

**From Civilizing Mission to Rationalizing Gaze:
A Genealogy of Urban Spirit-medium Cults
in Contemporary Thailand¹**

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Abstract

What is the genealogy of urban spirit-medium cults in contemporary Thailand? How and why have the cults become “remnants of irrationality” and “subjects of control” in Thai official and rationalist discourses? These questions will be addressed in this essay. Drawing on two controversial cases against spirit mediumship in two different periods of the modern Thai history (mid 19th and late 20th centuries, I argue that urban spirit-medium cults had survived the civilizing campaigns in the early Siamese modernization era and have eluded the bourgeois, rationalizing gazes of the media-saturated world. Official authorities, the Buddhist Sangha, and the rising middle class (as represented by scholars and mass media) have used their technologies of power to shape and reshape popular religious beliefs and practices, but their efforts and rationalizing gazes are far from absolute and complete. People, especially members of urban working class and rural villagers, are still very much in control of their religious world. This paper illustrates popular voices concerning religious freedom and individual choices in contemporary Thailand.

Introduction

The urban spirit-medium cults (*latthi phithi song chao khao phi*)² have been flourished in contemporary Thailand in the past few decades. In 1995, Wo. Chinpradit, a Bangkok-based senior spirit medium, describes the popularity of urban spirit-medium cults that “being a spirit medium is not foolish or old fashioned, as many think. Instead, it is still up-to-date and fashionable in this era, which is known as the era of the *thep*³ outbreak (*yuk thep rabat*)” (Wo. Chinpradit 1995:Preface). Later in that same year, the research unit of Thai Farmers’ Bank claims that spirit shrines have existed in every community throughout the country and outnumbered Buddhist monasteries. Thai people have spent more than 20 billion baht per year for all kinds of spirit mediumship, fortune telling, and other magic-related services (*Krasaethat*, December 25, 1995; *Matichon Daily*, December 23, 1995). In addition, Suchada Chakphisut (1988:82-98) estimates that in the late 1980s Thailand had around one million spirit mediums of all sorts (i.e., magical monks, Chinese and Indian mediums, traditional and urban mediums, and fortune tellers). Kukrit Pramoj, the late distinguished politician, national artist, and scholar, sums up the rise of urban spirit-medium cults by stating that “the

population of spirit mediums drastically increased recently; they can be found everywhere. Spirit mediumship in our country is a [cultural] phenomenon” (cited in Shalardchai Ramitanondh 1984:154-57).

However, the popularity of urban spirit-medium cults simply means that they are well favored by many. Their popularity are not necessarily attached by positive cultural values and images. The emergence of urban spirit-medium cults appears to be disturbing and obscure in current Thai public culture. Thai official authorities (i.e., Department of Religious Affairs, the Police), the Buddhist Sangha, middle class scholars, and some national media contend that the popularity of urban spirit-medium cults signifies the decline of the public’s faith in Buddhism and indicates the growing interests in magic and false or irrational religious beliefs and practices. Critiques against and using forces to suppress controversial cults on the grounds of anti-Buddhism, threatening national security, committing crime, or engaging in fraud, have been reported in the national media from time to time. The most controversial case is probably the closure of the Cult of the Heavenly Grandfather (*samnak pu sawan*) in Ratchaburi province in 1986 (see Yagi 1988).

Despite of spirit-medium cults’ extreme popularity in contemporary Thailand, little have been written about their origin and historical development in modern Thai cultural landscape. Most literature on the subject seems to portray the current emergence of urban Thai spirit-medium cults as an outbreak or a suddenly popular religious phenomenon, which widely spread across social spectrums.⁴ What is the origin of urban Thai spirit-medium cults? How and why have the cults become “remnants of irrationality” and “subjects of control” in Thai official and modernist discourses? In this essay, I would like to explore the genealogical history of urban spirit-medium cults. My analysis of descent of the cults will be centered around two controversial cases concerning spirit mediumship in two different periods in modern Thai national history. The first case deals with King Mongkut’s policies against spirit mediumship and other forms of supernaturalism in mid 19th century, while Chuchart Ngarmkan’s confession against spirit mediumship on the Cho Chai talk show in late 1997 is another case under consideration.

By following Foucault (1977)’s concept of genealogy, I argue that the history of urban spirit-medium cults is the history of religious syncretization, prohibition, and persistence. Rooted in the history of premodern religious traditions

of the Tai/Thai states, a genealogy of the cults can be seen in the process of modernization which is underlined by rulers and elite's ideas of centralization of power and control, the inauguration and celebration of Western sciences, and religious rationalization. I also believe that the emergence of urban spirit-medium cults in contemporary Thailand represent the return of Thai premodern religious practices in the postmodern cultural landscape. The return of this premodern past signify not only the revival of occasionally suppressed religious subjects, but also the rising voices of religious diversities in the rapidly changing cultural terrain. Spirit-medium cults had survived the civilizing mission campaigns in the early Siamese modernization era and had eluded bourgeois, rationalizing gazes of the media-saturated world. I contend that one of powerful messages from this religious phenomenon seems to point to contested voices of the popular religion. Official authorities, the Buddhist Sangha, and the rising middle class (as represented by scholars and mass media) have used their technologies of power to shape and reshape popular religious beliefs and practices, but their efforts and rationalizing gazes are far from absolute and complete. People, especially members of urban working class and rural villagers, are still very much in control of their religious world.

Prior to the Civilizing Mission

Urban spirit-medium cults are represented by sets of complex, interrelated religious beliefs and practices, which have been existing since the periods of premodern Tai/Thai states. Animism (beliefs and practices concerning *phi* and *winyan*), fatalism, *khwan* (the vital essence), magic, and spirit mediumship are among key features in the cults' currently syncretistic practices. In addition, most urban spirit-medium cults have included various religious elements from mainstream Buddhism, Chinese and Indian religions into their diversified rituals. The most notable syncretistic worships in the cults can be seen through a number of deities and figures worshipped in the cults. They are ranged from local deities like Ya Mo in Khorat, Chao Mae Chamathevi in Lamphun, famous Buddhist saints like Luang Pu To, great historical figures like King Naresuan, King Taksin, or King Chulalongkorn, to imported foreign deities like Guan Yin or Ganesh from Chinese and Indian religious traditions, respectively.

