



CULINARY AWAKENING

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Bogeyman of Bangkok

The embalmed corpse of a Chinese immigrant executed in Thailand for cannibalism in the late 1950s is the ghoulish star attraction at a medical museum

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Si Quey Sae-ung's reputation precedes him: notorious serial killer, vicious child murderer and ghoulish cannibal.

Seen as evil personified in Thailand, where the love of the macabre knows no bounds, the Chinese immigrant has become part of local folklore. He has been immortalised in films and books. He has also been a bogeyman for generations of children. For decades, Thai parents have been warning their offspring that if they misbehaved, stayed out late or skipped school, Si Quey would come and eat their liver.

Yet on encountering his embalmed corpse, in a small medical museum at Siriraj, Bangkok's oldest hospital, he does not appear menacing at all. Instead, he strikes a pitiful figure.

Si Quey's preserved remains are on permanent display at the hospital's Medical Museum: a desiccated mummy propped upright in a tall, glass-walled cabinet. Slathered in hardened paraffin wax, his leathery skin glistens in the light of fluorescent lamps.



He's our most popular exhibit, for sure ... Many, many Chinese tourists come to see him too

ATTENDANT AT BANGKOK'S SIRIRAJ MEDICAL MUSEUM

Embalming has turned the ill-fated immigrant's features distinctly mousy, with sunken cheeks and a pointy little nose. A white tooth protrudes on each side of his mouth, which is frozen agape as if he had been cut off mid-sentence while uttering his last words.

As in death, so in life. Based on an old newspaper photo, a copy of which is framed and mounted beside him, he was a small, wiry man who also looked mousy in life. At his trial in March 1958, he was photographed yawning, which made him appear as a snarling fiend.

Beside his corpse is the mummified cadaver of a man identified only as a "rape murderer". Like Si Quey, he too, was put to death and then placed on display in the museum as a cautionary exhibit.

Neither of them look out of place in the museum, which contains countless morbid exhibits. Just past the entrance, a wall greets visitors with graphic photos of those who died of

Si Quey's preserved corpse on display at the Siriraj Medical Museum. Photos: Tibor Krausz



stabblings, gunshots, self-inflicted wounds and blunt force traumas.

Inside await numerous fetuses and newborns with grotesque congenital deformities, preserved in glass jars filled with formaldehyde. Also on display are skulls fractured by hammer blows, diseased brains, dissected body parts, and the giant scrotum of a man who suffered from elephantiasis. Yet the museum's main attraction has always been Si Quey.

"He's our most popular exhibit, for sure," says an attendant with a flamboyant comb over in a dimly lit inner

room where a resin bust of Si Quey, cast from his mummy, takes pride of place among other "educational" exhibits. Clearly visible in Si Quey's chest are the bullet holes from his execution in September 1959, at age 32.

"Si Quey is a big draw for Thais," the attendant says. "Many, many Chinese tourists come to see him, too."

What draws the gawking crowds is the enormity of the crimes attributed to Si Quey, who was born in 1927 to farmers in the city of Shantou, Guangdong province.

After the end of World War II,

in which he had fought the invading Japanese as a conscript, Si Quey migrated to Thailand on a cargo ship. He was employed in various menial jobs and, in the mid-1950s, reportedly embarked on a killing spree.

In one gruesome murder after another between 1954 and 1958, it is said he stabbed six boys and girls to death in several Thai provinces. The youngest victim was five years old and the oldest 11. Both were ethnic Chinese.

It is said that Si Quey mutilated his victims' corpses, carving out their hearts, kidneys, livers and organs. He then cooked and ate the body parts. He did so, he apparently confessed to police, in the belief that consuming them would rejuvenate him.

He selected children because they were easier to entrap and kill.

Official records also state that he liked human flesh. He had his first taste of it during a fierce Japanese siege in the war when there was no food and he fought gnawing hunger by eating parts of his fallen fellow soldiers.

Although these lurid details are the stuff of nightmares, Thais are increasingly asking whether they are in fact true. They are also doubting whether Si Quey – Thailand's only convicted cannibal – really was a human flesh eater, or rather a scapegoat.

"In those days, people were very gullible. They believed anything without evidence," says Sakorn Khunain, 50, a taxi driver in Bangkok who has long been fascinated by the tale of Si Quey but is sceptical of his guilt.

Screenshot from a Thai documentary on Si Quey (below). Photo: THAIPBS via YouTube



His spirit is restless ... It's a curse on him to be locked in there

UNIVERSITY STUDENT SUTTISA RATTANASRI

Thai, confessed. What does not seem to be in much doubt is that in early 1958, Si Quey was likely responsible for the death of an eight-year-old boy called Somboon Boonyakan in a small town in Rayong province, in eastern Thailand.

Somboon left home one afternoon to buy vegetables from Si Quey, who was working as a gardener in a nearby orchard. When the boy did not return home, his parents started looking for him. His father encountered Si Quey, who was about to set light to a pile of twigs and dry leaves.

In the mound, the father realised to his horror, lay the disembowelled body of his son. Decades later, the parents still insisted in interviews that Si Quey had cut open their son's abdomen to eat his organs.

Yet despite Si Quey's recorded confession, claims that he was a cannibal were not proven credibly. He may also have been blamed retroactively for the unsolved murders of children elsewhere in previous years.



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PROFESSOR WASANA WONGSURAWAT, HISTORIAN AT BANGKOK'S CHULALONGKORN UNIVERSITY

His confessions to those crimes were inconsistent with the evidence, and police provided no hard proof to tie him to them.

"I'd argue that the legal system failed him," says Professor Wasana Wongsurawat, a historian at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University. "Si Quey was denied due process."

In several, or perhaps all, murders blamed on him, the historian adds, Si Quey was probably a convenient scapegoat for crimes committed by others.

Thailand, a staunch ally of the United States, was at the time in the grip of anti-communist hysteria, and the country's hardline military regime regarded immigrants from China as possible clandestine revolutionaries attempting to promote Maoism. Accused of crimes such as arson, suspects were often summarily executed.

"Si Quey suffered a similar fate. He was [portrayed as] this scary Chinese commie with bad teeth," says Wasana, an authority on the history of Chinese people in Thailand.

"Chinese migrant labourers back then were much like migrant labourers from Myanmar and Cambodia today" – marginalised and at risk of being convicted on the flimsiest of evidence, he says.

Six decades on, many Thais want to rehabilitate Si Quey's image. Tens of thousands have supported an online petition launched recently to have his mummified corpse removed from display. In response, Siriraj Hospital has taken down a label identifying him as a cannibal.

The hospital says it will provide new details alongside the Si Quey exhibit with updated evidence.

"We treat him like a family member," Prasit Watanapa, dean of the hospital's faculty of medicine, says.

Prasit adds that periodically staff perform a merit-making ceremony for Si Quey's soul.

Yet that may not suffice for Thais who believe that having been on display for so long as an object of scorn, Si Quey has had his soul trapped, and so it's time to set him free.

"His spirit is restless, seeking justice. I'm sure of it," says Suttisa Rattanasri, a university student. "When I saw him at the museum I felt sorry for him. It's a curse on him to be locked in there with people pointing fingers at him."

Sakorn, the taxi driver, concurs.

"Even if he committed these crimes, it was a long time ago. So we shouldn't still keep him captive like that," he says.

"And if he didn't commit them it's worse, because he has this stigma on him and that's not fair."

Illustration: Henry Wong