

# SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/>

## <Book Review>

Patrick Jory

Sinae Hyun. *Indigenizing the Cold War: The Border Patrol Police and Nation-Building in Thailand*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023.

*Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3, December 2024, pp. 603-607.

**How to Cite:** Jory, Patrick. Review of *Indigenizing the Cold War: The Border Patrol Police and Nation-Building in Thailand* by Sinae Hyun. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3, December 2024, pp. 603-607. DOI: 10.20495/seas.13.3\_603.

## Link to this book review:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2024/12/vol-13-no-3-book-reviews-patrick-jory/>

## View the table of contents for this issue:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2024/12/vol-13-no-3-of-southeast-asian-studies/>

**Subscriptions:** <https://englishkyoto-seas.org/mailling-list/>

## For permissions, please send an e-mail to:

english-editorial[at]cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp



## References

- Al Jazeera. 2024. Malaysia Wants to Join BRICS, China's Xi an "Outstanding Leader": Anwar. Al Jazeera. June 18. <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2024/6/18/malaysias-anwar-flags-brics-membership-praises-xi-as-outstanding-leader>, accessed June 22, 2024.
- Amir Yusof and Bedi, Rashvinjeet S. 2023. In Focus: A Double Whammy of Subsidy Removals and Weakening Ringgit Is Worsening Costs of Living for Malaysians. CNA. November 25. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/anwar-malaysia-food-inflation-cost-living-crisis-3939281>, accessed June 17, 2024.
- Anwar Ibrahim. 1996. *The Asian Renaissance*. Singapore: Times Books International.
- Chai, James. 2023. *Sang Kancil: A Tale about How Ordinary Malaysians Defied the Odds*. Singapore: Penguin Random House SEA.
- Danial Azhar. 2023. Prove We're Anti-Islam, Anwar Tells Critics of Unity Govt. *Free Malaysia Today*. July 7. <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2023/07/07/prove-were-anti-islam-anwar-tells-critics-of-unity-govt/>, accessed July 13, 2024.
- Hadi Azmi. 2024. Drivers Fume as Malaysia Axes Diesel Subsidies, Sending Prices Soaring. *South China Morning Post*. June 10. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/economics/article/3266008/drivers-fume-malaysia-axes-diesel-subsidies-sending-prices-soaring>, accessed June 17, 2024.
- Hafiz Noor Shams. 2023. *The End of the Nineteen Nineties*. Petaling Jaya: Matahari Books.
- Khoo Boo Teik. 2003. *Beyond Mahathir: Malaysian Politics and Its Discontents*. London and New York: Zed Books.
- . 1995. *Paradoxes of Mahathirism: An Intellectual Biography of Mahathir Mohamad*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- Lim, Guanle. 2023. The Rekindled Appetite for an Asian Monetary Fund: A Malaysia Perspective. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. October 20. <https://asia.fes.de/news/the-rekindled-appetite-for-an-asian-monetary-fund-a-malaysian-perspective.html>, accessed June 17, 2024.
- Mohd Faizal Musa and Afra Alatas. 2023. Commentary: Why did Anwar Ibrahim Welcome a Controversial Indonesian Preacher? CNA. August 2. <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/malaysia-anwar-ibrahim-abdul-somad-batubara-islam-extremist-madani-3668976>, accessed July 13, 2024.

## *Indigenizing the Cold War: The Border Patrol Police and Nation-Building in Thailand*

SINAE HYUN

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023.

The massacre of leftist student protesters at Thammasat University on the morning of October 6, 1976 is one of the most infamous events in modern Thai history. Thais and international journalists at the time were shocked by the extreme violence inflicted on the students, which included the use of snipers, anti-tank weapons, and M79 grenade launchers. Bodies of some of the dead students were burned and mutilated; one was even hung from a tree and beaten by a mob. Yet, strangely, in the Thai popular imagination the details of the event are rather blurry. Some Thais refer to the event as "16 October," a confused eliding of this event with the earlier

pro-democracy student mass protest of October 14, 1973. It is often mistakenly thought that Thailand's powerful armed forces—who carried out a coup later that day—were the instigators of the violent crackdown on students. In fact, the key actor in the massacre was not the army but a police unit, the Border Patrol Police (BPP). Who were the BPP, and why were they at Thammasat University on that day? These are the questions that Sinae Hyun sets out to answer in her provocative book *Indigenizing the Cold War: The Border Patrol Police and Nation-Building in Thailand*.

