Buffalo Crimes and Modernization in King Chulalongkorn’s Siam

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY
Matt Reeder earned an M.A. in Asian Studies from the University of Hawai`i at Mānoa in 2009 with a particular interest in political and social changes in 19th and early 20th century Siam. He has more recently become interested in the early modern history of Tai states in what is now Northern Thailand, Laos, and Shan State. Currently studying Kham Mueang writing and Burmese in Chiang Mai, he is hoping to conduct research on pre-modern political geography and identity in the region. He is looking forward to beginning Ph.D. studies in history in the near future.

The family had been asleep for hours when they awoke to a racket outside their home. Nai Soot, Nai Kluen, and Amdaeng Ploi grabbed their weapons and rushed outside. Four robbers were after their water buffaloes, their most valuable possessions. They defended their animals in the darkness, but Nai Soot was stabbed and killed in the fighting, and Amdaeng Ploi was wounded twice on her arm. Nai Kluen, however, managed to recognize four local toughs among the robbers. Although he shot and wounded one of them, they managed to get away with the buffaloes!

This episode illustrates an experience that was not uncommon in turn-of-the-twentieth century Siam. Gang robberies, often violent, were an increasing phenomenon. Bandits liked to target water buffaloes, the most valuable possession of many rural families, so incidents like the one retold above could leave poor Siamese families desperate. Crimes involving buffaloes were of major consequence to rural Siamese, but rural society did not function in isolation. Rural Siam was affected by the major economic and political changes that the kingdom was experiencing at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. This paper draws a connection between buffalo crimes—stealing buffaloes, robbing buffaloes, and buffalo-napping—and modernization.

Modernization is a theme that has occupied many historians that have studied Siam under King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868-1910). Maurizio Peleggi argues that modernization in Siam during this period was a form of globalization; Siamese elites borrowed from ideas that had become popular among elites around the world. There was nothing new about Siamese elites adapting foreign models, practices, and material culture for their own benefit. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, Siamese ruling elites increasingly looked toward Europe and European colonies for models of modernity. Modern ideas, practices, and things were the marks of “civilization,” and legitimized their leadership of Siam as a nation. Peleggi argues that capitalism and colonialism were two of the most important global trends adapted during the
The reign of King Chulalongkorn. The Siamese king and his ministers adapted colonial forms of centralized administration, and economic elites (including Siamese, resident Chinese, and Westerners) imported new forms of Western capitalism.

The way I will use the term modernization, however, should not always imply planned or purposeful transformations. The political and economic changes discussed in this paper were all modern—they were all planted in Siam from Western seeds. But they were not all intentionally imposed on Siamese society by elites. Modernization also should not always imply progress. In fact, I will show how modernization in Siam towards the end of King Chulalongkorn’s reign created problems as much as offered solutions.

I will be analyzing the characteristics of buffalo crimes in order to trace some of the lesser-known effects of modernization. There have been few studies on how modernization affected rural Siamese during this period. The research Tamara Loos has conducted on modernization, law, and gender in Siam is an important exception. Another resource that has been invaluable for this study is David Johnston’s dissertation on the capitalization of the Siamese rice economy. Although he rarely uses the term modernization, Johnston meticulously documents the development of the rice industry during this period, and traces related changes in rural agriculture, society, and trade. In addition, an article derived from chapter four of his dissertation argues that a certain level of crime was accepted in the village context. Johnston’s research emphasizes rice agriculture; he mentions modernization, buffaloes, and the expansion of police authority only tangentially. He does not draw any connection between modernization and buffalo crimes, but his observations on changes in the Siamese rural economy and society during King Chulalongkorn’s reign provide crucial context for many of the observations I will make here. Although there are a few other studies on the rural economy during this period, most of the literature on modernization has not focused on rural Siamese, but on the monarchy: its methods, its motivations, and foreign influences on it.

This paper is a modest attempt to fill this gap by looking at buffalo crimes in turn of the twentieth century Siam. I argue that devastating increases in buffalo crimes can be strongly correlated to political and economic modernization in Siam, but that modern administrative methods were also used with varying success to address the crime problem. Modernization, therefore, was both a cause and a solution to buffalo crimes. I begin by emphasizing the importance of buffaloes in rural Siamese society by describing their uses and value. Because buffaloes were so valued in rural society, buffalo crime was a serious matter. I outline characteristics of various kinds of buffalo crime, from small-scale thefts to gang robberies, in order to contextualize my arguments concerning the changes triggered by modernization. After discussing the frequency and patterns of buffalo robberies, I pull economic data from newspaper accounts to show that high levels of buffalo crime followed intense economic modernization in rural tracts of new paddy land just north of Bangkok. Political modernization and centralization in Siam can also be linked to buffalo crimes. Such crimes tended to increase, at least temporarily, as Bangkok reduced the power of local authorities. Modern strategies implemented by the monarchy to combat buffalo crimes, such as expanding the duties and jurisdiction of the police, initially yielded mixed results.

I concentrate on the rural areas near Bangkok as a case study, although I occasionally mention places further afield. My concentration on rural areas around Bangkok is justifiable for three reasons: economic modernization was most rapid here, political centralization in this area can be most easily divorced from elite concern over European threats on peripheral territories, and sources such as the Bangkok Times cover the Bangkok area most comprehensively.

The Bangkok Times

Although I have drawn from a variety of sources, I have examined the Bangkok Times from January through December 1906 especially carefully. Discussions of long-term trends in this essay are sometimes illustrated with newspaper passages, but I have also attempted to find support for these trends from other sources that have taken the long view. The Bangkok Times has its weaknesses as a source. It was an English language publication intended for Westerners in Bangkok and abroad. Foreign news predominated and even the paper’s domestic coverage was business and Bangkok-oriented. Although they rarely made the front page, short articles on buffalo crime, the rural economy, and provincial law enforcement nevertheless
appeared frequently. These stories provide a useful account of conditions in the countryside even though some of them seem to have been written with the entertainment of readers in mind. I have therefore not hesitated to quote the Bangkok Times frequently to convey the atmosphere of the times.

Details of buffalo crimes most often came to light through police reports or descriptions of court proceedings, especially in cases that made it to extraterritorial courts. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, Western countries and Japan pressured the Siamese monarchy into signing extraterritorial agreements. These agreements specified that legal cases in Siam involving citizens or subjects of those foreign powers were to be heard and decided by judicial or consular officials appointed by those countries’ governments. Extraterritorial rights became increasingly problematic as the number of individuals covered mushroomed. Asian immigrants to Siam were soon recognized as subjects of treaty powers, as were their children. Siamese with foreign employers or crimes that took place on foreign-owned property could also be heard at an extraterritorial court. The French court was reputed to be the most likely to rule against Siam’s prosecutors (often Europeans themselves), leading to a high demand for forgeries of identification documents that indicated French protégé (subject) status.

The result of these extraterritorial agreements was that many individuals in Siam could circumvent the law enforcement authority of the royal government. Prince Devawongse, voicing the frustrations of the monarchy, is said to have complained that defendants in Siam were “Siamese or foreign, just as best suits them at the moment.” But in regard to buffalo crimes, foreign courts in Bangkok seemed generally supportive of the Siamese government’s prosecution efforts, despite insisting on Western police procedures.

The terminology used by the Bangkok Times for work animals in Siam also deserves some comment so as not to lead to confusion. By “buffalo,” the newspaper is referring to the water buffalo. “Bullocks” is used to denote both cows and bulls. “Cattle” is an umbrella term used to refer to both buffaloes and bullocks. In this essay, I have followed the terminology used in the Bangkok Times for consistency. Although “work animals” in Siam could also include elephants and horses as well as bullocks and buffaloes, I mostly limit myself to buffaloes here as they are by far the most frequently mentioned work animal in the Bangkok Times and other sources.

