KASETSART UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

MANUTSAYASAT WICHAKAN
Vol. 29 No. 1 (January-June 2022)
ISSN 2673-0502 (online)

Disjunctive Palimpsest: Tracing the French Detective in Postcolonial Laos*

Recieved: 17 April 2020
Revised: 8 October 2020
Accepted: 20 May 2021

Panida Boonthavevej**

Research Article

Abstract

This article offers a study of a crime series written by Colin Cotterill (b. 1952), between 2004 and 2020, featuring Dr. Siri Paiboun, the national coroner of the Lao PDR in the late 1970s. It first focuses on the series's palimpsestuous relation with the detective fiction of Georges Simenon (1903-1989), published between 1931 and 1972, whose main character is Inspector Jules Maigret of the French Criminal Investigation Division. Afterwards, a critical intersection of Gérard Genette's concept of hypertextuality and Homi K. Bhabha's notions of mimicry and hybridity establishes the Siri Paiboun series as a hypertext upon which the hypotext of Inspector Maigret has been grafted. Nonetheless, the study problematizes the palimpsestuous relation of the two series, contending that the Siri Paiboun series operates as a site where *colonial mimicry* deviates from and later disrupts the authority of colonial discourse epitomized by the convention of French police novels. The generic disjuncture, termed as *hybridity* (Bhabha, 2007), it is argued, manifests an attempt to engage French detective fiction within a different cultural context. Traversing national divides, the

Keywords

crime fiction;
postcolonialism;
Lao People's Democratic Republic;
Colin Cotterill;
Siri Paiboun;
Georges Simenon

* This article is part of a research project entitled "Sticky-Rice Detective: Interrogating Postcolonial Laoness in Colin Cotterill's Siri Paiboun Crime Series" funded by The Faculty of Archaeology Research Fund, Silpakorn University (2016)

** Assistant Professor, Department of Western Languages, Faculty of Archaeology, Silpakorn University, e-mail: boonthavevejp@gmail.com

British author makes use of the genre, first, to delegitimize its colonial authority by questioning the status of Simenon's series as a model of *roman policier*, and, second, to criticize the Lao dysfunctional judicial system while his Belgian predecessor seeks to endorse the institutional authority of the French police force, whereby crimes are punished and the rule of law is upheld.

มหาวิทยาลัยเกษตรศาสตร์
คณะมนุษยศาสตร์

วารสารมนุษยศาสตร์วิชาการ
ปีที่ 29 ฉบับที่ 1 (มกราคม-มิถุนายน 2565)
ISSN 2673-0502 (ออนไลน์)

การศึกษาเปรียบเทียบอาชญนิยายชุดสิริ ไพบูน ของคอลิน ค็อตเทอริลล์ กับอาชญนิยายชุดจูลส์ เมเกรต์ ของฌอร์ฌ ซิมนง*

Recieved: 17 April 2020
Revised: 8 October 2020
Accepted: 20 May 2021

พนิดา บุญทวีเวช**

บทความวิจัย

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้นำเสนอการศึกษาเปรียบเทียบระหว่างอาชญนิยายชุดสิริ ไพบูน ของคอลิน ค็อตเทอริลล์ นักเขียนชาวอังกฤษ (1952-), กับอาชญนิยายชุด Jules Maigret ของฌอร์ฌ ซิมนง นักเขียนชาวเบลเยี่ยม (1903-1989) ตัวละครหลักในอาชญนิยายชุดสิริ ไพบูน คือ แพทย์ชันสูตรศพของ สปป.ลาว ในช่วงปลายทศวรรษที่ 1970 ในขณะที่ตัวละครหลักในอาชญนิยายชุด Jules Maigret คือ เจ้าหน้าที่สืบสวนของกรมตำรวจฝรั่งเศสระหว่างทศวรรษที่ 1930 ถึง 1970 การศึกษาครั้งนี้อาศัยแนวคิดเรื่อง palimpsest ของ Gérard Genette ร่วมกับแนวคิดเรื่อง mimicry และ hybridity ของ Homi K. Bhabha โดยนำเสนอว่าอาชญนิยายชุดสิริ ไพบูน เปรียบเสมือน hypertext ในขณะที่อาชญนิยายชุด Jules Maigret เปรียบเสมือน hypotext ซึ่งตัวบททั้งสองมีจุดที่คล้ายคลึงกันทั้งในด้านการสร้างตัวละคร สภาพแวดล้อม และแนวทางการทำงานในฐานะนักสืบ อย่างไรก็ตาม ถึงแม้ว่าอาชญนิยายชุดสิริ ไพบูน จะถือเอาอาชญนิยายชุด Jules Maigret เป็นต้นแบบ แต่ผู้อ่านสามารถศึกษาอาชญนิยายชุดสิริ ไพบูน ในฐานะพื้นที่ในการต่อต้านวาทกรรมอาณานิคมที่มาในรูปของอาชญนิยายภาษาฝรั่งเศสได้ โดยจุดที่แตกต่างระหว่างอาชญนิยายทั้งสองชุดนี้เปิดโอกาสให้นักสืบลาวได้ท้าทายวาทกรรมจากจักรวรรดิฝรั่งเศส

คำสำคัญ

อาชญนิยาย;
แนวคิดหลังอาณานิคม;
สปป.ลาว;
คอลิน ค็อตเทอริลล์;
สิริ ไพบูน;
ฌอร์ฌ ซิมนง