In addressing these questions, the book also aims to make a theoretical contribution to the burgeoning field of Cold War studies. For decades our understanding of the Cold War was of a global ideological confrontation between two superpowers, the capitalist United States and the communist Soviet Union. It was “cold” because the two superpowers never came into direct military confrontation. Rather, the kinetic aspect of the confrontation was experienced by the superpowers' proxies in the Third World. Recent research on these countries, often carried out by “home scholars” with a better understanding of local political dynamics as well as access to local sources in local languages, are changing our understanding of the Cold War (p. 7). As one of the great Cold War scholars, John Lewis Gaddis, himself conceded, the superpowers “were never super enough to operate at full strength everywhere” and small powers “were often in a position to influence the actions of their larger counterparts” (p. 7). As historiography globally has moved to emphasize the agency of non-Western powers in their own history, Hyun's book argues that we need to “indigenize” the Cold War, that is, to understand how local political elites adapted and transformed powerful foreign or external factors in pursuit of their own political agendas. In the case of Thailand and other Southeast Asian political elites, Hyun argues, the main political agenda was postcolonial nation building (p. 2).

The author conducted almost two years' fieldwork in Thailand, carrying out research at the BPP General Headquarters in Bangkok, the Third Regional Division Headquarters in Chiang Mai, and camps in the 17 provinces of Northern Thailand. She visited 54 BPP schools and interviewed 123 BPP teacher-officers. She was also given access to the private collections of records of BPP officers.

Hyun dates the origins of the BPP to the 1940s and 1950s, the heyday of the Thai police force, when it was a powerful rival of the military. At the time, the police fielded more men under arms than the military. Its personnel were heavily armed, with armored cars, machine guns, and even artillery (p. 28). Police received superior training to regular armed forces units, including in psychological operations and unconventional warfare. The head of the police, Pol. Gen. Phao Siyanon (1909–60), was in the early 1950s perhaps the most powerful man in Thailand. He was supported by the anti-royalist prime minister Field Marshal Phibunsongkhram, who saw the police as a counterbalance to the increasingly powerful army. The BPP was formally established in 1955 as a paramilitary intelligence unit under the auspices of the CIA, which itself had only

just been founded but which would famously go on to play a crucial role in supporting anti-communism in Third World countries.

Hyun shows that despite having such powerful patrons, the BPP had anything but a smooth rise. Just two years after the BPP's founding, the conservative head of the army, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, carried out a decisive military coup which began a long period of military dictatorship. The coup was a disaster for the BPP. Phao and Phibun both had to flee the country, never to return. Immediately following the coup, Thailand's CIA station office "spent the night burning documents and most advisers left the country soon after fearing Sarit's revenge" (p. 36). The 1957 coup thus removed Phao and the CIA as the BPP's chief patrons. Sarit moved to defang the BPP, withdrawing much of its funding, confiscating its heavy weaponry and transferring it to units in the armed forces, and demoting the BPP to bring it under the administrative control of the Provincial Police. Sarit appointed himself director general of the Police Department (pp. 37–39).

The story of the BPP might have ended there, had it not been for the fact that the police unit found a new patron. It was none other than the Princess Mother, mother to the young king Bhumibol Adulyadej (1946–2016), and the royal family who took the orphaned BPP under their wing. During the Phibun era, when the monarchy was politically weak, the royal family had tried to build an image of benevolence. They took a particular interest in the development of the border regions in the north. It was there that the Princess Mother, herself a trained nurse, encountered the BPP and learned of their development activities with the ethnic minorities. Later the BPP gained the support of the United States Agency for International Development, or USAID, which had been set up by President Kennedy in 1961. In the same year the royal family built a palace just outside the northern capital, Chiang Mai, close to the BPP's development projects. From this time the Princess Mother became the patron of the BPP, often referring to its officers as her "children." From the 1960s to 1980 she made more than 260 trips to BPP events such as school openings and Village Scout initiation ceremonies, often dressed in combat fatigues and a beret. These visits climaxed between 1973 and 1975, with 53 trips in 1975 alone (pp. 140–141). The key argument of this part of the book is that over the course of the 1960s the BPP became the armed forces unit with the closest relations to the monarchy.

By 1962 the Border Patrol Police had complemented its role as a paramilitary intelligence organization with a "civic action" function in Thailand's northern border region. Civic action included building schools and medical clinics, providing medicine, improving sanitation, and providing agricultural training. Schools attended by ethnic minority children who often could not speak Thai played a central part in the BPP's civic action role. The BPP acted at once as centers of development, institutions for assimilating the ethnic minorities, and nodes of intelligence gathering. Its civic action work laid the foundation for the famous Royal Development Projects, overseen by the king and members of the royal family, which started up in 1969. As the prestige of the monarchy and particularly King Bhumibol grew, the military regime relented in its earlier

opposition to the BPP. Crucially, in the early 1970s the royalist PM Gen. Thanom Kittikachorn removed the BPP from its position under the Provincial Police and restored its status as an independent organization (p. 59). By the 1970s it was effectively overseen by the royal family.