The Value of Buffaloes

Buffaloes and bullocks were common in Siam at the beginning of the twentieth century. Most rural families had a buffalo, a cow, or a bull. If they did not, they could borrow one, rent one, or exchange their own labor to use one temporarily. Siamese families in the Chao Phraya River basin used water buffaloes for many purposes, but they were considered nearly essential for farming. Farmers occasionally used bulls instead, but buffaloes were preferred because they were stronger, more easily trained, and willing to work in water-logged fields.

In 1948, Thai scholar Phya Anuman Rajadhon published a small book on farmers in central Siam “as they were in the old times.” He describes in detail how farmers in central Siam used buffaloes. The buffalo’s most important duty was to provide the power to pull plows and harrows through the rice fields as the farmer guided the implements from behind. Farmers sometimes used buffaloes to thresh rice, as well. In the past, Phya Anuman explains, villagers created a common threshing ground and threshed each farmer’s harvest collectively in turn. Rice sheaves were piled around a central pole, and villagers led the animals to trudge on the sheaves in circles around the pole until the rice grains separated out and sifted to the floor. Villagers removed the empty sheaves as they rose to the top. Buffaloes were also used to pull bullock carts and their manure was used to fertilize the fields.

Due to the important role they played in the rural rice farming cycle, buffaloes were one of the few rural possessions with much monetary value. Land was only beginning to acquire a market value in central Siam, and rural houses were small and impermanent. Although most families in central Siam had a small boat and some had an oxcart, they were generally not worth much. Aside from the yearly rice crop, a family’s wealth consisted mostly of its work animals. A buffalo could be relied upon to fetch a high price in the event a family encountered hard times.
Buffalo Theft and Nakleng

As the most common and conspicuous form of wealth in the Siamese countryside, cattle were also the most tempting target for thieves and bandits. Phya Anuman noted that it was “necessary to take great care with respect to oxen and buffaloes, because they are the most important source of power in farming, and so there are always evildoers waiting to steal them.” After a morning’s work in the fields or threshing rice, villagers turned their buffaloes loose to rest and to forage for grass, but they were not left unguarded. Children, often in large groups, were responsible for tending the animals as they grazed each afternoon. Sometimes a small group of adults would join them to make sure they took their role seriously.

Small-time buffalo thieves, operating on their own, were usually inexperienced farmers who had fallen on hard times. In the following newspaper account, Nai Pee of Uthai Thani was accused of the theft of two buffaloes. The inexperienced defendant scrambled ineffectively to come up with a plausible excuse to avoid conviction:

When arrested the accused was in possession of the buffaloes, and at first he said they belonged to his brother Nai Suen Di. This the brother denied. Afterwards Nai Pee said he had hired them from Nai Mao. Nai Mao, however, denied having given them for hire; and the buffaloes were finally identified as belonging to Nai Pan. Accused was found guilty, and sentenced to one year’s imprisonment.

Although the penalty sounds serious, one year in jail was much more lenient than punishments ordered for convicted gang robbers. Small-time theft was still considered a local matter because after the defendant’s release, both the plaintiff and the defendant were likely to remain in the same village.

In the following case of theft heard in the French extraterritorial court, the accused was charged with buffalo theft in Nakhon Nayok:

Nai Ta, the complainant, said he was roused about midnight by the noise of the buffaloes in the shed, and went out. He saw two robbers trying to open the shed. Taking his gun, he fired at them. Then he shut himself into the house as he was afraid to do anything more. It was a very lonely part of the country and he was alone in the house with an old man. [A district official] said that next morning he was informed by Nai Ta that he had shot a thief in the night. They went out together to see if any trace could be found, and 20 sen [800 meters] from the place they came on the accused lying badly wounded. … Accused’s explanation was that he was on his way to see his mother and a sick friend. His torch went out, and as he passed Ta’s place he called for a light, when Ta shot him. Further examination admitted he was not going the most direct way to his destination.

By press time, the judge had not yet ruled on the case. The Bangkok Times noted, however, that the accused was “still suffering very much from his wounds.” Cases of buffalo theft were not usually heard in extraterritorial courts. Either the plaintiff or the defendant (in this case, probably the plaintiff) must have claimed French protégé status and saw an advantage to bringing the case before the French court. Perhaps he could not expect fair or preferential treatment from local officials, or perhaps he hoped for a better judgment from the French court.

Some small-time thieves were farmers who resorted to theft only rarely, out of economic desperation. Others, however, were nakleng, meaning “rogue,” “rascal,” “thug,” or “player.” Nakleng generally became members of a hierarchical network and engaged in more lucrative criminal activities, such as gang robbery. Aspiring nakleng stole cattle or committed other crimes to prove their mettle. According to a columnist in the Bangkok Times, a nakleng was characterized by his “manly bearing and courage, readiness to fight in single combat or in a riot, fidelity to friends, deep loyalty and respect towards feudal lords and parents.” Nakleng flaunted their public image by “demonstrating” in the markets and in the gambling halls. Prince Damrong Rachanuphap, Minister of the Interior and a celebrated historian, heard a captured bandit give testimony in 1903 and reported the details in the form of an interview. According to Prince Damrong, the robber explained how nakleng perceived themselves:

Criminals [phwarat] don’t call each other criminals, they call each other nakleng. The people who call themselves this are known to be those who understand robbery, the people who steal cattle, or the people who collaborate with them such as those who buy stolen cattle. So, these people are called nakleng. It is understood that they are all these kinds of people.

Nakleng tended to look out for their own village’s interests while preying primarily on other villages. The line between criminal gangsters and upstanding citi-
zens in rural Siam was a fine one; nakleng or “retired” nakleng often served as local officials. Villages valued nakleng for their experience. One monk recalled, “In the old days parents would not allow their daughter to marry a man who did not know how to steal a buffalo. Local people believed that if you knew how to steal a buffalo, you would know how to keep your own buffaloes from being stolen.”

To dispose of a stolen animal, a small-time buffalo thief would make arrangements with a nakleng in another village to buy the stolen buffalo. The buyer, often a local official, frequently resold the buffalo back to the original owner if the owner agreed not to report the incident. This practice, which historian David Johnston calls “buffalo-napping,” allowed thieves and local middleman to profit with a reduced risk of suffering violence or involving the state.

Prince Damrong’s nakleng explained that a farmer, on realizing that his buffalo had been stolen, would turn to a local nakleng. The nakleng then contacted nakleng in nearby villages, explaining that he was helping a farmer look for his buffalo, which must have innocently wandered off. The farmer, he would explain, was willing to pay a reward. Then the nakleng who had bought the stolen buffalo from the thief would then step forward, saying that he had heard the buffalo had come his way. They agree on an appropriate reward amount. Then the intermediary goes back to the farmer, collects the reward fee (with a commission), pays the buyer, and tells the farmer that the buffalo will be tied to a tree in a certain location.

Usually, no one publicly acknowledged that a crime had been committed. Johnston concludes that the “buffalo-napping” arrangement was mutually beneficial. Villagers could get their stolen buffaloes back for less than their value if they did not press the matter with the authorities. The nakleng were assured a steady source of easy income with little fear of state intervention. Despite Johnston’s assertion, however, the practice benefited the thief and the middleman far more than the farmer; the prices they asked were not insignificant sums for a poor villager. A comparatively powerless farmer, however, often had little choice.