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* บทความวิจัยนี้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของงานวิจัยเรื่อง “นักสืบข้าวเหนียว: การศึกษาสภาวะหลังอาณานิคมลาวในอาชญนิยายชุด “สิริ ไพบูน” ของคอลิน ค็อตเทอริลล์” โดยได้รับทุนสนับสนุนจากกองทุนสนับสนุนการวิจัย คณะโบราณคดี มหาวิทยาลัยศิลปากร พ.ศ. 2559

** ผู้ช่วยศาสตราจารย์ประจำภาควิชาภาษาตะวันตก คณะโบราณคดี มหาวิทยาลัยศิลปากร ติดต่อได้ที่: boonthavevejp@gmail.com

ที่ครอบงำวัฒนธรรมท้องถิ่นลาว ในขณะเดียวกันก็ยังสามารถตั้งคำถามต่อกระบวนการยุติธรรมในช่วงที่เปลี่ยนผ่านจากระบอบการปกครองแบบราชอาณาจักรสู่ระบอบการปกครองแบบสาธารณรัฐสังคมนิยมอีกด้วย

1. Introduction: Palimpsest and Postcolonial Crime Fiction

Crime fiction studies may generally be divided into two periods, with the 1990s as the turning point. In the 1970, scholarly attention was given to the development of the genre, mainly focusing on classic detective stories and the Golden Age, represented by Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), among others. Afterwards, interest was seen shifting from “whodunit” stories to “whydunit” stories. It has been suggested that underlying the change is the historical and ideological background. Early detective stories carry with it a reflection of the world that values realism and rationalism, making it clear that “plot construction and thematic content reflect one another: telling a story is approached as a problem of composition while crime is treated as an exercise in ratiocination” (Pyrhönen, 2010, p. 46). With the advent of hard-boiled crime fiction, popularized by Raymond Chandler (1888-1959), crime fiction studies turns to investigate the characters’ psychological backgrounds and their social environs.

From the 1990s on, new critical approaches emerge with the proliferation of new sub-genres. A historical approach to crime fiction is first introduced in Jon Thompson’s *Fiction, Crime, and Empire: Clues to Modernity and Postmodernism.* The study aims to develop a historical poetics of fiction that might allow one to see how cultural practices, such as crime fiction, become crucial sites for the resistance, acceptance, or incorporation of what Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) calls hegemonic values, beliefs, and ideas (Thompson, 1993, p. 6). The development of crime fiction studies in relation to the social condition continues to attract more scholarship, including Stephen Knight’s *Crime Fiction Since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity* (2004; 2010); John Scaggs’s *Crime Fiction* (2005); Heather Worthington’s *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (2011). Crime fiction, it has been argued, is deployed to criticize beliefs, ideas and values previously inherent in early detective fiction.

With the proliferation of sub-genres, crime fiction tends to pose questions regarding race, gender, culture, and many others. These questions are resoundingly prominent in *The Post-Colonial Detective*, Ed Christian’s edited collection which explores crime fiction and crime fiction writers by considering how indigenous detectives in postcolonial countries combine their indigenous cultural knowledge with western police methods in solving crimes, or how crime authors use or subvert the conventions of the genre (Christian, 2001, pp. 3-4).

As the postcolonial approach becomes more widely practiced, Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen, in *Postcolonial Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective*, lead an investigation into the state of a postcolonial nation and how colonial situations have been re-created and re-investigated from the perspective of the colonized (Matzke and Mühleisen, 2006, p. 8). They also entrust to the postcolonial detective the roles of the cultural arbitrator in contact zones, mediating cultural tensions, and of the subversive force against cultural hegemony (Matzke and Mühleisen, 2006, pp. 5-7).

As the genre further diversifies, one of the most poignant questions posed by postcolonial crime fiction seems to be that of identity. It has drawn increasing scholarly attention as the identity of the perpetrator in "whodunit" of the Golden Age has been reformulated by postcolonialism. In *Multicultural Detective Fiction: Murder from the "Other" Side* (1999), Adrienne Johnson Gosselin and the other contributors investigate issues surrounding community, culture and gender in Native American and African American crime fiction. Questions of cultural identity posed by postcolonial and transnational writers are also addressed in *Sleuthing Ethnicity: The Detective in Multiethnic Crime Fiction* (Ed. Dorothea Fischer-Hornung, and Monika Mueller, 2003); *Questions of Identity in Detective Fiction* (Ed. Linda Martz, and Anita Higgie, 2007); *Investigating Identities: Questions of Identity in Contemporary International Crime Fiction* (Ed. Marieke Krajenbrink, and Kate Quinn, 2009); *A Companion to Crime Fiction* (Ed. Charles J. Rzepka, and Lee Horsley, 2010).

Remarkably, postcolonial crime fiction studies does not necessarily focus on Anglophone and Francophone authors as it has traditionally been carried out in the 1970s in the case of classic detective fiction. The aforementioned collections of essays feature crime fiction from several global regions – Central America, South America, South Asia, East Asia, Africa, Russia, and Australia – written in diverse languages: Japanese, Chinese, Afrikaans, German, Spanish, Russian, Dutch, and Italian. Arguably, they constitute a testament to viable scholarships crime fiction has generated, and the field of study continues to extend an invitation to crime fiction and writers in other languages and regions around the world.