Spirit-medium cults are indigenous to Tai/Thai culture. Beliefs and practices concerning spirits, spirit mediumship, magic, and other forms of supernaturalism can be found in historical accounts and literature since days of Sukhothai. King Ramkhamhaeng's inscription, King Lithai's *Traiphum*, and other Ayuthayan classical literature (i.e., *Lilit Phra Law*, *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*) are among rich evidences showing the prominent places of animism in the Siamese syncretized religious traditions.⁵ In the Bangkok era, although Buddhism has continued its dominance as the state-sponsored religion, animism and Brahmanism were widely practiced both in the great and popular traditions. Two of most authoritative sources dealing with religious beliefs and practices in the early Bangkok period are the Law of Three Seals (*Kotmai Tra Sam Suang*) and King Chulalongkorn's the Royal Ceremonies of the Twelve Months of the Year (*Phraratchaphithi Sipsong Duan*).⁶

Beliefs and practices concerning magic, supernaturalism, and spirit cults in urban areas had coexisted in a relatively harmonious state with Buddhism and Brahmanism until the Kingdom entered the modern era in the 19th century. Siamese rulers and elite had begun to learn and adopt rudiments of Western civilization, especially sciences, technologies, and languages. The 19th century was also the period that Siamese rulers and elite had begun to realize the threatening of European colonial power and the Kingdom's inferior positions in the world's politics and economy. Encounters and contacts with Westerners had planted a modern consciousness of places, cultural heritages, and identities in Siamese rulers' and elite's minds. In the mid 19th century, Siam under leadership and remarkable vision of King Mongkut had launched its civilizing mission, which included a move to rationalize and discipline its subjects' religious beliefs and practices.

The Early Modernist Critiques on *Khon Song* and Spirit-medium Cults

Jean Comaroff, an anthropologist from the University of Chicago, coined the term "bourgeois modernism" in describing the ways that the rulers, the elite, and members of the middle class in contemporary Southeast and East Asian countries highly value rationality and modernity. She remarks that "spirit possession, with its implications of unwilling invasion, of bodies seized by superhuman force, violates

the models of selfhood central to bourgeois modernism”⁷The term “bourgeois modernism” also characterizes how Asian rulers have adopted a rational vision of their countries and the world. By adopting Comaroff’s term, I understand that modernism in Siam is defined in conjunction with the rise of the urban middle class during the early Bangkok period. The rise of Siamese bourgeois modernism began within a small group of educated, progressive elite, because formal education, printing, and communication technologies were still limited in the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. Only Siamese rulers and elite were able to have contacted with Westerners. I believe that the essence of Siamese “bourgeois modernism” is the rationality of criticism, the realization of their power to know and power to produce knowledge in a way that was far different from the preceding periods.

The spirit mediums *khon song* stood in opposite to this rising bourgeois modernism. Modernist and rationalist critiques against the *khon song* and spirit mediumship have appeared regularly in scholarly and popular works produced by the Siamese elite since the late eighteenth century. Early Siamese bourgeois modernists’ views on the *khon song*, superstition, and magic can be found in works by *Chao Phraya*⁸Thiphakorawong (Kham Bunnag) and Sunthon Phu, two of leading Siamese court historians and poets during their time.

In his widely-read book, entitled, *Kitchamukit* (literally, A Book Explaining Various Things), Thiphakorawong states that he wanted to write a book introducing useful knowledge (i.e., the sciences, philosophy, and religion) to school children and young learners. Most popular books available during that time were intended for pleasure reading. He intended to write about Western sciences, religion, and other general knowledge that he thought would be useful for literate Siamese learners. The writing mode employed by Thiphakorawong could be described in today’s terms as frequently-asked questions (FAQs). It was informative, comprehensive, but very simplified. The author positioned himself in place of young readers and asked simple questions such as, Why do we have day and night? What are the principles of Christianity? Among Buddhism and other established religions, which one is better than others? Comprehensive answers were then immediately given.⁹

Thiphakorawong was a key cabinet member and high-ranking bureaucrat during the reign of King Mongkut. As a court historian, he was in charge of writing

the early Bangkok chronicles. His *Kitchanukit* and other writings were produced primarily under King Mongkut's royal patronage. Many sections in *Kitchanukit* originally appeared in a newspaper entitled, *The Bangkok Recorder*. He did not deal with the *khon song* directly, but his view in responding to the comparison of Buddhism to other religions reflected his modernist standpoint against superstition and animism.

In the *Bangkok Recorder*, dated November 3, 1865, Thiphakorawong wrote that "people who pay respect to icons in the spirit shrines are wrong. [Because the spirit] is formless and invisible. No one knows whether spirits exist or not. Blindly paying respect to invisible things is useless."¹⁰ However, in the case of Buddha statues, he argued that everyone should pay respect to them. "The religion with which the Thai affiliate nowadays is a religion the adherents to which must pay respect to [Buddha] statues. The Thai take statues as reminders of Buddha's teachings and virtues"¹¹By comparing these two passages, it may be seen that the author obviously condemns beliefs and practices pertaining to spirits. He highly regards Buddhism as a superior religion because the visibility and existence of Buddha as a historical figure, and the Buddha's universally and rationally-sound teachings about life and suffering.