Sometimes nakleng buyers misjudged their victims, provoking them into filing complaints. For example, one man in Uthai Thani set out with some friends to look for his stolen buffaloes and came to the house of Nai Semma. Nai Semma told them that he knew where the buffaloes were, and could get them back for 200 Ticals [baht]. Although the Bangkok Times does not specify how many buffaloes were stolen in this instance or their market value, it can be assumed that this price represents a significant discount off the market price or else it would not be worthwhile to the farmer. Eventually, according to the Bangkok Times, the victim agreed to pay. “After getting the Tcs. 200, however, Nai Semma said he didn’t know where the buffaloes were.” The angry farmer turned to state officials, and Nai Semma was subsequently arrested.

Likewise, in Minburi three men on three separate occasions found their buffaloes stolen in the night. In each case the owners could trace buffalo tracks leading to the home of a certain Hadji Hem. The case against him in the French extraterritorial court was summarized in the Bangkok Times. One of the plaintiffs, To Po, explained that he had approached Hadji Hem to ask where the buffaloes were located.

Accused told him to come back the next morning, adding that the people who had the buffaloes would sell them for 160 Tcs [baht]. Po said he had not that amount of money, but accused received in payment a gun he valued at 90 Tcs and one of the stolen buffaloes worth 70 Tcs. The next day Po went to Hem and received seven of his buffaloes back.

The other two plaintiffs had similar stories. In his own defense, Hadji Hem tried to attract a better judgment by claiming that the plaintiffs were framing him because he was “a French protégé.” In the end, however, the French judge disagreed and sentenced him to a year in jail for receiving stolen property.

**Bandit Gangs and Buffalo Robberies**

Armed and organized gangs of nakleng bandits enjoyed success far more consistently than petty thieves. Prince Damrong’s bandit informant stated that robbers generally preferred to target buffaloes rather than household valuables. Although it was difficult to herd off and sell the animals without getting caught, they were usually worth more than what could be found in houses.

Bandit gangs usually struck late at night. Prince Damrong’s bandit explained that gangs observed certain rituals in the evening before committing home robberies. It is likely that they observed the same rituals before targeting buffaloes as well. The informant...
described the rituals performed by a gang just before a raid:

When they gather together, they stack their weapons together in a cone shape. Then, they hang talismans on the cone of weapons, and sit around it in a circle. The robbers’ spiritual leader [ajan] splashes liquor on the weapons, and they pray to the gods. They assure the land guardian spirits, the gods, and the king that their gathering doesn’t aim to plot against the monarchy; they are doing this because they are extremely poor. They ask for the valuables of the house to maintain their lives, and that the robbery be as successful as they wish. This is the content of their prayers. But, if there is no experienced spiritual leader in the group, the praying ceremony is not done.34

Villagers shared the robbers’ deep respect for spirituality. The belief that the most daring and successful nakhlong leaders had magical powers was widespread. For example, the Bangkok Times noted that villagers commonly believed that a notorious gang leader, Ai Suu Thuam, could neither be pierced by bullets nor cut by knives.35

After the ceremony, the robbers set out towards the targeted village or homestead. Sometimes gangs attempted to get away with the buffaloes as quickly and quietly as possible; if no one discovered the missing buffaloes until morning, the gang would be more likely to evade pursuit. This was difficult, however, as barking dogs would frequently awaken a family.36 In other cases, gang members fired their weapons as they approached to intimidate the villagers into avoiding confrontation. Buffaloes were most frequently surrendered to armed gangs without a fight, as exemplified by the following report of a robbery in Pathum Thani:

On the night of the 6th inst. some five or six persons attacked the house of Khun Prachaset at Sampok in that Muang [town]. They were well-armed, and began a fusillade, in which nobody was hurt, but by which the people of the house were quite scared. Then the robbers were able to get quietly away with eight buffaloes, worth in all some Tcs. 760.37

The gang fired their weapons to announce their presence, but did not meet much resistance. Even among the robberies that made the newspaper, nearly half of the incidents involved no fighting (see table). The bandits escaped with the cattle as quickly and quietly as possible, since the gang could not risk organized pursuers. In fact, gang robbers feared determined village headmen far more than provincial police because headman could raise a pursuit team and give chase immediately.38

Because gunfights occurred in only about half of the newsworthy incidents of buffalo robbery, we can assume that they were even more uncommon in the incidents that went unreported. Farmers did defend their herds when they could, however. Wealthier families, groups of farmers, or villages hired workers or trusted nakhlong to keep watch. These defenders were rarely successful against large, well-armed gangs, but this incident was an exception:

The other night some eight or nine robbers made an attack on a buffalo pen… They were armed and began shooting, but, notwithstanding that, the man in charge of the buffaloes made a plucky resistance and succeeded in driving off the robbers. This man Nai But got wounded in the affray, but not seriously. It is not known if any of the robbers were badly hurt.39

A gunfight did not necessarily result in injury. Peter Thompson, a surveyor who recorded his travels in rural Siam around the turn of the twentieth century, explains, “They are armed only with rusty old muzzle-loaders, and often after an hour’s firing no one on either side is hurt. This is not altogether to be attributed to the badness of their weapons or of their marksmanship, for the villagers are firing from behind their houses, and the dacoits are skillful at taking advantage of such cover as the ground offers.”40

Groups of farmers or entire villages sometimes pooled their herds to make cattle defense more practical, although larger herds provided more tempting targets for robbers. In the following incident, the defending farmer lost a large number of buffaloes, “having had the cattle of a number of people under his care”:

On the night of the 16th inst. an armed gang of twelve or thirteen men attacked the house of a farmer named Nai Kan. There were four men on the place, and they made an effort to defend their cattle, but the robbers did not hesitate to shoot, and the defenders had to retire. The robbers got away with a drove of fifty buffaloes.41

This raid was unusual; a catch of fifty buffaloes was very large. It required a large number of bandits, and must have required extensive planning. Arranging a
**Table: Gang Robberies of Buffaloes Reported in the *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail, 1906* (1)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date (2)</th>
<th>Location of incident (3)</th>
<th>Location on the map</th>
<th>No. in gang</th>
<th>No. captured (4)</th>
<th>Did the gang have guns?</th>
<th>Was there a fight?</th>
<th>No. wounded/ killed (5)</th>
<th>No. buffaloes stolen (6)</th>
<th>No. buffaloes recovered (8)</th>
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<td>3/2</td>
<td><em>Monthon Prachinburi</em>, Muang Petriew [Chachoengsao], Klong 6</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
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<td>5-6</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No fighting</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>1 / 0</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<td><em>Mueang Pratoom-thani, Wat Talesap</em></td>
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<td>?</td>
<td>No fighting</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>Bang-kapi</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>No fighting</td>
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<td>?</td>
<td>? / ?</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/31</td>
<td><em>Klong Sansep</em> (10)</td>
<td>Klong Sansep</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>No fighting</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/26</td>
<td><em>Bang Hua Pa, 20 sen north of Klong Rangsit</em> (11)</td>
<td>Bang Hua Pa</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1 / 0</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) Incidents described as “robberies” begun by “gangs” are included, even if the report does not specify that the criminals possessed weapons.
(2) Date of newspaper publication. Dates follow the “month/date” form.
(3) I have kept the spellings used in the *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*. I have added locations in brackets to clarify the location. All of these locations are in *Monthon Krung Thep* unless otherwise indicated.
(4) Number captured by press time. If not mentioned, I have assumed none were captured.
(5) A question mark (?) indicates that an unspecified number of buffaloes were taken; a zero (0) indicates that the gang tried but did not succeed in stealing any buffaloes.
(6) Number of buffaloes recovered by press time.
(7) These figures record information reported. When an article does not mention casualties, I have used a question mark (?). When the article mentions that either defenders or robbers were wounded but does not mention any killed, I have inferred that there were none killed. I have assumed law enforcement officials were not present—indicated with an (x)—unless mentioned in the article.
(8) Bullocks, not buffaloes. The article does not specify whether seven bullocks were actually stolen, or merely targeted.
(9) Because no *Mueang* was specified, I would guess that this is a *Mueang* Bangkok district. Perhaps it is Saraphum district. The Rs are not pronounced and in the 1905 map I used, the district was spelled without the Thai letters for “thu.” I have not marked this spot on the map.
(10) Although *Klong* Saen Saep extended all the way to Chachoengsao, this robbery probably took place in *Mueang* Bangkok or *Mueang* Minburi.
(11) Although *Klong* Rangsit extended all the way to Nakhon Nayok, this robbery probably occurred in *Mueang* Thanyaburi.
quick and discrete getaway with fifty animals would have been difficult. This raid was most likely the work of a regional crime boss, rather than a local nakleng, who would have had the resources to be ambitious and who would have been willing to risk taking on a whole village.