The article presents a comparative study of a French crime series and an Anglophone crime series in Southeast Asia. Between 1931 and 1972, Belgian writer Georges Simenon (1903-1989) authored seventy-five novels and twenty-eight short stories featuring Jules

Maigret, the chief detective of the French Police Department (Geherin, 2008, p. 9; Worthington, 2011, p. 143). The series is noted for its realistic setting and the invidualistic protagonist. Maigret works for the Paris police force, a centralized institution, yet he is “an antibureaucratic bureaucrat, a policeman with a human face who gets things done his own way in spite of red tape and conventional superiors” (Porter, 1981, p. 212). Maigret is a police officer, but his vigilante justice is comparable to that of “the individual private eye who safeguards society and attempts to restore the order disrupted by criminal activity” (Scaggs, 2005, p. 88).

In “Du récit à l’envers au récit de l’envers: The Imprint of the Palimpsest in Simenon,” Christine Calvet applies the concept of palimpsest to her study of the Maigret series. She aptly suggests that the investigation in crime fiction, “mainly serves to bring to light the multiple “stories,” whether superficial or intimate, at work in a given character’s life. The developments of the main plot result in the re-emergence of a whole framework of past events, which soon prove themselves vital to the narrative. The story of the crime lends a new resonance to past situations which have changed characters’ lives” (Calvet, 2014, p. 63). She stipulates the plot of crime fiction as the form of a palimpsest, “where the present leaves its imprint on the immutable inscriptions of the past,” revealing the impossibility of erasing the past and proving that the truth of the present cannot be written or rewritten on the same material (Calvet, 2014, pp. 66-67).

In 2004, thirty-two years after Simenon published the last Maigret novel, Colin Cotterill (b.1952) debuted the Siri Paiboun series. In 2009, it was awarded “The Dagger in the Library” by The Crime Writers’ Association. The fifteenth and last novel in the series was issued in 2020. As far as crime fiction set in Laos is concerned, Cotterill is probably the first British writer who placed his crime series in the country. It explores postcolonial conditions in Laos after the Communist Party took over in 1975. Written in English, the series features Siri Paiboun, a 72-year-old field surgeon and a party cadre who has been medically trained in France and has fought in the Pathet Lao movement for over thirty years. In 1976, after his retirement, he is appointed the national coroner and stationed at the morgue of Mahosot Hospital.

The apparent lack of research interest in Anglophone crime fiction in Southeast Asia may be noted. In *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, there is only one brief mentioning of the Siri Paiboun series:

> One of the more unusual postcolonial detectives is Dr Siri Paiboun, the national coroner of Laos, protagonist of Colin Cotterill's novels. Cotterill has lived in Laos. Dr Siri, in his seventies, has devoted decades to revolutionary activities, but finds that in postcolonial Laos the ideal society has not emerged, the infrastructure is crumbling, and the government is purging those who disagree with its policies. It is difficult to know whether Cotterill's Laos is realistic, but it is a compelling setting. (Christian, 2010, p. 292)

The paucity of scholarship in Anglophone postcolonial crime fiction in Southeast Asia arguably warrants a palimpsestuous study of the Siri Paiboun series, as similarly conducted by Calvet for the Maigret series. In *The Coroner's Lunch* (2004), Siri first mentions the name Maigret after he is assigned the task of investigating the mysterious death of two Vietnamese operatives whose bodies are found in Nam Nguem Reservoir. He attributes his investigative eagerness to his favorite pastime while studying in France:

> During his stay in Paris decades before, he'd taken delight in the weekly serializations of one Monsieur Sim in the L'Oeuvre newspaper. They followed the investigations of an inspector of the Paris police force who was able to solve the most complicated of mysteries with the aid of nothing more lethal than a pipe of tobacco.
>
> By the time he got to Vietnam, Siri was more than pleased to learn that Monsieur Sim had restored his name to its full Simenon, and that Inspector Maigret mysteries were now appearing as books. The French in Saigon had shelves of them, and a number found their way north to be read by those communist cadres who'd spent their formative years in France.
>
> Siri had been able to solve most of the mysteries long before the detective had a handle on them – and he didn't even smoke […] he felt a distinct merging. *The coroner and the detective were blending*. He liked the way it felt. For a man in his seventies, any stimulation, should it be kind enough to offer itself, had to be grasped in both hands. (Cotterill, 2004, pp. 62-63; my emphasis)

The merging of the police detective and the coroner conjures the concept of hypertextuality in Gérard Genette's seminal volume, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1997, p. 5), which unites a text B (hypertext – the Siri Paiboun series) to an earlier text A (hypotext – the Maigret series). Here, the process of making new things out of old ones entails "a new function being superimposed on and interwoven with an older structure" (Genette, 1997, p. 398), inviting readers to engage in a relational reading to the hypotext. The textual relation between the two crime series can be represented by the analogy of the palimpsest, whereby "on the same parchment, one text can become superimposed upon another, which it does not quite conceal but allows to show through" (Genette, 1997, p. 399). Traditionally conceived in terms of intertextuality and hypertextuality by Julia Kristeva (1969) and Roland Barthes (1973), this relational reading was coined by Philippe Lejeune (b. 1938), an essayist, as "a *palimpsestuous* reading" (Genette, 1997, p. 399; original emphasis).