Sunthon Phu directly questioned the credibility and believability of the *khon song* whom his relatives invited to give the treatment of the famous poet's illness during his visit to his birthplace in Rayong province in 1806. In *Nirat Muang Klaeng* (The Voyage to Muang Klang) he stated that spirit mediums lied in saying that he was ill because of an attack by a guardian spirit of the mountain where he picked up a flower without first informing the guardian spirit. Sunthon Phu knew that he caught a cold and soon would be getting better. He did not have faith in spirit mediumship; therefore he accused the medium of lying. He even called the medium *thao mot* (literally, Mr. Spirit Medium). The utterance of *thao mot* indicates how the speaker placed the sacred subject of popular religious belief into the terrain of the ordinary. Sunthon Phu only regarded the spirit medium as an ordinary rural villager. The medium's power and capability to communicate with spirits meant very little to him because the medium told a lie.¹²

Thiphakorawong criticized animism on the ground that spirits are invisible. Sunthon Phu questioned the credibility and integrity of spirit mediums. Both

prominent learned Siamese scholar and poet during the early nineteenth century seem to share a strong faith in rationalism and modernism. They believed that truth must be provable and observable, not just a mere traditional worship and belief. It was inevitable that the *khon song* and spirit mediumship would become the subject of condemnation in these rationalist and modernist views.

King Mongkut¹³ on Spirit Mediumship

Thai authorities and modernist rulers have been suspicious about what “truth or fraud in spirit presentations”¹⁴ throughout the Bangkok period. Perhaps no modernist ruler was prominent in his endeavor to uncover the truth about spirit mediumship as King Mongkut, who was claimed by many historians as the father of Siamese/Thai modernization.

Prince Damrong (1862-1942), King Mongkut’s son and the architect of Siamese nation-building project during the reign of his older brother, King Chulalongkorn (r.1868-1910), wrote an account concerning his father’s encounter with the Chinese spirit mediums in the 1860s. Contained in the book, entitled, *Khwan Song Cham*¹⁵ (literally, The Memory) was Damrong’s childhood memory of his father’s exercise of authority and rationality against a group of Chinese spirit mediums’ performance in Bangkok. The King’s encounter with Chinese spirit mediums took place because the royal project to enlarge one of inner Bangkok’s avenue (Bamrung Muang Road) was obstructed by the Chinese immigrants residing along the proposed site. Central to the concern of the Chinese community was their sacred spirit shrine, which was known as *san chao sua* (the Tiger Deity’s Shrine). This sacred shrine had to be relocated so that the road expansion project could be complete. Damrong’s account can be translated as follows.

“Long ago, there was a big Chinese deity shrine named *san chao sua*, situated along Bamrung Muang Road. It was obstructed by the royal-initiated road enlargement project [and had to be relocated]. [King Mongkut] offered a new shrine location at Fuang Nakhon Road and would have a new shrine built to replace the old one. Chinese [immigrants] were not pleased with the royal proposal. They came up with a ‘trick’ (*ubai*) to invite the deity to possess the spirit mediums (*khon song*) and predict danger and disaster if the shrine was to be relocated. This created a wide

spread fear and panic among the Chinese in the Sampheng area. They therefore submitted a request to the King to perform a ritual with a procession to appease the deity. Their request was granted and the King was their royal audience. I [Prince Damrong] followed the King to witness the performance and was able to remember it. The procession was organized in a typical Chinese style, decorated with colorful flags. It was quite strange, though. There were a few [Chinese] spirit mediums dressed in pants, sleeveless waistcoats, and red head scarves. [Deeply in trance], each of them sat on chair carriages in the procession. Some of them stuck the pointed, sharpened metal through their cheeks from one side to another. Some used their supernatural power to force their male carriers to stagger on and off the road. When the spirit mediums' carriers arrived before the royal audience, the King ordered his royal guards to replace those staggering carriers and instructed them to carry those in-trance mediums firmly and steadily. The royal guards were able to carry them at ease. The audience lost faith in those Chinese spirit mediums. After the procession, the King instructed the Metropolitan Department (*krom muang*) to carry out the royal proclamation that if the deity (*chao sua*) still predicted disasters and fearful events, spirit mediums would be the subjects of punishment. Soon the deity came to possess the mediums again. This time the deity spoke through his mouthpiece that he was very pleased with the new shrine location at the Fuang Nakhon Road near Wat Mahan."¹⁶

The King Mongkut-Chinese spirit mediums episode deserves further explanation. The episode itself is very compelling when it is considered in the light of the Siamese modernization project. It is an unnoticed¹⁷ part of modernization project in Siam. King Mongkut was among the great modernist and rationalist minds in Siam during his times. He had spent most of his young life as a Buddhist monk and a scholar learning Western sciences, languages, religion, astronomy, and philosophy prior his succession to the throne in 1851. Through long-term contact with the Westerners, he had gained a consciousness and developed a criticism of traditional Siamese cosmography.¹⁸ He launched a series of modernization projects, including improving Bangkok's infrastructures and facilities, during his reign. According to Damrong's account, one of the reasons behind King Mongkut's

determination to modernize the Kingdom's capital's facilities was to "avoid Westerner's looking down [at Siam as an uncivilized kingdom]." ¹⁹ For the King, the goal of modernization was the achievement of "civilization" by taking European countries and Siam's European-colonized neighbors (i.e., British Singapore and Dutch Java) as a model.

When the King ordered the capital's road upgraded in this episode, the Chinese spirit shrine stood as a signifier of irrational belief. It obstructed the path to modernization of the kingdom. At the same time, it also symbolized the powerlessness and marginality of the Chinese immigrants during that time. Popular spirit mediumship and supernatural power were no match for the mighty power of the modernist-rationalist rulers. The Chinese immigrants used the deity's voice as resistance to the royal decree. Rumors of disasters through the spirit mediums seemed to unite the immigrant population, but they ran into the stone wall of rationality and modernity, to which Siamese rulers subscribed. In the royal audience granted to the Chinese spirit-medium procession, King Mongkut's presence and some authoritative words effectively discredited the whole spirit-medium ritual and procession before the royal audience and the public. The King's royal guards also worked as a royal technology of power in order to uncover the truth behind spirit mediumship and suppress the popular resistance of this group of Chinese immigrants. As a result of this episode, King Mongkut made a very powerful statement against Chinese as well as the indigenous Siamese spirit mediumship. To him, spirit possession was a matter of "conscious acts and performances" by the mediums. This irrational belief had to be eliminated, if Siam was to keep up its pace to modernity.