The Frequency of Buffalo Robberies

In order to assess patterns and motivations of buffalo robbers, I examined the Bangkok Times for the year 1906 and compiled a table of each reported incident of robbery and its characteristics (see table). In total, the newspaper reported twenty-three incidents of gang buffalo robberies that year. All of the incidents occurred in the countryside near Bangkok, in the central region of Siam. The data on robberies in the table should be considered a sample of the most public and newsworthy incidents of buffalo robbery around the capital; it should certainly not be considered an exhaustive list.45

For a better, but still incomplete, sense of the actual number of gang robberies around that time in Siam, we can look at the 1905/06 annual report of the Ministry of Justice. The ministry reported 30 convictions for dacoity (gang robbery) in metropolitan Bangkok, and 142 convictions in the provinces. These figures include robberies of household items, rice, and cash as well as robberies that targeted buffaloes. The figure in the report for convictions of robbers in Bangkok had fallen slightly from the 36 convictions the year before. The report did not compare the number of convictions in the provinces with the year before, and provided no data on arrests.46 The Bangkok Times news reports of captured robbers represent just a small proportion of the number of people actually charged with gang robbery in the kingdom. Nevertheless, by comparing and analyzing the information reported about robberies in Siam in 1906, we can generalize certain gang robbery practices and test anecdotal observations about robbery patterns and motivations.

The string of buffalo robberies, for example, stretched significantly longer in 1906 than in previous years. The high season for stealing buffaloes commonly stretched from January through April, during the hot, dry season.44 After the rice harvest (usually December through February), there was little for villagers to do in the fields. In addition, the hard, dry earth made stolen buffaloes harder to track. In 1906, however, the length of the robbery season in the Bangkok area expanded considerably. In early June, the Bangkok Times stated that the “cattle lifting season” should have been nearly over, but in early August, the newspaper commented, “Cattle lifting seems to be a more prevalent crime than ever before in the suburbs. Formerly the game was given up with the coming of the rains [in June].” The number of robberies in 1906 finally abated by September, but in late November, a news report indicated that “the cattle lifting season in the suburbs has begun early.”45

The data on 1906 robberies (see table) corroborates the newspaper reports of a lengthened season of cattle theft. There were no reported incidents of buffalo robbery in January and February 1906, perhaps due to the harvest of a boom crop, but a steady stream of robberies stretched from March through August. The November robbery seems to be an outlier; the newspaper’s prediction that the cattle lifting season had already begun was premature.

Economic Modernization as a Cause of Buffalo Crimes

The harvest in the early months of 1906 had been “a very good one,” yet Siam experienced a wave of robberies during the extended season of cattle robbery that year.46 The crime spree reported by the Bangkok Times could not, therefore, be the result of a poor harvest generally. Prince Damrong’s bandit claimed that nakleng conducted robberies in order to fund eating, drinking, and gambling habits, or even to make legal business investments, but these motivations also do not explain the extended season of buffalo crime in 1906.47

A more localized examination of economic and robbery reports, however, shows a strong correlation between the localities which most strongly felt negative effects of economic modernization and the areas frequently victimized by buffalo bandits. This area, called the “Northern Suburbs” by the Bangkok Times, includes the towns of Minburi, Nonthaburi, Pathum Thani, and Thanyaburi (which encompassed the newly created paddy fields off Rangsit Canal), as well as rural northern districts of the city of Bangkok such as Bang Kapi (see map).48 Of the twenty-three incidents of gang robbery reported in the Bangkok Times in 1906,
seventeen, or three-quarters, occurred in the Northern Suburbs (see table). Because many economic problems had been brewing in the Northern Suburbs for years, it is likely that poor economic conditions in the area motivated buffalo robberies and not the other way around.

The Northern Suburbs were hit hardest by economic problems because they were experiencing the most rapid transformation to a modern, capitalist economy. A rise in worldwide demand for rice coincided with unequal treaty provisions that removed barriers to foreign trade in the second half of the nineteenth century. Siamese commoners and elites hoped to capitalize on the new opportunities for profit by opening up rice paddy in the Bangkok area to feed the rice export trade. Wealthy government officials sponsored a boom in new canal construction in the 1870s and profited handsomely from their investments. In 1889, the royal government awarded a monopoly in canal development to a newly formed company made up of royal family and Western investors called the Siam Land, Canals, and Irrigation Company. The huge development project that consumed the company’s efforts in the 1890s and 1900s was the creation of Rangsit Canal and a huge network of interconnecting smaller canals northeast of Bangkok.49

Although neither state-sponsored monopolies nor contracts for investment were new to Siam, the economic problems in the Northern Suburbs were the result of modern changes in several ways. First, the scale of the Siam Land, Canals, and Irrigation Company’s Rangsit Canal project was unprecedented. As a result, problems with the development that came to light in 1906 (which I will describe below) had a magnified effect. Second, land speculation and absentee landlordism were made possible by the growing value of land. Higher land values and Western pressure led to shifting the tax burden from tax farms on luxuries to land taxes. Higher land values for paddy around Bangkok were caused by the growing international demand for Siamese rice exports. The boom in exports was made possible by low tariffs and the elimination of royal monopolies mandated by a series of treaties with Western powers. But when the value of the baht increased, international demand for rice declined and Bangkok-area farmers who were most connected to international markets suffered. Third, Siam had long been used to an abundance of land but a shortage of labor. By the beginning of the twentieth century, how-
ever, sudden increases in land prices, shortages of available paddy, and land speculation caused shortages of both labor and cheap, desirable land, prompting socio-economic problems which Siam was unprepared to face.  

The Siamese government’s attention was drawn to problems in the Rangsit Canal area after reports that 3000 families had simply abandoned their fields. On closer investigation, the number was more accurately thought to be about 2000, but the Siamese government viewed the situation with alarm. Prince Damrong sent several officials to investigate the matter. Their May 1906 report blamed land speculators and sympathized with farmers in the Rangsit area:

Most of the paddy land is rented from absentee landlords who live in Bangkok. ...As soon as [they] felt confident that the farmers wished to settle permanently they demanded major increases in rents. [Of course] by this stage any farmer would have found it very difficult to remove his buildings and belongings ... and consequently in certain areas extraordinarily high rents were enforced. [Moreover] once farmers have begun plowing and planting they are summoned to the landlord and forced to enter into contract with him. [In these circumstances] the farmers have no choice but to agree to the owners’ demands.