As far as the question of genre is concerned, the Maigret series may be categorized as police novel, or *roman policier*, a sub-genre of crime fiction which is usually governed by a police officer which emphasizes the process of detection (Mills, 2007, p. 176). Obviously, he works "with institutional support, conducting more or less accurately reported police business" (Knight, 1980, p. 168). Fashioned after the French counterpart, the Siri Paiboun series is categorized as postcolonial crime fiction. In "Ethnic Postcolonial Crime and Detection (Anglophone)," Ed Christian defines postcolonial crime fiction as the detective fiction that "often moves from the interrogation of suspects to the interrogation of society, where crime stems from flaws in the political, social, and industrial systems […] due to the residual effects of colonialism and to the struggles of formerly colonized nations to find new yet culturally friendly ways of making their situation progressively fairer and happier" (2010, p. 284).

Postcolonial crime fiction, Christian maintains, features postcolonial detectives who are:

> [A]lways indigenous to or settlers in the countries where they work; they are usually marginalized in some way, which affects their ability to work at their full potential; they are always central and sympathetic characters; and their creators' interest usually lies in an exploration of how these detectives' approaches to criminal

> investigation are influenced by their cultural attitudes. (2001, p. 2; original emphasis)

Nonetheless, most indigenous postcolonial detectives, it is noted, have been created not by indigenous authors but by "ex-colonizers, generally white men who have lived in the countries they write about or who have studied them sympathetically" (Christian, 2010, p. 283).

One might say the difference between the two crime series is that of the colonizer and the colonial subject, constructed via the colonial discourse, rendering the latter "a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction." The colonized is thus produced as "a social reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (Bhabha, 2007, p. 110). Reading along these lines, the protagonist of the Siri Paiboun series can never live up to the finesse of *roman policier* in the Maigret series. Although he was trained in a French medical school, for one thing, he was not considered as competent as his French classmates:

> After clawing his way through a French education system dense and overgrown with restrictions against the poor, he had finally proved that a country boy could make something of himself. He found a rare, benevolent French sponsor, who sent him to Paris. There he became a competent but not brilliant medical student […] In his first two years at Ancienne, without distractions, he was in the top thirty percent of his class. His tutors agreed he had great promise, "for an Asian." (Cotterill, 2004, p. 16)

No matter how devotedly Siri tries to emulate the French model, he would be considered mere "francophone," not French, revealing the ambivalence of *colonial mimicry* as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is *almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha, 2007, p. 122; my emphasis). At the same time, the Siri Paiboun series as the hypertext may never be placed in the same category of the Maigret novels (the hypotext). Being the sign of a double articulation, it would be fixated as "a 'partial' presence'" (Bhabha, 2007, p. 123), posing a threat to the authority of the French novels. As a result, the ambivalence of colonial discourse becomes eminent.

The next three sections, hence, constitute a comparative study of the two crime series in four aspects, namely, the detectives' characteristics, the social environments, and their forensic teams. This study is mainly informed by the concepts of hypertextuality (Genette, 1997), and mimicry and hybridity (Bhabha, 2007). It examines how the Siri Paiboun series deviates from the French model, thus revealing its agendas of 1) subverting the Eurocentric ideological and literary expectations, and 2) (re)investigating the postcolonial society which poses a number of constraints under which the detective operates (Matzke and Mühleisen, 2006, pp. 5-8). The body of the victim, usually scrutinized in the crime novel, is transformed into the body of the (post)colonial society, "a site of multiple investigations and subject to many, often overlapping or intersecting modes of analysis and meaning" (Knepper, 2006, p. 39). The comparison attempts to delegitimize French colonial authority represented by Simenon's series as well as to criticize the judicial system and the poorly distributed resources in postcolonial Laos.

2. Characteristics of the Detective Figures

Reading the Maigret series in relation to the Siri Paiboun series, one notices some salient affinities and disparities between the two. One point of difference resides in the characterization of the detective figures. Regarding physical appearances, Inspector Maigret is described as a heavily built man in his forties, often seen wearing "a thick black overcoat with a velvet collar" (Simenon, 2014b). With his "proletarian" frame, he had "a way of imposing himself just by standing there," his pipe usually nailed to his jawbone (Simenon, 2013, pp. 10-11).

In addition to his self-assertiveness, Maigret is also noted for his stoicism. In *A Man's Head*, Dufour, one of the sergeants, is shot to death. Janvier, another sergeant, wished to console him, but "he felt so devastated when he saw his chief's sagging shoulders that all he could do was sniff and turn his head away" (Simenon, 2014c, p. 44). Afterwards, Maigret returns to the headquarters, where he is ready to be reprimanded by Coméliau the magistrate. However,

> […] Maigret did not flinch once, did not register the slightest trace of protest or impatience.
>
> Solemn-faced, his features drawn, he listened to the end with deference and humility. (Simenon, 2014c, p. 45)

Maigret's characteristics reflect his ordinariness and understanding of human behavior, upon which he relies for solving crimes. Noticeably, "he does what average Frenchmen once did, enjoys what they enjoyed, believes what they believed" (Porter, 1981). Unlike the eccentric amateur detective who prides himself on his intellectual superiority and superhuman deductive powers, "Maigret is a professional policeman […] a common man of average intelligence" (Geherin, 2008, p. 10).