King Mongkut's campaigns against spirit mediumship, magic, and supernaturalism can be seen in one of his public proclamations in the 1860s. He insisted that all *mo*²⁰ who involved in spirit mediumship, fortune telling, and magic were hated by victims. They were considered undesirable persons by many. These kinds of *mo* were favored by "people who had lusts beyond human capabilities." Any people committed crimes or frauds concerning spirit mediumship, fortune telling, and black magic must be punished severely. The King strongly recommended that an execution of both *mo* and their clients was the proper punishment to their crime and unusual beliefs and practices (Mongkut, King

1914:103-105). In the King's opinion, people practicing or believing in magic and supernaturalism and using them for unlawful purposes deserve severe punishments. He contended that spirit mediumship, magic, and supernaturalism were groundless and blind beliefs. They were against Buddha's teachings, the state-sponsored religion. He concluded that "...no religion is better than Buddhism and so all precedent Siamese kings believed..." (Ibid.:115). In other words, Buddhism, based on King Mongkut's judgment, is more believable than spirit mediumship, magic, or supernaturalism because it contains logically provable teachings and practices.

The Siamese rulers' celebration of modernity and rationality since the second half of nineteenth century did not always mean they succeeded in their endeavors to eliminate spirit-medium cults, superstition, and magic. Damrong's account further revealed that spirit possession was popular among the new Chinese settlers as well as the indigenous Siamese. He wrote that "the Siamese also invited deities to possess the mediums' bodies, but they did not do it as openly as the Chinese".²¹ I suspect that spirit medium practices among the Siamese populace mentioned in Prince Damrong's account did not cover popular spirit possession, which was widely practiced outside the royal palace during his childhood.

Prince Damrong provided a detailed account of spirit possession, which was secretly practiced within the royal palace. I translate Damrong's account as follows.

"When I was a child, I saw the spirit possession rites, which were secretly performed inside the royal palace several times. During that time, there were three widely-regarded spirits (*chao phi*), namely, *chao pho ho klong* (the lord father of the drum hall), *chao pho nu phuak* (the lord father of the white mouse), and *chao pho phra pradaeng* (the lord father of *phra pradaeng* district). In Thai spirit possession, the medium must be a middle aged woman. Prior to the ritual, the medium must take a bath and change into new clothes. The medium wore a loincloth and a shoulder cloth wrapped around both shoulders like men. [She] sat crossed legged on the floor, and raised both hands, palm up, carrying lit incense sticks. She closed her eyes and remained still for a while, probably extending an invitation to the spirit. The people who participated in the ritual surrounded the medium and waited. In a moment, the medium's hands began to shake and shake more violently until incense sticks in her hands fell onto the floor. [With

these bodily signs], it was understood that the spirit had already come to possess [the medium's body]. A person from the participating company then asked who the spirit was. The medium would answer that it was the such and such spirit. When everything was in place, the talk began. It was strange because the person who wanted to talk to the spirit called his/herself '*luk chang*' (literally, the elephant's child), of which meaning I never heard. When everything was done and the spirit wanted to leave, the medium simply said 'here I go' (*pai la na*). Then, the medium laid down. Her body shook. Her breathing went faster and faster for a while before returning to its normal state..."²²

Damrong's account provides a vivid picture of spirit possession in Bangkok during the decades prior to the beginning of the twentieth century.²³ He portrays spirit mediums and mediumship as part of Siamese and Chinese immigrant traditions. He seemed to be aware of its popularity and persistence. He saw spirit mediumship as a subject to be suppressed, but he did not explain further why it was popular among both Siamese and Chinese. Damrong described spirit mediumship as an inferior cultural practice to Western-imported modernity and rationality, but he was surprised that similar spirit possession also existed in Western countries.²⁴ Like King Mongkut, he was part of the class of Siamese rulers and modernists who saw spirit mediums and mediumship as an obstruction to the path of modernization. Indeed, he viewed spirit mediumship as a "trick" (*ubai*) set up by Chinese immigrants to reflect the royal order, since the deity's voice seems to be the only channel of critical communication open to them under the Siamese absolute monarch's politics and culture. Unfortunately, the deity's voice through spirit mediums only created fear and frustration among the Chinese new settlers in Sampheng area. It never influenced the construction plan proposed by the Siamese modernist-rationalist rulers.

King Mongkut's encounter with a group of Chinese spirit mediums and his severe punishments and criticisms against spirit mediumship, magic, and supernaturalism in the 1860s represent the hallmarks of civilizing campaigns for Siamese modernization project during his reign. More than a century later, the civilizing or modernizing mission has been very much alive. In late 1997, another

compelling and shocking episode against urban spirit-medium cults took place in the country's most accessible public space--the national television network. This time a veteran spirit medium quitted his career and denounced the naked truth concerning spirit mediumship business before the national audiences.

The Black Sheep Medium

“Spirits and supernatural powers may exist, but not “real” spirit possession. Serving as a spirit medium for twenty-six years, I have to confess that spirit possession is “fake.” It is an art of acting which every ordinary person is capable of performing, provided they learn, observe, and are brave enough to play a spirit medium’s role.”