A Bangkok Times exposé in July 1906 revealed the poor conditions in the fields off Rangsit Canal to the country’s English readership. The paper noted that land speculation had been necessary to ensure the success of the Siam Land, Canals, and Irrigation Company’s work to open up new fields, but that the canals had not been maintained and in many cases they could no longer be used for irrigation and transportation. “Inevitably,” the paper concluded, “such landlords are chiefly concerned with the rents they can obtain.... With the silting up of the canals the land is not what it was, and the highly rented tenants found they could not meet all the claims upon them.” Landlords were unsympathetic and farmers were forced to sell their property and abandon the land. The government came up with a number of ambitious ideas to address the situation but, despite the admonition of the king, administrative disunity prevented significant government assistance. Severe economic problems persisted in the area for years.

Land speculation and devaluation also led to a return to shortages of labor (both human and buffalo), leaving even more paddies vacant. The Bangkok Times noted that there was a lack of both labor and buffaloes to work the new lands opened up by the Siam Canals, Land, and Irrigation Company north of the city. A Bangkok Times correspondent reported that, after farmers had fled the area, “land was going cheap in the [Rangsit Canal] district, but there are hardly any buyers.” The newspaper continued, “there is a great shortage of labor in that district this year. The Laos from Korat Monthon came down in large numbers, but got scared by some foolish report or other and promptly returned, losing Tcs. [baht] 12 in railway fares, to say nothing of time and in many cases a long journey on foot.” The demand for paddy lands alongside the new canals had been high in the 1890s and early 1900s, but demand dropped off around 1905. Land investors and large farmers could not find enough labor to work their fields, and much of the paddy land in the Northern Suburbs was left fallow.

The spread of livestock diseases, such as rinderpest, can also be traced to the increasing commercialization of the Siamese economy, and also caused a shortage of buffalo labor in the Northern Suburbs in 1906. Cattle trade routes, which previously linked delta towns with their upriver hinterlands, now expanded to include overseas destinations such as Singapore and Hong Kong. Easily communicable diseases had periodically plagued Siamese herds in the past, but the expansion of the cattle trade, and trade routes, left Siamese herds increasingly susceptible. The government responded to a serious rinderpest outbreak in 1898 by creating an abattoir to quarantine cattle for import or export, but the measure was not always effective. A government report announced that in February 1906, for example, disease had felled 102 bullocks and 29 buffaloes in Songkhla, 136 bullocks and 104 buffaloes in Khorat, and 134 bullocks and 107 buffaloes in Chaiyaphum. But these statistics pale in comparison to the death rate in the Northern Suburbs. In May, the Bangkok Times reported that government veterinarians were investigating the deaths of about fifty percent of the buffaloes in the Rangsit Canal district. The officials concluded that a rinderpest epidemic was to blame. Disease, robbery, and the out-migration of small farmers had lately increased the cost of buffaloes approximately one hundred percent. The newspaper noted that “a much larger area would be under cultivation but for a lack of buffalo.”
In addition to problems caused by disease and the failure of the Siam Land, Canals, and Irrigation Company, farmers faced suddenly higher taxes in 1906. In a bid to reform Siamese legal codes and finances as a basis to renegotiate unequal treaties with Western powers and Japan, Siam began to phase out gambling, prostitution, and opium tax concessions, together representing a substantial portion of royal income. To offset decreased revenues caused by the abolition of gambling houses outside Bangkok, the government reformed the land tax system in 1905, increasing taxes on most categories of land and doubling the kingdom’s land tax revenue. According to the 1905/06 state budget report of the Ministry of Finance, paddy land was now taxed variously depending on output. Fallow land was also taxed, but at a lower rate. The report claimed that even the “highest rate levied is still considerably lower than the rate upon similar land in Burma,” but the tax clearly had a strong effect on rice farmers and caused discontent. A news item in early June noted that “taxes are being collected in the Northern Suburbs at present, and in many cases people have little enough money to meet these claims.” In the four weeks prior to the June 8 notice of tax collection in the Northern Suburbs, seven robberies were reported in Pathum Thani, Thanyaburi, and Minburi, all just north of the city near Rangsit Canal (see table and map). The Bangkok Times made the connection between economic problems and gang banditry in early August 1906: “[A] number of those who have abandoned their land seem to have taken to robbery.”

The economic problems that hit the Northern Suburbs particularly hard did not abate quickly. An October notice in the Bangkok Times observes that the crop in Thanyaburi, which included most of the Rangsit Canal district, “will be very poor indeed,” the result of a terrible year. The correspondent reports that “there is great difficulty in getting food for the buffaloes, and robberies are frequent.” The Bangkok Times estimated that, due to late rains, the next year’s rice harvest in Siam would likely be less than seventy-five percent of average. But they optimistically noted that “the worst year in Siam can always be redeemed by a month’s good rain and high water in the river.” Many farmers, however, had already recast their seeds several times and were running out. An anonymous “gentleman who is in a position to form a pretty accurate opinion” estimated in October that rice yields would reach only fifty to seventy-five percent of the previous year’s crop. 1906 was only the beginning of the economic hardships in the Northern Suburbs. David Johnston notes that the economic depression that plagued Siam from 1905 to 1912 hit first and hardest in the Rangsit Canal district.

The evidence concerning robberies in the Northern Suburbs of Bangkok indicates that robberies were motivated by rural economic challenges, not merely the need to fund nakkeng gambling debts or business ventures. Although poor weather had always been a leading cause of crop failure for Siamese farmers, the increasing penetration of the capitalist economy into rural Siam caused a new set of problems, and clearly exacerbated buffalo crime. Higher risks assumed by farmers looking to profit from rice sales, rising land taxes, increased land speculation and leasing, and land devaluation caused by unmaintained canals were all unfortunate results of the modernization of the kingdom’s economy. Even rinderpest, a naturally occurring disease, could now be more easily communicated over long distances as the international cattle trade linked Siam more closely to Singapore, Hong Kong, and beyond. All of these symptoms of economic modernization led to economic hardship in the countryside near Bangkok and caused a rise in buffalo robberies.

**Political Modernization as a Cause of Buffalo Crimes**

In addition to economic modernization, political modernization during King Chulalongkorn’s reign also caused an increase in buffalo crimes. Although political modernization during this period is often characterized as administrative “reform,” the major goal was centralization. It has been argued that political centralization in Siam during this period was not a modern development at all in that it promoted authoritarianism, but it is nevertheless useful to see the process as a kind of modernization. The monarchy was replacing an older political model of limited central suzerainty over relatively autonomous peripheries with a political model of central control over peripheries through bureaucratic appointments, derived from European colonial administrative models.

Centralization of law enforcement authority in central Siam, unlike in the borderlands, had little to do with foreign territorial threats, but it nevertheless
benefited the monarchy in several ways. First, a modern police force patrolling both Bangkok and the provinces would prove that Siam was capable of enforcing law and order in a Western fashion, undercutting the rationale commonly given by foreign powers for extra-territoriality agreements. Second, by protecting rural people from crime, the government assumed the role of protector from local authorities, binding the population closer to the monarchy. And third, reducing disorder in the countryside increased tax revenues, rice yields, and export tariffs. The transition, however, from local to central responsibility for the maintenance of order in the countryside was rough. The disorder caused by shifting authority towards Bangkok and its officers contributed to a rise in unrest and crime, including buffalo crimes, during the later part of King Chulalongkorn’s reign.\textsuperscript{74}

Before the efforts of the king’s administration to centralize provincial administration, local nobility and village leaders were responsible for law and order. The provincial nobility or other local authorities requested assistance from the capital only as a last resort, when the demands of gangs became too much. The king would often respond by appointing a special representative to the troubled region. The official, sometimes with military support, had the theoretical authority to demand cooperation from all local leaders until the problem could be brought under control.\textsuperscript{75} Local leaders were reluctant to involve Bangkok, however, because even if a campaign against the bandits was unsuccessful, the interaction resulted in a transfer of resources and authority from these leaders to central officials.