Conversely, the coroner in Cotterill's novels is characterized as an atypical detective figure. A somber detective is replaced with a partly comical figure:

> Dr. Siri Paiboun was often described as a short-arsed man. He had a peculiar build, like a lightweight wrestler with a stoop. When he walked, it was as if his bottom half was doing its best to keep up with his top half. His hair, clipped short, was a dazzling white […] He'd never had much success with whiskers, unless you counted eyebrows as whiskers. Siri's had become so overgrown, it took strangers a while to make out his peculiar eyes. Even those who'd traveled ten times around the world had never seen such eyes. They were the bright green of well-lighted snooker-table felt, and they never failed to amuse him when they stared back from his mirror. (Cotterill, 2004, p. 5)

The characterization of Siri Paiboun clearly debunks the Holmesian stereotype of the detective who is eccentric but erudite, methodical and taciturn. Yet, his unique features inadvertently befit the cultural context in which he carries out investigative missions. Even though he keeps referring to Maigret's investigative flair, the characteristic dissimilarities between the two detectives underline the estranging presence of the hybrid that questions the colonial authority of the French novels (Bhabha, 2007, pp.162-163).

In terms of personal life, Jules Maigret is married to Louise, whom he had met at a party he had been invited to. She is often referred to as “Madame Maigret.” The couple remains childless. While Madame Maigret is understanding of her husband’s career, she is unfortunately “a model of nonentity” (Mills, 2007, p. 177). In *A Man’s Head*, Madame Maigret finds that her husband is so absorbed in the murder case he is investigating. She says nothing even when “her husband left her after drinking his coffee without even noticing that it was scalding hot” (Simenon, 2014c, p. 74). Meanwhile, Siri Paiboun was first married to Boua, a nursing student whom he met while studying in Paris. She died in a mysterious explosion while both were working with the communist movement, rallying for supporters. After the Communist Party took over the country and declared it a republic, Siri, who had been a field surgeon, was relocated to Vientiane and reluctantly took the job of a coroner. He later married Daeng Keopakam, who is now styled as “Madame Daeng.”

Siri had first met Daeng thirty-seven years earlier at the southern youth camp where he and his then wife, Boua, were serving with the Lao Issara, or the Free Lao movement. In *Anarchy and Old Dogs*, Siri re-connects with Daeng, and though she is now suffering from rheumatism she is selling noodles at a stall near the Mekhong ferry ramp (Cotterill, 2007, pp. 99-101). Subsequently, they get married and Daeng moves to Vientiane. Also childless, she establishes herself as an entrepreneur taking over a noodle shop near Chantabouli Temple (Cotterill, 2007, p. 255). An actively supportive wife, she plays an important role in Siri’s detective flair.

As far as residence is concerned, Maigret and his wife live in an apartment on Boulevard Richard Lenoir, considered a petit bourgeois setup. In contrast, Siri initially stays in an old French two-story house near Haysok Temple. The building, to be shared among a few families, “needed just about everything: paint, mortar, uncracked glass, tiles, you name it” (Cotterill, 2004, pp. 7-8). The place is later ruined in a bombing incident that kills one of his neighbors. He is thus relocated to shared government housing near That Luang (Cotterill, 2009, p. 90). Referred to as “The Zoo,” the cement box home, at one point, accommodates the needy - “eleven vagabonds and exiles: Comrade Noo, the Thai forest monk; Mr. Inthanet, the puppet master; the silent wandering woman; Crazy Rajhid; Gongjai, the ex-karaoke lounge hostess; Mrs. Fah” (Cotterill, 2016, p. 13; Cotterill, 2015, pp. 77-78).

His lifestyle seems a far cry from the bourgeois typified by Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. Their residence - No. 221B Baker Street - apparently places them in the same category of bourgeois detective as Maigret's, while Siri's positions him among the working class. Nonetheless, unlike Maigret and Siri, Holmes, a private detective, remains unmarried. The partial affinity among Maigret, Holmes, and Siri inadvertently highlights the ambivalence of the colonial hybrid that resists "the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions" (Bhabha, 2007, p. 160).

3. Places and Social Environments

Married and childless, the two government officials carry out their, often self-imposed, missions while allowing readers to vicariously explore the landscape and atmosphere in which crimes occur. Remarkably, there is often an intimate relation between crime and its milieu. When the detective is strolling along the streets of Paris or other towns, his view towards those places he immerses himself in reflects his occupation and the authority the state has invested in him. Here, walking is a form of surveillance the police officer vigilantly conducts. For instance, investigating a cold case in Liège, in *The Hanged Man of Saint-Pholien*, Maigret alights in an old neighborhood:

> The inspector turned up the collar of his overcoat, cleared his throat and began walking alone down the deserted street. And all his senses were attuned to a single purpose: to perceive the faintest noise, the slightest ruffle in the air that might warn him of any danger. (Simenon, 2014b, p. 86)

The sense of place is clearly reflected in Maigret's investigative method of "soaking up the atmosphere of a crime scene and gradually immersing himself in the lives of people who previously had been strangers to him" (Geherin, 2008, p. 11). In *Inspector Cadaver*, for instance, Maigret arrives in Saint-Aubin to investigate the death of one Albert Ratailleau. More than once, he is seen walking along the main street:

> Hands in pockets, overcoat collar turned up, Maigret made his way cautiously towards the first light he could see, which resembled a lighthouse in the fog. Although it seemed a long way off, the shimmering halo was so bright it was easy to think he was heading for a major landmark. […] Saint-Aubin wasn't a big place. He could already see the lights of the dairy like a factory ablaze in the night. […] This was the miniature world in which Albert Retailleau had lived. His mother had spent her whole life here. Apart from holidays at Les Sables-d'Olonne, someone like Geneviève Naud had virtually never left this little town. (Simenon, 2015a, pp. 77-78)