This is a vicious criticism against spirit-medium cults given by Chuchart Ngarmkarn, a “black sheep” spirit medium who decided to publicize the “secret techniques and tactics” hidden in spirit shrines. This middle-aged male spirit medium was invited to appear on the *Cho Chai* literally, “penetrating the heart” talk show, which is currently one of Thailand’s top-rated television talk shows. Broadcast on a national television network (The Royal Thai Army Television Channel 5) on September 28 and October 2, 1997, this particular topic captured the public’s attention and became very controversial shortly thereafter.

Soon after the first segment of the show was broadcast, feedback from the audience flooded the production studio. The content of the show made headlines in national daily newspapers and weekly magazines. The Thai public reacted to the show with mixed feelings. There were both positive and negative reactions to the mediums’ interview. Many members of the audience were grateful that the mediums were “morally responsible” and brave enough to share with the public how spirit-mediumship is made-up or fake. However, others were suspicious about these mediums’ intentions, since such a public confession and interview was a rare occurrence, especially amidst the extreme popularity of spirit-medium cults in modern Thailand since the 1980s. In the worst case, these mediums and the hosts of the show were accused of “showing disrespect to spirits and supernatural powers and offending the whole community of spirit believers and shrine-goers throughout the country.”²⁵

As a popular post-prime time talk show, the *Cho Chai* program is broadcast every Thursday night from 10.00-11.00 p.m. on the Royal Thai Army Television Network, Channel 5. Its main features deal with the people and events that most attract public attention during each week, especially those famous figures who make national media headlines. Its high rating relies on digging up insights into and back-stage accounts of particular news-making events. People in focus are invited to appear on the show. The personalities and popularity of the hosts, Damrong Phuttan²⁶ and Sanya Kunakorn, are also crucial to the success of the program. Both of the hosts are highly regarded as two of the top entertainment personalities in the country. Mr. Damrong Phuttan founded *Khu Sang, Khu Som* (literally, "Perfect Love Matches"), the country's leading tabloid, and has been its editor-in-chief for almost two decades.

The *Cho Chai* show of September 28, 1997 was selected to feature the problem of fraud in Thai spirit-medium cults. A group of spirit-mediums from Chantaburi province was invited to the show. They performed an on-stage spirit possession show before a large invited audience in the TV-CH5 studio in Bangkok. Subsequently, two leaders of the cult were extensively interviewed. The particular spirit-medium cult profiled on this program is known as the cult of *Chi Gong*.²⁷ The leaders of the cult are experienced mediums of Chinese spirits with a respected reputation. They attract a large number of followers in Thailand's Eastern coast provinces, i.e., Chonburi, Chantaburi, Trad, and Chacheongsao. They began the show by demonstrating a spirit possession ritual on the stage which had been set up to resemble their actual Chinese spirit shrine. The wall was painted red and decorated with red curtains and Chinese calligraphy. An altar to Chinese spirits was set up with a tray for joss sticks, candles, flowers and other sacrifices.

Chuchart Ngamkarn, who was in Chinese spirit medium's attire, was in a trance while he was talking to audience member via his assistant. The medium obviously spoke in tongues, but his utterance sounded very much like the Thai language with a Sino-Thai accent. After inviting the *Chi Gong* spirit to possess his body, he demonstrated extraordinary ritual performances, which were believed to be the outcome of supernatural inspiration and influence. His performances included splitting his own tongue with a sharp knife, speaking in tongues, identifying a

potential spirit medium from the audience, and relating a person's life story accurately without having any previous knowledge of that individual.

After performing the spirit possession ritual for a while, the hosts took over the show and started an hour-long interview. Chuchart was asked to elaborate on his life story, how he ended up being a spirit medium, and why he wanted to admit before a national audience that spirit possession was fake. Chuchart came up with the story that he learned how to be a spirit medium for the first time when he was ten years old. It was purely his personal interest that turned him to this kind of religious belief. Through his neighbors in Chonburi, he was introduced to various kinds of spirits and spirit possession techniques. He then practiced on his own with a sense of childish curiosity and amazement. While this unusual behavior caught his mother's attention, he insisted that there were no real spirits, but purely his own imagination and role-play imitation. He learned how professional spirit mediums act, talk, and communicate and quickly realized that nothing was beyond his experience, conscious knowledge and self-control. However, his parents did not share with him this rational insight. Instead, they brought him to a Chonburi spirit shrine where the senior medium confirmed his parents' belief that their son was a potential medium and a channeler of a Chinese spirit. Chuchart finally decided to become a spirit medium and devoted his teenage life to being a novice medium determined to search for authentic spiritual techniques and knowledge in the world of urban spirit-medium cults.

Having spent twenty-six years in the cult, Chuchart became an experienced medium who had established his own shrine and attracted a large group of followers. He gained expertise in spirit possession techniques and knowledge which many people still believe to be authentic supernatural powers. His specializations include splitting his own tongue with a sharp knife, inserting a sharp object through his own cheeks, sitting on a chair with sharp, pointed nails on its surface, stepping on red-hot charcoal, and advising followers on matters of health, family, and business. It is his contention that this knowledge and these techniques are made up. They are simply the mediums' acts, never influenced by a spirit or supernatural power. Chuchart came to the conclusion that spirit possession is an art of acting by mediums, in cooperation with their followers, through a ritual process. This leads to the assumption that spirit medium cults in general rely on a blind belief in the

supernatural power of spiritual beings, and on medium's capabilities of acting to deceive followers. In other words, spirit-possession is made up through ritual process and context. Chuchart does not want to fool the public; rather he uncovers the bold truth of once secret and sacred spirit possession techniques and knowledge, so that the public will be able to decide on their own. This is the major purpose of his confession to the public via the *Cho Chai* show.

Chuchart's view was strongly supported both by fellow guests and by the hosts of the show. In the second part of the show (October 2, 1997), Gagari Sikh, an Indian Thai and a devout Buddhist who has kept an eye on the spirit-medium cults in Thailand over the years, voiced strong opposition to spirit-medium cults. Sikh labeled the spirit-medium a liar and a mentally abnormal person. He said that many people become spirit mediums because of economic interests and some because they want to publicize their supernatural miracles. He continued that spirit cults are obviously against Buddhist principles and beliefs. They represent an irrational, false belief persisted in contemporary Thai society. It is necessary to send this message to the Thai public, who blindly believe in and follow such cults.