In general, however, representatives of the central government had little authority in rural areas, particularly in comparison to the powers of strong local officials and nakleng. In 1902, a royal representative in Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat) concluded that the “increase in banditry was because the commune and village elders...did not tell the officials about the bandits even if they knew who they were and what crimes they had committed for they feared the power of the bandits more than that of the government.”\textsuperscript{76}

Without the local presence of a powerful police force, villages often relied on their own village’s nakleng for their security. Bandit leaders and other nakleng were local powers in their own right and served as, cooperated with, and intimidated local officials. David Johnston suggests that villagers saw cattle robbery as a tolerable agent of wealth redistribution. Therefore, he concludes, they avoided interfering with the operations of bandit gangs. He cited an article in the Bangkok Times that describes a powerful nakleng defended by thankful villagers: “the common people of the country...have been in no humor to assist the Police, for it is said that [nakleng leader] Ai Pia was a kind of Robin Hood, robbing only the rich and often helping the poor.”\textsuperscript{77}

The Robin Hood characterization may fit some bandit leaders from the perspectives of their favored villages, but it cannot characterize buffalo banditry in general. Many of the targets of buffalo robbers were small, undefended farmhouses. In 1906, for instance, the Bangkok Times reports a number of cases in which farmers with very few large animals were nevertheless targeted (see table). Gangs seemed to have targeted cattle herds of any size. The following article demonstrates that no target was too small:

\textit{[A] gang of thieves...attacked a place where there was one poor solitary buffalo. The owner’s family did their best to defend their property, and the robbers, who were armed as usual, opened fire. Both the wife and daughter of the owner were shot, the former being very seriously wounded. The robbers got the buffalo.}\textsuperscript{78}

It appears that although larger herds may have been more tempting, buffalo robbers targeted small, perhaps weakly defended, animals as well. Although it may be applicable in some instances, the Robin Hood characterization of gang robbery cannot be generalized. Instead, villagers and local leaders collaborated or cooperated with bandits out of necessity in order to minimize losses.

The king was aware that without an effective rural police force, local leaders could not always confront bandits. The Ministry of the Interior gradually reduced the power of local leaders by reorganizing the provincial administrative structure and by transferring powers to royal appointees. Regional commissioners and their staffs gradually took over tax collection, natural resource management, and provincial law enforcement from the local nobility. Sometimes this could only be accomplished by appointing members of the rural aristocracy to high positions in the developing administrative system or by allowing provincial nobles to continue collecting certain taxes.\textsuperscript{79}
By weakening the authority of the established local nobility, the process of centralization of law enforcement responsibilities upset the balance between central and local powers in Siam. As the Ministry of the Interior grew less tolerant of collusion between local officials and bandits, violent incidents increased. Naklong could no longer rely on local officials to protect their activities, so they instead resorted to riskier and more violent raids. Local officials, facing sudden scrutiny of their relations with local outlaws, felt compelled to eliminate the evidence. Johnston notes a suspicious case where arrested bandits, held by Suphanburi officials in a local jail, were mysteriously poisoned before they could be questioned. Although it is unclear whether or not he had been involved, the provincial governor lost his job as a result. Historian Tej Bunnag argues that provincial nobility bitter about their loss of authority to Bangkok even encouraged gangs, hoping to convince the royal government that it could not administer the countryside without their assistance.  

The modern system of law enforcement promoted by the monarchy had little patience for local officials who cooperated with robber gangs to strengthen local power at the expense of the state. The less-accommodating attitude of the Ministry of the Interior towards local arrangements that condoned crime undermined rural systems of law and order, explaining anecdotal observations that robbery had become especially widespread in the last two decades of King Chulalongkorn’s reign. Political modernization, then, also triggered a rise in buffalo crimes, at least in the short term.

**Modern Solutions to Buffalo Crimes**

The royal government, however, viewed the extension of royal authority into the countryside as a solution to, not a cause of, the crime problem. Unlike previous attempts to centralize power in Siam, King Chulalongkorn adopted Western colonial methods of internal control to monitor cattle in the provinces. I will briefly discuss two methods of intellectual control adopted by the Siamese government: counting buffaloes and other work animals in the first national census, and setting up an elaborate cattle registration system to monitor the cattle trade and, in theory, prevent buffalo crime. Then I will discuss the expansion of police authority as a solution to buffalo crimes.

After Prince Damrong’s Ministry of the Interior became officially responsible for local administration throughout the kingdom, an effort was made to count the Siamese population. As historian Volker Grabowsky points out, the census count had political implications: unlike previous lists of male commoners, the Yuan (Northern Thai) and Lao were counted as Siamese in order to weaken European claims to these ethnic groups. The Siamese census of 1904 also counted buffaloes and bullocks (as well as horses and elephants). The census results revealed that ownership of large work animals was widespread. Although buffaloes seemed to be more common in some areas and bullocks in others, there seemed to be an average of one to two people per buffalo/bullock. The government’s motivation for counting these animals is unclear; they were not directly taxed, but they were valuable rural resources. The animal counts were probably most influential in guiding new policies proposed by the expanding agriculture, public health, and perhaps even the policing bureaucracies.

Another method the royal government used to monitor cattle in Siam was an elaborate system of cattle registration that theoretically prevented stolen cattle from being bought and sold. In 1900, the government announced new regulations that required official documentation of every buffalo or bullock transfer in the kingdom. Although details of the law changed several times in the subsequent years, by 1906 district chiefs were required to endorse new certificates for each purchase. Cattle dealers who intended to export cattle would have to present the papers for each of their animals to both the head veterinarian at an abattoir in Bangkok and then to customs officials. If the animals were intended for slaughter, the certificates were to be checked first by the Sanitary Department. All of these officials were to compare the physical characteristics of the animals with the descriptions of the animals on the certificates before making new ones or allowing the animals into their facilities. District chiefs had the authority to detain cattle suspected stolen for two months to locate the true owner.

This elaborate system for cattle registration remained largely ineffective. Although government officials at every level agreed that too many stolen cattle were passed through the system, none were particularly vigilant about comparing the animals to the descriptions on the registration. The government veteri-
narian, from England, insisted that it was not the duty of his staff to ensure that cattle were described properly on the certificates; in practice they checked perhaps one out of ten. The head customs agent, also English, argued that the “descriptions are after all matters of opinion,” before listing some examples of vague animal descriptions. Cattle traders and the government veterinarian argued that cattle appearances changed over time. According to the Bangkok Times, the veterinarian exclaimed that “no written certificate could be of any good for a bull five years old, which was issued when the animal was eighteen months old.”

The necessity of having endorsed certificates, regardless of the accuracy of the descriptions, nevertheless created a substantial market for forged papers. The Bangkok Times pointed out that it was commonly believed that anyone involved with the cattle trade could “produce hundreds of those papers.” Robbers reportedly even altered animals’ appearances by coloring the skin or bending the horns. Moreover, checking each animal carefully at every level would create unimaginable delays. The newspaper concluded, “if the system were taken seriously, it would make the trade impossible.” Although it did not achieve the goal of slowing the illegal cattle trade, the registration system did insert representatives of the royal government into a new arena, asserting that the proper transfer of cattle required the government’s seal of approval and claiming for the central government the responsibility for solving the cattle crime problem.