Maigret locates himself in the environs in which crime is committed in order to comprehend the dynamics of the people and place. This will eventually provide the background information for his crime-solving. Concurrently, in the Siri Paiboun novels, places in the cities he lives in or visits on his missions supposedly reflect the social climate of Laos in the 1970s. Strolling along the streets is arguably a literary device to display and reflect upon the transformations the cities have undergone. Revealing signs of a crumbling economy, Vientiane, for example, has become dusty and deserted. In *The Coroner's Lunch*, Cotterill writes:

> Siri walked home through the dusty Vientiane streets at the end of a long Friday. He usually kept a cheery smile on his face for anyone who wanted it. But he'd noticed that fewer people returned it these days […] He passed dark, half-empty shops that all seemed to sell the same things. He passed the fountain whose spouts had become cave dwellings for insects, and unfinished buildings whose bamboo scaffolding was green with ivy. (Cotterill, 2004, p. 7)

As the city of Vientiane is described above, the city of Phnom Penh, after it has been captured by the Khmer Rouge, is depicted in *Love Songs from a Shallow Grave*, where Siri accompanies his friend Civilai in a fact-finding mission. There, he reminisces of the time he spent with Boua during an orientation program after they had been recruited by the French to set up a youth camp in southern Laos. He remembers walking along the Boulevard Norodom, "one of the prettiest cities in Asia" in 1940s (Cotterill, 2010). However, the second visit reveals a totally different city:

> He stepped onto the deserted tree-lined boulevard. This was where he and his wife had walked hand in hand back in the forties […] He needed to hold on to that Phnom Penh for as long as he could. But there were no smiling faces now. No lovers on benches. No impossible beds of tulips and roses. This was a morning-after Boulevard Norodom. […] There was litter everywhere and evidence of vandalism. (Cotterill, 2010, p. 251)

The transformed landscapes of the cities arguably contribute to the protagonist's disillusioned view of the communist ideology implemented in Cambodia and Laos. Instead of improving life for the people, the implementation of communism has adversely changed the once prosperous cities.

It is noted that situating the detective in the criminals' social environs, the Maigret series places more emphasis on the psychological complexities of the criminals rather than on the process of solving crime (Schütt, 2003, p. 73). For example, in *The Flemish House* (2014a), Maigret chooses not to disclose the result of his investigation, which would have incriminated the Peeters family. This is "perhaps the starkest example of Maigret setting himself up as a moral judge of a crime and a criminal, basing his decision on his own evaluation of the characters and circumstances rather than acting as an impartial enforcer of the law" (Alder, 2013, p. 81). Here, his class solidarity with the petit bourgeois of the Peeters family overrides the resolution of the case.

On the contrary, Siri often associates himself with the victims. In *The Merry Misogynist*, Siri visits Vang Vieng to investigate a serial killer case. Trying to locate the house of Mongaew and Boonhee, who have lost their daughter Ngam, he discovers that:

> The house was loosely woven elephant-grass panels on a bamboo-and-wood frame. The roof was thatched. There was a bamboo conduit that snaked down from the hills, bringing water from a spring to a large oil drum. Three chickens scratched around in the dirt, and an anorexic dog, one that Siri didn't recognize, slept under a bush of thistles. […] Siri passed the little altar that held offerings to the spirits of the land. With the kind cooperation of

> Lady Kosob, the rice goddess, there would be early rains, and they would not fall in torrents that destroyed the earth embankments that separated the rice troughs. It was clear the offerings had been too paltry to raise this family from poverty. There were only two small paddies attached to the farm but they appeared to be deserted. (Cotterill, 2009, pp. 120-121)

The poor couple had been grooming the daughter for the Miss Sangkhan beauty pageant, hoping that she would win and receive a considerable sum of prize money as well as “countless offers to advertise beans and cement and farm implements and soft drinks, all for a fee” (Cotterill, 2009, p. 128). However, as Siri learned, this hope was dampened when the pageant was cancelled because it was considered a relic of the decadent society the Communist Party was trying to weed out (Cotterill, 2009, p. 129).The different emphases of the detective figures’ investigation, as a result, underline the production of hybridization that turns the discriminated subject into a disturbing colonial presence, and that refuses to resolve the tension between the two cultures, i.e., French and Laotian (Bhabha, 2007, p. 162).

4. Forensic Team and Technology

The cultural context in which the detective carries out his investigation contributes not only to the detective’s class consciousness, but also to his investigative approaches. Professionally, both Maigret and Siri work for government institutions, the police force and the hospital, respectively. However, when it comes to the working conditions, Maigret seems to have the luxury of collaborating with a team of resourceful and reliable officers: Janvier, Dufour, Lucas and Torrence. In *Signed, Picpus* (2015b), for example, Maigret depends on his team members to keep watch outside Madame Le Cloaguen’s residence. On the contrary, without formal training as a coroner, Siri is “ramrodded” into this job after retirement. Dtui, one of his lab assistants, comments on his qualification:

> Technically, Dr. Siri isn’t all that qualified either. I mean, he’s good, but he doesn’t have any formal training as a coroner. Our politburo didn’t seem to think that fact was terribly important; surgeon-coroner,

> same difference. Luckily for them, Siri's a bit of a genius in a number of ways. (Cotterill, 2008, p. 4)