The voices presented in the *Cho Chai* show resemble the modernist and official authority's critiques on spirit-medium cults in Thailand. Every single voice in the show echoes a similar perspective: viewing the spirit medium cult as an evil practices and the human medium as a liar or a mad man. Following reasons may explain why the demonstration of a fake spirit mediumship was featured on this popular television program. First, Chuchart and his companions' decision to become "black sheep" mediums is widely known. The motivation to disclose naked truth behind the sacred spirit mediumship has been developed throughout the course of Chuchart's career as a spirit medium and as the leader of a popular spirit medium cult. He set as his goal the learning of all the tactics and techniques of being a medium, and always wished to publicize how fake they were whenever he was given a suitable stage. Prior to this show, Chuchart and his team had recently appeared before the public at least twice: once on a cable television network, namely, Independent Television (ITV), and again at Wat Suan Kaew, Nonthaburi province, under the sponsorship of Phra Phayom Kanlayano, the famous abbot, who is widely regarded as a spokesperson of the Buddhist Sangha and the anti-spirit-medium cult movement.

Secondly, Damrong Phuttan, the leading host of the *Cho Chai* program, had a political motivation in his selection to feature Chuchart's spirit possession performance in his talk show program. Damrong has recently served as an appointed senator in Thailand's parliament. He vowed to enact a national legislation to outlaw spirit-medium cults. With his Islamic religious affiliation, he believes that spirit-medium cults represent criminal gangs under a religious cover (*gang song chao*).²⁸ He further believes that the cults must be eliminated based on their evil nature. It is quite obvious that Damrong manipulated the entire contents of the show into an attack on the cults, using a national media (TV) as his technologies of power. His ideological stance resembled the state ideology, represented by various government agencies and the Buddhist Sangha, in which there is no room for magic, superstition, and spirit-medium cults.

Concluding Remarks: From Civilizing Mission to Rationalizing Gaze

Foucault (1977) defines the concept of "genealogy" as an analysis of decent. He explains that "The search for descent is not the erecting of foundations: on contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself" (1977:147). I do not mean to do what Foucault calls "the erecting of foundations," nor to trace the complete chronology of urban spirit-medium cults in this essay. Rather, I intend to show the possible connections of two events which mark the history of the cults. I use the dawn of Siamese modernization, as represented by the reign of King Mongkut, as the starting point of my genealogical analysis because Siam in mid 19th century was a society in a radical transition from the traditional to the modern one. The rise of modern rationalism among Siamese rulers and elite was apparent in the ways they treated premodern religious traditions such as spirit-medium cults and other forms of supernaturalism. I interpret King Mongkut's policies and actions against spirit medium cults and supernaturalism as an integral part of his civilizing mission in which he and his successors initiated in order to modernize the Kingdom amidst the gazes of European colonial powers during that time.

I juxtapose King Mongkut and early modernists' civilizing mission to the recent controversy in the Cho Chai talk show. I am aware of time and other contextual differences between these two events, but I am of the opinion that putting these two episodes concerning spirit mediumship's fraud will open doors for an understanding of the genealogy of urban spirit-medium cults and their ongoing popularity. In the 1860s, King Mongkut and other Siamese elite were in the driver's seat in directing and shaping the Kingdom's religious affairs. They were the most powerful voices and authorities in the absolute monarchy regime. They had technologies of power in hands. Armed with Western knowledge and technologies, they were willing to judge and define what was good or evil for Siamese. They had definitely stamped their authorities that spirit mediumship, fortune telling, and other forms of supernaturalism were evils, while Buddhism was good for the Kingdom. I believe that rationalist and modernist views on religion as adopted by Siamese rulers and elite in mid 19th century were against the popular perceptions. Spirit mediumship, fortune telling, and other forms of supernaturalism have persisted, flourished, and well favored by upcountry folks and a significant number of educated, urban people until the present (see Phunphit Amatayakun 1991).

The civilizing mission concerning the control of spirit-medium cults appeared to be fruitless. Nonetheless, efforts by educated, modernists elite have continued to the present. I see Chuchart's role and the Cho Chai talk show along this line. Although Chuchart cannot be regarded as an educated elite in contemporary Thailand, his efforts to denounce spirit mediumship as a fraud were strongly supported by national media and other members of middle class including scholars. Voices in the Cho Chai talk show belong to rationalist middle class and educated elite. They express their concerns over the wide spread of what they call false or irrational religious beliefs and practices in contemporary Thai society. Using a national television network as the venue to criticize spirit mediumship, they had launched their one-sided criticism to the national audiences and expected to shape the popular perception toward spirit-medium cults and other forms of supernaturalism.

I would rather believe that Chinese spirit mediums were coincidentally portrayed in both controversial cases. Either King Mongkut and Siamese elite in

mid 19th century or Chuchart and his Cho Chai talk show hosts did not particularly target spirit mediums or spirit mediumship deriving from Chinese religious traditions. They saw spirit-medium cults and all forms of supernaturalism, regardless of their origins, as remnants of irrationality and false beliefs and practices. They, therefore, should be subjects of control. In the first case, a Chinese spirit shrine and a group of Chinese spirit mediums represented a symbol of barbaric practices which obstructed the Kingdom's path to attain a civilized status in Siamese rulers' as well as the Westerners' eyes. This was also true in case of indigenous Siamese and Indian spirit mediumships which were practiced outside the palace and beyond the royal gaze. In the Cho Chai talk show, Chinese spirit mediumship, as represented by Chuchart and his followers, was perceived by the hosts, guest commentators, and audiences as a representation of Thai spirit mediumship and other forms of supernaturalism. In the rationalists' minds, spirit mediumships and supernaturalism from whatever origins are relatively indifferent, since they reflect non-scientific, ill-logic, and superstitious principles, to which practitioners and followers subscribe.²⁹