Most importantly, however, rural crime problems gave the Ministry of the Interior another justification to expand police presence throughout the country. The jurisdiction of the Bangkok police force was expanded to include the city’s closer rural suburbs, and the Ministry of the Interior formed the Provincial Gendarmerie Department in 1897 to take over provincial law enforcement from the army and the various modest security forces cobbled together by commissioners and local officials. The transfer of authority outside Bangkok from local officials to representatives of the central government was gradual because many existing provincial leaders resisted. The transfer of law enforcement authority was well under way, however, by 1906. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, each of Siam’s seventeen new administrative regions (monthon) had a gendarmerie station, and 330 substations had been located at provincial and district towns. The provincial gendarmeries were assigned a variety of duties, ranging from guarding the border and the new railways, checking travelers’ papers, detaining suspicious characters, arresting persons carrying firearms at night, as well as inspecting opium dens, gambling halls, and bars. Aside from the overall goal of solidifying central Siamese political control, the priority for the provincial gendarmerie was to combat banditry.

Both the expanded Bangkok police force and the newly established Provincial Gendarmerie Department were created along European lines. In 1887, a prince who had spent considerable time in London was made Minister of Local Government. Impressed with what he saw in Britain, he recommended that the Bangkok police be modeled after the London police, including blue uniforms and helmets. Later, the force was reorganized on the colonial Indian model “in nearly every respect,” including another change in uniform design, and its commissioner and several officers were brought in from India. During his stop at Pahang in British Malaya, King Chulalongkorn surveyed the colonial police system, and recommended further changes on his return home.

As part of its efforts to design modern law enforcement institutions, marginalize provincial powers, and work with European officials in Bangkok, the royal administration appointed a series of Europeans to lead the expanded Bangkok Police force and the Provincial Gendarmerie. These Europeans, many of whom had previously worked for the Indian colonial police, were charged with the training, standardization, and recruitment of new law enforcement personnel. Sons of Bangkok elites were selected to be officers and a number of Afghans and British Indians, especially Sikhs, were hired as Bangkok city police charged with dealing with Europeans and other foreigners especially. Former gendarmerie commander C.H. Forty points out that due to complex extraterritoriality procedures, “To be at all successful, a police officer had to make himself acquainted with the procedure and laws of the different courts and to have some knowledge of several languages. This state of affairs called for officers of considerable ability and education.”

The expanded Bangkok police force and the provincial gendarmerie faced a host of challenges. The European and elite Bangkok officers had little practical experience in the Siamese countryside, and were often
shown a cold shoulder by local leaders. Strategy, too, was a problem. An amusing news item illustrated the kind of challenges faced when gendarmes led and drilled by Europeans and Bangkok elites had little practical experience:

A body of police went forth to affect the arrest of the notorious dacoit chief Ai Pia, said to be in hiding somewhere on the southern outskirts of Bangkok. The police had been informed of the place where he was. Mr. Divisional Superintendent Follett, and Mr. Chief Inspector Day of the Special Branch, with a squad of men all in uniform therefore marched to the spot with some pomp and circumstance, causing some stir in the Paklat neighbourhood. They found where Ai Pia was, but Ai Pia himself was not. He had moved out for parts unknown, and so the Police marched back again.\textsuperscript{94}

Ai Pia was to remain a stubborn thorn in the side of law enforcement personnel until 1913. In addition, both the Bangkok police and the provincial gendarmerie had trouble recruiting new members. Even after absorbing existing security forces, the rapid expansion of gendarmerie activities in the provinces required a steady stream of new recruits, who were simply not signing up voluntarily. The conscription act issued in 1905 began to solve the problem by assigning some conscripts each year to the provincial gendarmes.\textsuperscript{95}

Lastly, corruption remained a problem. Intended to eliminate collusion between local officials and criminals, the Bangkok police and the provincial gendarmerie were by no means free of corruption. Some law enforcement officials were still found to be in league with gangs. Articles exposing this kind of corruption, even among the new police forces, periodically surfaced in the \textit{Bangkok Times}.\textsuperscript{96}

Nevertheless, the provincial law enforcement became more effective over time. In one instance in late November 1906, the \textit{Bangkok Times} reported that the police responded quickly and bravely to the scene of a buffalo robbery, although they were outnumbered and ultimately not successful at protecting the buffaloes:

[T]wenty robbers all armed attacked a farmer’s house. They must have known there was a police station near by, but apparently they are bold enough to defy the ordinary forces of law and order. Eight policemen promptly turned out and with the four or five men in the farmer’s household attempted to prevent the robbery. But the thieves had evidently a big supply of ammunition, and by dint of steady firing part of them kept the police and the farmer’s people at a distance while the others rounded up and got away with the cattle.

A witness recalled that gunfire was exchanged for an hour or two, and the newspaper noted that two arrests had already been made.\textsuperscript{97} In the following incident, however, the local gendarmes arrived on the scene of the robbery in time, defended the buffaloes, and wounded and captured some of the bandits:

There were over ten armed men in the gang, and they began operations with the usual fusillade. Fortunately, however, this was heard by a Gendarmerie patrol, who hurried to the rescue and came on the scene while the [robbery] was still going on. The robbers fired on the gendarmes, one of whom got a bullet through his helmet. The fire was then returned, and two of the gang fell wounded. The others fled at once, but in addition to the wounded men two others were captured.\textsuperscript{98}

As the provincial gendarmeries became more successful, the Ministry of the Interior added new units and local resistance waned.

Villagers and traders gradually became aware that the central government’s law enforcement authorities were enjoying some success at reducing crime. Rural Siamese came to embrace the new rural authority as an additional tool in their efforts to protect their property. One locality without a police presence chipped in to fund a substation to entice the Ministry of the Interior to send gendarmes. At the time, the town of Chonnabot was located along the road from Nakhon Ratchasima to Udon Thani. “It is on this road that many traders pass,” according to an October news article, “and robberies are frequent. The officials, traders, and people therefore combined and raised a sum of Tcs. [baht] 2,074 odd, with which they have now erected a very substantial and complete station, dug a well, etc.” The Ministry of the Interior was delighted to accept the station and, according to the article, planned to send a squad of gendarmes to staff it.\textsuperscript{99} Villagers voluntarily contributed to the monarchy’s political centralization process when it proved capable of providing them some benefit.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Numerous studies have examined how King Chulalongkorn and his administration modernized Siam. This article does not deny the crucial role of the mon-
archy and the influence of the elite. However, economic and political modernization was not only an issue of elite concern; it also had a significant effect on everyday rural life.

The economic modernization of Siam, or the capitalization of the rice economy, was a major, though temporary, cause of the rise of buffalo robbery in the countryside. Exacerbating factors included higher land taxes to offset reduced revenues from tax farms, increased land speculation and land rents, unmaintained canals caused by absentee landlordism, and greater opportunities for the spread of cattle disease. By studying economic conditions in Bangkok’s Northern Suburbs in 1906, a clear association can be drawn between negative effects of economic modernization in the countryside and conditions that encouraged buffalo theft and robbery.

Political modernization also affected rural life. By expanding centralized law enforcement to the countryside, the monarchy displaced local authorities, created bonds between the monarchy and local people, and attempted to undermine arguments made by representatives of Western governments that Siam did not have a modern legal system. New provincial administrators and law enforcement officials upset the existing balance between rural crime and local authority, also contributing to a temporary rise in buffalo crime.

The monarchy’s attempts to strengthen its administration of the countryside led to a greater, modern, interest in the regulation of the buffalo, a major rural resource. The government eagerly counted work animals, registered cattle, and charged its expanding police force with stamping out the illegal buffalo trade. Rural Siamese continued, at first, to rely on local institutions of power for protection but gradually adopted the new law enforcement institutions as additional means to protect their buffaloes and other possessions. Through increasing rural acceptance of these new policies and institutions, the purview of the central government expanded to cover rural law enforcement and the intellectual control over cattle.