Meanwhile, his team is portrayed as unconventional, sometimes to the point of bizarreness. First of all is Geung Watajak, "a good-looking man in his forties with pronounced Down syndrome features and jet-black hair greased on either side of a crooked center parting" (Cotterill, 2005, p. 23). He had earlier been hired by Dr. Pongruk, the former coroner at the Mahosot Hospital, as his morgue assistant. Another assistant to Siri is Chundee Chantavongheuan, who usually goes by her pet name "Dtui." Described as a "solid young nurse with a well-washed but rather craggy face and a happy mouth" (Cotterill, 2004, p. 19), she seems unsuccessful in finding romance in her life because:

> There had been years when large torsos were in high fashion, a symbol of wealth and plenty. Physiology went through cycles. But in the twentieth century, malnutrition was à la mode. Dtui with her laundry-bin build was off the scale. There were no suitors queuing at her door. They wouldn't have to dig deep to find her kindness and humor, but they didn't even bring a spade. (Cotterill, 2004, p. 28)

Although Siri and his assistants do not look like professionals, they display a strong sense of team spirit. In *Slash and Burn* (2011), Siri embarks on the joint operation of locating a missing US airplane and possibly an M.I.A. Peach, the Lao–English interpreter, whose parents had worked as missionaries in Laos, looks at the team admiringly. Apparently, she is surprised at the efficiency of Siri's team members given their lack of proper training.

As far as human and technological resources are concerned, Maigret's team is better equipped with Criminal Records and the efficient forensic technology. In *Maigret Bides His Time*, he investigates the murder of Manuel Palmari, a vagrant from Corsica who had started as a pimp. At sixty, he was living with Aline on Rue des Acacias (Simenon, 1966, p. 7). Since Aline is also one of the suspects, an officer is called in to check for gunshot residue:

> "Moers! Can you come in with the paraffin?"
> The expert had understood and was preparing his instruments.
> "Your hand, please."
> "What for?"

> "To prove that you haven't used a firearm this morning."
> Without blinking she held out her right hand. Then, just in case,
> the experiment was repeated on the left hand.
> "When can you let me know, Moers?"
> "In about ten minutes. I've got all I need down in the truck."
> (Simenon, 1966, pp. 22-23)

In contrast, the morgue at the Mahosot Hospital suffers a severe scarcity of resources. The morgue and the so-called forensic lab are housed in the same poorly equipped unit. "[G]uided by the guile of his hero Maigret of the Paris Sûreté," Siri oftentimes has to rely on makeshift technology when collecting samples from a crime scene (Cotterill, 2010). In *Anarchy and Old Dogs*, Siri and Officer Tao have to perform an autopsy on the body of Say, the deputy governor of Champasak, who has been electrocuted in his own bathtub. In light of their scarce resources, they manage to take an impression of the right index finger using a square of carbon paper (Cotterill, 2007, pp. 95-96).

The disparity in the two detectives' forensic technology, it may be contended, is aimed at criticizing the bureaucracy in postcolonial Laos. In *The Merry Misogynist*, Siri complains to Phosy, Inspector of the National Police Force, about the red tape in the customs department. Siri is autopsying the body of one Ngam from Ban Xon, Vang Vieng. In his attempt to analyze the stomach contents, he relies on chemicals from Teacher Oum. The much-needed items are donated by the Vladivostok Schools Cooperative in the USSR, and have been waiting at the docks for a year. This is considered an improvement since his new French forensic pathology textbooks have been stuck there since early 1976. Siri figures, "By the time they're cleared you'll be able to use them on me" (Cotterill, 2009, p. 55). The situation elucidates the constraints of postcolonial Laos under which the detective carries out his investigative tasks. Even though the country has been liberated from the French colonialists, the forensic team still find themselves struggling with the lack of resources and having to rely on international aids.

To a certain extent, Siri's method of investigation is quite similar to Maigret's. He gathers all the relevant information, comes up with a hypothesis, and tries to verify it. Meantime, Maigret, after collecting available information, starts with a list of questions and tries to answer them. In *The Madman of Bergerac*, he explains to his wife that:

> ‘Before we do anything else, we need a schedule. I think it’s best to act as if we don’t expect to receive any new information. In other words, to work with what we’ve got and try out all the different theories until one of them rings true.’ (Simenon, 2015c, p. 79)

It seems both Siri and Maigret rely on rational inquiry while working on their cases. Nevertheless, Siri’s investigation is often hampered by supernaturalism in various forms, i.e., dreams, omens, premonitions, possessions, trances, and visitations, and serves several functions. Conceived as the hypostasis of the victim’s call for justice, it functions as clues that help the coroner/detective in his crime solving operation. Eventually, the perpetrators are prosecuted and the spirits of the dead are laid to rest. The deceased who appear to Siri apparently come to him hoping he would help them with their unfinished businesses (Cotterill, 2013, p. 71).[1]

An incident that highlights the significance of spectral clues resides in Siri’s first high-profile case in late 1976. Mrs. Nitnoy, Comrade Kham’s wife and a senior cadre at the Women’s Union, is found dead. Comrade Kham breaks it to him that the cause of his wife’s death is her gastronomic fascination. The husband claims that his wife died because she had consumed a lot of *lap* or *pa daek*, raw meat or fish concoction infested with parasites. Since, according to the law, the doctor cannot issue a death certificate until he confirms the cause of death, Comrade Kham would rather have Nitnoy’s own surgeon sign the certificate, and rush the body to the crematorium (Cotterill, 2004, p. 40). The coroner’s suspicion is stirred up during the husband’s visit to the morgue:

> Siri looked at the tall man and was overwhelmingly conscious of a dark image some three meters behind him. For some unknown reason it filled him with dread. It wasn’t clear, and there wasn’t enough light to distinguish features, but its shape reminded him exactly – exactly of Mrs. Nitnoy […] She was standing, shaking. She tensed. She readied herself and charged at the comrade’s

[1] For further discussion of supernaturalism in the Siri Paiboun series, see “Haunting Nation: Supernaturalism and Lao-ness in the Siri Paiboun Crime Series” by Panida Boonthavevej. (2018). *Journal of Mekong Societies*, *14*(3), pp. 42-63.