While King Mongkut's policies regarding spirit mediumship and supernaturalism were enforced by laws and the King's authorities, the Cho Chai talk show and Chuchart's efforts have had different outcomes. They generated public discourses concerning truth and fraud in spirit mediumship in public spaces like mass media as well as in interpersonal conversations. Thailand in the late 20th century is far different from the Kingdom of Siam during the reign of King Mongkut. Telecommunication technologies as well as broadcasting and written media among the civil society were key factors. The rationalist views and criticisms, as presented in the Cho Chai talk show, were no longer absolute. They were far from an exercise of power, like King Mongkut did more than a century ago. Rather, they have further generated heated debates and contests not only for pro- or anti-spirit-medium cults, but also for freedom and choices of personal religious affiliation.³⁰ I believe the spirit mediumship debates, as generated by the Cho Chai talk show and Chuchart's efforts, demonstrate a promising side of contemporary Thailand as a civil society on the rise. Comparing to King Mongkut and Siamese elite's policies and actions in mid 19th century, religious beliefs and

practices in the postmodern Thai society seem to be a matter that the Thai state and related authorities are no longer in control.

Endnotes

¹A Paper presented in the 7th International Conference on Thai Studies, organized by International Institute for Asian Studies, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, 4-8 July 1999. My research on urban spirit-medium cults in Thailand and my graduate studies at the University of Washington, Seattle from Fall 1995 to Winter 1999 was funded by the Ford Foundation and the University of Washington. Suranaree University of Technology provided a grant for the preliminary study on Khorat spirit-medium cults from 1995-1996. I would like to thank Prof. Charles F. Keyes for his advice and comments, Achan Suriya Smutkupt and Silapakit Teekhantikun for their cooperation and assistance over years working together on this and several other research projects.

²I would like to remind my readers that the use of the term "spirit-medium cult" in English is primarily an academic invention, and is a representation of a complex religious phenomenon in Thailand. The term carries a slightly different meaning when it is translated across linguistic boundaries. In Thai, there is no an exact word with an equivalent meaning to the English term, "spirit-medium cult." The complex religious phenomenon which I call "spirit-medium cults" in this paper is perceived quite differently in contemporary Thailand. There is literally no organized, centralized, or homogeneously hierarchicalized entity of Thai spirit-medium cult. The Thai perceive the existence of spirit-medium cult simply by the terms "*khon song*," "*rang song*," (both referring to spirit mediums), or "*tamnak song*," "*samnak song*," (spirit shrines), or "*song chao khao phi*" (spirit possession). This set of terminologies is used interchangeably by both the public and the people involved in the cults. The Thai term for "cult" is "*latthi phithi*," but this term is rarely used among spirit mediums and their disciples. Rather, this term is used exclusively among Thai scholars. For the purpose of this study, I use the term "spirit-medium cult" to represent the overall religious practices and beliefs adhered to by spirit mediums and their disciples, as well as their off-shrine social networking. Most spirit-medium cult activities take place within designated ritual spaces (i.e., spirit shrines, and places for the ritual of paying homage to teachers (*wai khru*). Thai spirit-medium cults are very heterogeneous. They can be found almost everywhere, in urban as well as rural areas. They constitute unorganized popular religious practices (see Pattana Kitiarsa 1999).

³*Thep* or *thewada* refers to deities in general. In contemporary urban spirit-medium cults, many believe that *thep* or *ong thep* represents deities deriving from Brahmanist or Indian mythology, while *chao* refers to deities originating from Chinese religious tradition.

⁴A number of studies of spirit-medium cults in northern Thailand indicate that the origins of the cults can be found in traditional spirit cults based in rural communities. The emergence of spirit cults in urban areas is also the consequences of rapid rural-to-urban migration, urbanization, and industrialization which see the

population of spirit mediums from rural areas becoming urban dwellers (Anan Ganjanapan 1984; Mourgne 1984; Shalardchai Ramitanondh 1984; Tanabe 1991).

⁵Bickner, Robert J. *An Introduction to the Thai Poem: "Lilit Phra Law" (The Story of King Law)*. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1991); *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*. (Bangkok: Silapa Bannakan Press, 1970); National Library, Department of Fine Arts, *Sila Jaruek Lak Thii Neung: Jaruek Pho Khun Ramkhamhaeng (Sukhothai Inscription No. 1: King Ramkhamhaeng's Inscription)*. (Bangkok: Religious Affairs Press, 1990[1977]); Reynolds, Frank E., and Mani B. Reynolds, trs. *Three Worlds According to King Ruang: A Thai Buddhist Cosmology*. (Berkeley: The Regents of the University of California, 1982).

⁶*Kotmai Tra Sam Duang (Laws of Three Seals)*. (Bangkok: Kurusapha Business Organization, 1972); Chulalongkorn, King. *Phraratchaphithi Sipsong Duan (The Royal Ceremonies of the Twelve Months of the Year)*. (Bangkok: Phrachan Press, 1953[1888]).

⁷Comaroff, Jean. "Defying Disenchantment: Reflection on Ritual, Power, and History," in *Asian Visions of Authority: Religion and the Modern States of East and Southeast Asia*, eds. Charles F. Keyes, Laurel Kendall, and Helen Hardacre. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), p.307.

⁸*Chao Phraya* is the highest rank of Siamese bureaucrats and nobles during the absolute monarchy regime prior to 1932. It is equivalent to the rank of minister in the present bureaucratic system.

⁹Thiphakorawong (Kham Bunnag). *Kitchanukit (A Book Explaining Various Things)*. (Bangkok: Department of Fine Art, 1965[1867]).