Besides civic action, the BPP continued its counterinsurgency role. A BPP subunit, the Police Aerial Reinforcement Unit, or PARU, which had also been set up with CIA assistance in the early 1950s, was deployed to Laos in the 1960s to participate in the CIA's covert operation, the famous "secret war in Laos." PARU was the main Thai force in Laos's civil war. It assisted the CIA in training the special guerrilla units of Wang Pao's famous Hmong army. PARU units fought against both the Communist Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese Communist forces, losing 2,500 men by the early 1970s. Also, since the 1950s PARU had been assigned to provide security for the royal family (pp. 87, 127).

The BPP was heavily involved in counterinsurgency activities in Thailand's own rural areas. The most famous BPP initiative of this era was the founding of the Village Scouts movement in the early 1970s (pp. 110–123). This became the largest and most popular anti-communist movement of the Cold War era, a central part of the BPP's "psychological warfare" operations (p. 120). In 1972 the king officially placed the Village Scouts under royal patronage (p. 116). The Village Scouts were both anti-communist "village vigilante groups" tasked with rooting out communism at the village level, and a "vehicle to promote the BPP's and the royal family's anticommunist nation-building projects" (p. 111). Besides the Princess Mother, King Bhumibol, by this time increasingly public in his anti-communism, also took a special interest in the Village Scouts, supporting them financially and even providing a set of regulations for how their activities should be conducted (p. 119).

Hyun argues that from the BPP's origins as an anti-communist paramilitary intelligence organization originally set up by the CIA, by 1975 it had effectively become "an arm of the Thai royal family intent on building a royalist nation" (p. 1). In Chapter 4 Hyun returns to the infamous massacre at Thammasat University on October 6, 1976. A crucial question concerns who gave the order for the BPP and PARU units, the Village Scouts, and other right-wing militias to go to Thammasat University that morning. While the book does discuss the roles and backgrounds of the various commanding officers at the time of the massacre (pp. 126–128), the question is not definitively resolved. But Hyun believes that "the presence of BPP, PARU, and the Village Scouts . . . reasonably provokes suspicion about the indirect and direct involvement of the monarchy in the massacre and coup on that day" (p. 133). Precisely because of the question of the monarchy's involvement, the BPP, PARU, and Village Scouts have been reluctant to speak about—or indeed commemorate—their role in the massacre (p. 133). In an interview one of the founders of the Village Scouts, Somkhuan Harikul, denied that the Village Scouts had even been at Thammasat University that morning (p. 124). The ambiguity surrounding the history of the October 6, 1976 is thus directly related to the lack of clarity surrounding the role of monarchy on that day.

The remarkable story of the BPP in Thailand's experience of the Cold War provides strong support for Hyun's indigenization argument. While the BPP may have been the brainchild of the CIA, the monarchy and its conservative supporters skillfully used it as a political tool to reshape Thailand's postcolonial political order in their own image. This is an important book which will change the way we understand the history of the Cold War in Thailand.

Patrick Jory

*School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry, University of Queensland*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8462-128X>

***Innovation, Style and Spectacle in Wayang: Purbo Asmoro and the Evolution of an Indonesian Performing Art***

KATHRYN EMERSON

Singapore: NUS Press, 2022.

In the 1970s, an influential Indonesian arts administrator was trying to introduce serious reforms in the centuries-old Javanese shadow play (*wayang*) tradition. Humardani, the head of a music, dance, and puppet conservatory in Solo, Central Java, railed against the hidebound conventions of nightlong performances that were filled with long, talky scenes in which the plot barely advanced, comic interludes that distracted from anything to do with the narrative at hand, musical accompaniments with little or no emotional valence, and an invariant structure that prevented any shaping of the performance for the purpose of conveying a message.

Having traveled to Europe and the US, Humardani was clearly influenced by Western ideas about artistic expression, messages, originality, concision, and dramatic effectiveness. He set about developing a new, "condensed" version of a shadow play performance (*wayang padat*). A puppeteer would not generate characters' words extemporaneously but rather memorize a carefully crafted script. He would not improvise jokes or puppets' movements sitting in front of the screen but rather plan out, in concert with a team of associates, every moment of the performance: what musical pieces to play, what scenes to perform in what order (omitting most or all of the conventional ones), what words to have each character pronounce in order to generate dramatic tension. Furthermore, he would get everything wrapped up in about two hours. Humardani was adamant that his goal was not to make performances shorter so that people could get up and get to work in the morning. Instead, he wanted to make a shadow play a focused, dramatically compelling event in which the audience's attention was unwavering and their minds stimulated. He wanted, in sum, to make of a puppeteer an artiste.

Carried out within the confines of the conservatory, creating *wayang padat* performances