> back with all the ferocity of a bull intent on goring him […] But when her body met her husband's, she vanished. (Cotterill, 2004, p. 41)

Consequently, instead of working on the dead body in the morgue, he decides to go to the field, and visits the Union's headquarters and interviews Dr. Pornsawan (Cotterill, 2004, p. 60), whereby Siri discovers that it was the husband who murdered her by lacing her painkillers with cyanide. He was jealous of his wife's rising career at the Women's Union as she often appeared in the Khaosan News Agency newspaper. Haunted by a sense of guilt, Comrade Kham eventually shot himself in the head (Cotterill, 2004, pp. 58-59; 240).

The circumstances of Siri's investigative tasks obviously differentiate the Lao detective from his French counterpart. With the detective working under several social and technological constraints, the Siri Paiboun crime series departs from the model of police procedural found in the Maigret series.

5. Conclusion: Joined in Disjunction

A palimpsestuous reading of the Maigret series and the Siri Paiboun novels in light of the genre has finally demonstrated that Siri Paiboun series operates as a site where *colonial mimicry* deviates from and later disrupts the authority of colonial discourse epitomized by the convention of French police novels. The generic disjuncture, termed as *hybridity*, reveals the problematic nature of colonial representation whereby the discriminated subject reverses the effects of colonialist disavowal and estranges the basis of its authority (Bhabha, 2007, p. 162). The Siri Paiboun series, one may maintain, constitutes a hybrid object that retains traces of the Maigret series while revaluing its presence by resisting its being positioned as a literary inferior.

The Maigret series may be considered the hypotext and Siri Paiboun series as the hypertext; both are engaged in a palimpsestuous relationship. Yet, one needs to be reminded that it is not simply a situation in which the two texts coexist harmoniously on the same plane. They are joined in *disjunction*, "produced within the act of enunciation as a specific colonial articulation" (Bhabha, 2007, p. 153). One cannot merely say that the Siri Paiboun

series takes after the model of the French detective novel since this comparative study of the two crime series has already underlined the questionable status of the Maigret series. The “paranoid classification” (Bhabha, 2007, p. 162) it encounters – does it fit in the sub-genre of the golden age crime fiction, police procedural, or hardboiled crime fiction? – renders obvious the ambivalence of colonial mimicry which resides in the “split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference” (Bhabha, 2007, p. 153). The Siri Paiboun series, as the hypertext, can thus be classified neither as “imitation,” nor as “proximization” of the Maigret series (Genette, 1997, pp. 7; 304).

Conspicuously, the disjunctive palimpsest, evidenced in the sub-genre the Maigret series is placed in, reveals the repressive force of the central government. Although the detective himself projects “an image of efficiency with a genial face and the touch of the common man” (Porter, 1981, p. 206), the quality peculiar to the private eye in hardboiled crime fiction, he unquestionably embodies the institutional authority of the French police force in maintaining social order as found in police procedurals. It has been argued, “such a view continued to have widespread currency through the alternate waves of revolution and reaction that characterized French political life down through the nineteenth century and into our own time” (Porter, 1981, p. 203).

Meantime, the hybridization of the genre in effect questions the judicial system in the Lao PDR. Technically, the law did not exist in Laos. After the communist movement established a republic on December 2nd, 1975, it would take up to sixteen years for the first constitution to be drafted. That means the Ministry of Justice in which Siri is housed operates under the “lawless” circumstances. In *Six and a Half Deadly Sins*, for instance, the question of legality is brought up by Inspector Phosy, the police chief, in his conversation with Sergeant Teyp in the Luang Nam Tha Police Headquarters. So as to garner confidence from him, Phosy explains, “We have a system. Laws. Everything that happens here is reported to and acted on in Vientiane. You are members of the Lao police force. Never forget that” (Cotterill, 2015, p. 55). But, in fact, there was no law. There was no constitution.

> There were no laws as such. The ministry had drawn up a list of crimes and suitable punishments, but the judicial system was in its infancy and justice was being meted out by old military officers and headmen who interpreted the ambiguous lists however they

> saw fit. […] The question of legality was always a contentious one, as the old royalist constitution and its rules had been thrown out along with the French texts. Until a new law book was drafted, the term “legal” would remain a matter of conjecture. (Cotterill, 2015, pp. 55; 101)

In a land without lawyers, nobody represents the defendant at the trial. It is based on circumstantial evidence alone (Cotterill, 2010, p. 197). In the country where the law is not put into use, the question of legality is critically challenged. What constitutes a crime? It is left to the whim of those in the police force and the judicial system which does not really exist.

Finally, the comparative study of the Siri Paiboun series and the Maigret series has demonstrated how the postcolonial crime series deviates from and disrupts the convention of French police novels. The departure from the literary tradition is indicative of the author’s attempt to challenge the colonial authority of the French model of *roman policier*, as well as to criticize the Lao dysfunctional judicial system, whereby the notion of justice and the rule of law are questioned.

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