¹⁰My own translation.

¹¹*The Bangkok Recorder*. July 5, 1867. My own translation.

¹²Sunthon Phu. "Nirat Muang Klang," in *Nirat Khong Sunthon Phu (Sunthon Phu's Nirat)*. First Edition. (Bangkok: Kurusapha Press, 1961). The original poem read as follow.

จนเดือนเก้าซำที่ซึ่งพรฝน	ทุกตำบลบ้านกว่าล้วนน้ำไหล
อึ่งว่างหงนศำรชำระทำใจ	จนล้ม ใจคิดว่าทายจะอาชนม์
ให้กลิ่นกลิ่นเห็นปีกองประหวาดหวัน	อินทรีย์สิ้นศิรทองธของชน
ท่านบิดาเหตุที่รู้มนต์	มาหลายนคนเขาว่าต้องอารักณ์
หลงละเมอเพื่อพูดกับผีสาว	ที่เคียงข้างผู้คนไม่รู้จัก
แต่หมอยื่นป่าปีดขงจินัก	ทั้งสิ้นรักหลายวันก่อขบรบทา
ให้คนทรงลงผีเมื่อที่เข็บ	ว่าพระเกีบดอกไม้ที่ชาชชา
ไม่งอนง้อขอผู้ทำดูมา	ท่านปู่เจ้าคุมแก่นจึงแทนทศ
ครั้นดาหมขอโทษก็ไปรดให้	ที่จริงใจที่ก็รู้่อผู้ว่าปัด
แต่ชาวบ้านท่านนือข้างท้าวมด	จึงสู้อคนี้้งไว้ในอุรา

(สุนทรภู่. "นิราศเมืองแกลง." ใน *นิราศของสุนทรภู่*. พิมพ์ครั้งที่ 1. (กรุงเทพมหานคร: โรงพิมพ์จุฬารัตนา, 2504, หน้า 109-110).

¹³King Mongkut (r.1851-1868) was the fourth monarch of the reigning Chakri dynasty, whose image and biography were grossly fictionalized in the Hollywood musical picture, *The King and I*. King Mongkut as a real person was one of the best educated Siamese in Western sciences, languages, and philosophy in his generation. Prior to his succession to the throne in 1851, the King had spent decades in Buddhist monkhood. He laid the foundation for the Kingdom's modernization in the later periods.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Damrong, Rajanuphap. *Khvam Songcham (The Memory)*. (Bangkok: Thailand Social Sciences Association Press, 1963). This book was published by the Social Sciences Association Press in honor of Prince Damrong's 100th birthday. Prince Damrong passed away in 1942. The manuscript was originally Prince Damrong's diary written in the later part of his life and provided to the publisher by one of his daughter. Sulak Sivaraksa, Thailand's leading social critic, was the key player in organizing a centennial celebration of Prince Damrong's prominent works both as the great bureaucrat and the great scholar. Sulak is the editor of this book.

¹⁶My own translation.

¹⁷I use the term "unnoticed" because the official attempts to suppress spirit-mediums cults, superstition, and magic have been rarely dealt with in scholarly works on Siamese/Thai modernization either by international and domestic scholars.

¹⁸See Reynolds, Craig J. "Buddhist Cosmography in Thai History, with Special Reference to Nineteenth-Century Culture Change." *Journal of Asian Studies*. 35, 2 (February 1976):203-20.

¹⁹See Damrong Rajanuphap, 1963, p.159.

²⁰*Mo* generally refers to doctor as well as specialist or expert in one's profession.

²¹*Ibid.*, p.158.

²²*Ibid.*, pp.158-59. My own translation.

²³Prince Damrong was born in 1862. His father, King Mongkut, passed away in 1868. I therefore estimate that Prince Damrong's encounter with Chinese and Thai spirit mediumship must have occurred during the late 1860s. The King Mongkut-Chinese spirit mediums episode must have taken place between 1866-1868, during which Prince Damrong was old enough to remember and understand his experience, but before the King's death in 1868.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p.159.

²⁵I transcribed the *Cho Chai* talk show from video cassettes on November 3, 1997.

²⁶From 1996 to the present (1998), Mr. Damrong Phuttan is an appointed senator in the national parliament. Together with Phra Phayom Kanlayano, the abbot of Wat Suan Kaew, Nonthaburi, he is very active in the anti-spirit-medium cults campaign, including an attempt to enact a national law to outlaw the cults. Mr. Damrong is a Thai-Malay Muslim.

²⁷*Chi Gong* refers to a deity deriving from the popular Chinese and Taiwanese religion. *Chi gong* is widely regarded in Taiwan as a possessor of mediums and a healing deity. In Thailand, *chi gong* is a Chinese deity whose supernatural power is to solve almost all human sufferings. Chuchart Ngamkan is named by the Thai press after his appearance on the national television network as "Chuchart Chi-gong." Prof. Stevan Harrell, Department of Anthropology, University of Washington, provides me the information about Chi Gong via our e-mail communication.

²⁸*Khao Sot*. September 2, 1996.

²⁹Counter-arguments to this point, see Seri Phongphit (1997); Suriya Smutkupt et al (1996), and Pattana Kitiarsa (1999).

³⁰Due to a limited space for this essay, I do not discuss the consequences of the Cho Chai talk show in detail. Debates and discussions concerning truth and fraud in spirit mediumship were widely discussed in the national media in late 1997. I believe that Chuchart's efforts and the Cho Chai talk show have had a considerable impacts on urban spirit-medium cults. My spirit mediums key informants in Khorat

told me in Summer 1998 that they talked about the Cho Chai talk show, but they did not think it had negative impacts on their cults. It did not turn regular shrine-goers away. They have run their spirit mediumship business as usual. They believed that their followers had serious economic problems since the economic recession since July 1997, not the Cho Chai talk show or Chuchart's confession and criticism.

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