Historians tend to have a Bangkok-centric view of Siamese modernization under King Chulalongkorn. We tend to think of modernization during this period as a process of elite localization of European models, without considering its effects beyond the capital. But rural Siamese, particularly in the Bangkok suburbs, also noticed changes during this period that affected their most valuable possessions, their water buffaloes. Villagers realized that bandit raids on their buffaloes were becoming more frequent. Crop failures and debts led their neighbors to resort to buffalo theft. Local officials no longer had the power to work out solutions between farmers and nakleng. But farmers increasingly chose to appeal to government bureaucrats to track down their registered animals, and village chiefs turned to the royal police force to combat banditry. When rural Siamese noticed changes affecting their buffaloes, they were thinking about modernization, too. Modernization in Siam during King Chulalongkorn’s reign did not simply rearrange power among elites. It also caused rural Siamese to realize that new and closer connections—economic and political, troublesome and beneficial—linked them and their buffaloes to a modern Siamese society.

References


______. “Indian Police Subalterns in King Chulalongkorn’s Kingdom: Turn of the Twentieth Century Bangkok Pantomime” in *khue khwam phumjai, [It is Pride]*, ed. Sirilak Sampatchalit and Siriporn Yodkamolsat, 453-473. Bangkok: Sangsan, 2545 [2002].


End Notes

1 I have retold the story reported in “The Buffalo Question,” *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 6 March 1906, 14. Nai and Amdaeng are forms of address for male and female commoners, respectively. Other forms of address that can be found in quotations in this essay are: *Hadji*, for a Muslim who has completed the Hajj, and *Ai*, for a criminal or troublemaker.


The *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail* republished each week’s seven daily *Bangkok Times* issues in one weekly installment to send overseas. 1906 is a particularly interesting year. In addition to ongoing efforts to modernize the government by expanding the responsibilities and authority of the bureaucracy, severe economic problems in the Bangkok area became apparent in this year. Efforts to modernize the kingdom’s legal system were also well underway in 1906.

For the *Bangkok Times*’ efforts to make light of crime stories, and especially for poking fun at the police, see Hong Lysa, “Indian Police Subalterns in King Chulalongkorn’s Kingdom: Turn of the Twentieth Century Bangkok Pantomime” in Sirilak Sampatchalit and Siriporn Yodkamolsat, eds., *khue khwam phumjai* [It is Pride] (Bangkok: Sangsan, 2002), especially 464.

Hong Lysa, “‘Stranger within the Gates’: Knowing Semi-Colonial Siam as Extraterritorials,” *Modern Asian Studies* 38, no. 2 (May 2004), 333-334.

Hong Lysa, “Extraterritoriality,” 129 and 134.


For insisting on Western procedures, see Hong Lysa, “Extraterritoriality,” 138-140.

Volker Grabowsky, “The Thai Census of 1904: Translation and Analysis” *Journal of The Siam Society* 84, part 1 (1996): 58-59, 68, and 76-78. According to the 1904 census, Siam’s human population was 6,622,732. Omitting the portions ceded later in the decade to British Malaya and French Indochina, the population was 5,807,344. Grabowsky thinks these figures too low, and estimates that the population was actually about 7.44 million. The census also counted beasts of burden in central Siam (not including most of the North, most of the Northeast, and some of the most distant Malay states), showing buffalo to be the most plentiful at 1,444,178 and cows close behind at 1,304,751. According to census figures for this central region, there was an average of 2.9 persons in Siam for every domesticated buffalo (although this figure was as low as 1.3 in monthon Phuket and monthon Chumphon) and 3.0 persons for every cow. These figures should be considered the result of a rough count, at best.

Although these are the reasons frequently given, the preference must largely be cultural, as bulls tend to be favored in Cambodia.


The numbers of ox-carts (113,920) and boats (293,519) in central Siam were far lower than the numbers of work animals. These specific numbers represent a rough count at best. Grabowsky, “Thai Census,” 68.


Ibid., 18.


One sen is a distance of 40 meters.


For the harvest being “very good,” see “Rice Crop Prospects,” *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 29 October 1906, 11.

Damrong, “Conversation,” 2.

Ibid., 20-21. I wonder if the statement that the robbers were in no way plotting against the monarchy was made for Prince Damrong’s benefit?


For an extended discussion of economic changes in turn of the twentieth century Siam, see Johnston, “Rural Society,” especially chapters II and VII. Also, see Ian Brown, *Elite*, especially 77-88, which concern the economic problems in the Rangsit area.


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53Brown, Elite, 78-79 and 88.
55“A Late Year,” Bangkok Times Weekly Mail, 23 July 1906, 11.
53Rinderpest is a viral cattle disease that spreads quickly among populations that have not been inoculated; it is usually lethal. “Cattle in Siam,” Bangkok Times Weekly Mail, 14 May 1906, 10.
57Rinderpest is a viral cattle disease that spreads quickly among populations that have not been inoculated; it is usually lethal. “Cattle in Siam,” Bangkok Times Weekly Mail, 14 May 1906, 10.
59Rinderpest is a viral cattle disease that spreads quickly among populations that have not been inoculated; it is usually lethal. “Cattle in Siam,” Bangkok Times Weekly Mail, 14 May 1906, 10.
60The Ministry of Finance Budget Report was published in “Finances of Siam: The Budget Report,” Bangkok Times Weekly Mail, 2 August 1906, 22-24. After the land tax changes of 1905, land was taxed at rates varying from 24 att to one baht per rai, depending on estimated output. Sixty-four att equaled one Tical (baht). One rai is a measure of land area equal to a square forty meters per side. For the discontent caused by the tax increases, see Tej Bunnag, The Provincial Administration of Siam: 1892-1915 (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977), 160.
62“Northern Suburbs,” Bangkok Times Weekly Mail, 6 August 1906, 10.
63“Crop Prospects,” Bangkok Times Weekly Mail, 18 October 1906, 22.
68Ibid., 27.
69Ibid., 191.
71“Ibid., 160-161 and 164.
72Ibid., 160-161 and 164.
73Ibid., 97-98.
Information on the cattle registration system comes from a series of Bangkok Times articles, mostly concerning a major legal case against a cattle dealer who was accused of trying to export stolen cattle on the basis of a number of certificates whose descriptions did not match the animals. In the course of testimony, a number of problems with the registration system were exposed, leading the judge to conclude that “the certificates cannot be relied upon to enable me to pronounce either party to be the true owner of the cattle...” See the following articles, all in the *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*: “A Cattle Case,” 11 September 1906, 15-16; [editorial] 12 September 1906, 17; “The Cattle Case: Unbusinesslike Methods of Officials,” 12 September 1906, 18-19; [editorial] 13 September 1906, 21; “The Cattle Case: Who is Responsible?” 13 September 1906, 22; “Correspondence: The Cattle Case,” 14 September 1906, 3; “Another Cattle Case,” 15 September 1906, 7; “End of the Cattle Case: Vytie Wins All Along the Line,” 19 September 1906, 19; and “The French Court: Another Cattle Case,” 10 November 1906, 3.

A gendarmerie is a police force with a military organization. Gendarmerie commissioners replaced army officers in Prachinburi, Nakhon Ratchasima, and Chiang Mai, and took over from police commanders in Ayutthaya, Nakhon Chaisi, and Ratburi. Tej, *Provincial Administration*, 97-98 and 105.

Tej, *Provincial Administration*, 96-98.

Ibid., 224. By administrative region, I am referring to monthon.


Tej, *Provincial Administration*, 224. Recruiting was a problem for both the provincial gendarmerie and the Bangkok police, especially after the government stopped enlisting Indians. See “Dearth of Policemen,” *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 4 January 1906, 19.

See, for example, *Bangkok Times Weekly Mail*, 9 February 1906, 2.

