

WHERE FORTUNE MEETS FUNCTION

Thai spirit houses are found everywhere in the country but their role and purpose are too often left unexplained

BY JOHN HOSKIN

Some nine years ago, the Thai staff at the British Embassy in Bangkok became concerned about what can only be described as the height of diplomacy. They feared that the then-ambassador, Christian Adams, was too tall.

At six foot four inches, His Excellency towered over the embassy's spirit house and this was considered a bad omen, upsetting the compound's guardian spirits who in disgust, it was

claimed, had knocked their low-lying abode sideways and cast a spell of sickness over the entire mission. So, in a novel showing of esprit de corps, the embassy built a new spirit house raised just above the ambassador's height, and all was well again.

What makes this more than a curious anecdote of the diplomatic life is the vivid way it illustrates the importance Thais attach to the spirit world.

ABOVE: Making an offering at Jim Thompson's House. **OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Small statues destined for a spirit house; a shrine among the trees at Wat Kutao in Chiang Mai; statues, like the houses themselves, come in all shapes and sizes; and food offerings at a village shrine.

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The vast majority of Thais are, of course, Buddhist, but as descendants of an ancient civilization, they have inherited animistic beliefs that are not necessarily contradicted by mainstream religion. Buddhism in Thailand is a genuine faith, an essential element in the cultural fabric, but its concern is primarily with man's ultimate release from suffering, from the cycle of death and rebirth. As such it does not directly address mundane problems. At the same time, it is a tolerant faith, overlaying rather than supplanting earlier attitudes.

So, the Thais retain a host of beliefs in supernatural powers from their animistic ancestors, beliefs that interact with ordinary life. These convictions do not contradict Buddhism and, indeed, are held in such a close and complex relationship with the national religion that an outsider can scarcely differentiate the dual elements.

By far the most widespread and easily seen manifestation of supernatural beliefs in daily Thai life is the spirit house. Like the one at the British embassy, these are found in the compounds of virtually every home, office, hotel and public building, even in front of today's most high-tech high-rises. Typically in the form of model temples or traditional wooden houses, they may be

large or small, simple or ornate, but none are merely decorative and all serve a precise and seriously held function.

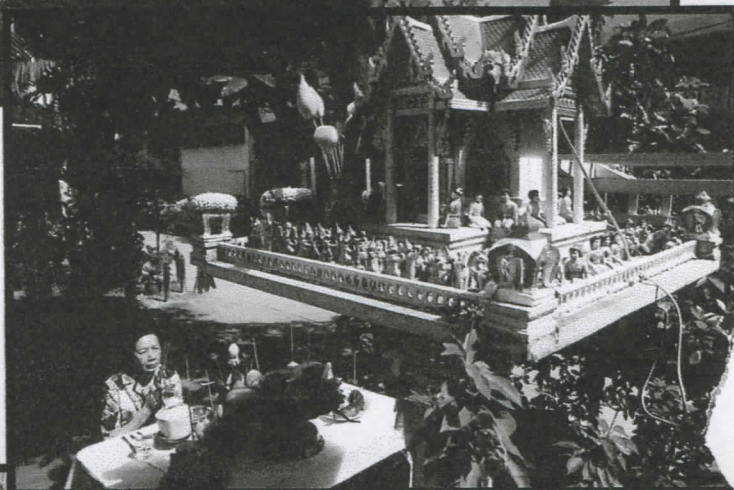
According to popular Thai belief, a guardian spirit known as Phra Phum (Lord of the Land), occupies the site of any building and watches over the fortunes of those who live or work there. In order to ensure its continued protection, the spirit should be properly housed and shown due respect. If not, any manner of ill luck may befall the human residents of the land.

The style of a spirit house is an individual preference, but only an expert in such matters, generally a Brahmin priest, can properly answer the question of its location. The site should face either north or south, both auspicious directions, and it should not be overshadowed by the building or else the spirit will not come to reside there. A post is then set up on the chosen spot and the little house is perched on top in an elaborate ceremony, with food, fruit, flowers, candles and incense placed before the shrine while the spirit is invited to make its home there and protect the property and its new residents.

The spirit house itself comprises a single room and small outer terrace at a slightly lower level for daily offerings. Placed



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inside the shrine is a picture or image symbolic of Phra Phum, usually depicted with a double-edged sword in its right hand and sometimes a book in the left, used, it is believed, to record the deaths of people under the spirit's protection. Figures of people and animals may also be placed in the shrine to serve Phra Phum.



ABOVE, TOP: A colorful shrine at Bang Pa-In. ABOVE: Offerings are a daily event. LEFT: Roadside spirit houses in Mae Hong Son. OPPOSITE: The shrine at Wat Phra Non in Mae Hong Son.

link. Special offerings should also be made on important days such as the anniversary of the shrine's installation and New Year's Day.

Like most supernatural beliefs, spirit houses imply a reciprocal relationship with the unknown and the invisible. In return for its acquiescence and assistance, the spirit must be feted with daily offerings of food and flowers, served always in the morning along with burning incense that, as in all rituals, essentially serves as a communication

must be accorded and Phra Phum treated as one would a host. When a guest arrives, for example, he or she should first ask for permission to stay the night and for protection before going to sleep. The latter is in the belief that otherwise sleep would be disturbed by nightmares and evil spirits would come to sit on

the guest's chest, causing difficulty in breathing. Likewise, on departure the guest will say farewell to the spirit house and request a safe journey.

The reciprocal nature of the relationship between owner and spirit house is ongoing, and if the human residents enjoy good fortune, for instance, being able to afford a car or a higher standard of living, the spirit house should similarly be improved or enlarged. Conversely, if there is a premonition of misfortune, or a desire to overcome some difficulty, the spirit may be asked to help and rewarded with a special offering should the prayer be granted.



The realm of the supernatural is, of course, not limited to individual properties and the influence of spirits extends over whole villages and cities. Notably, every Thai town will have a *lak muang*, or "city pillar," which both marks the town's founding and serves as the residence of its guardian spirit. Shrines may also be erected to individual spirits, such as that of Chao Mae Tuptim at the Bangkok Hilton, famous for its preference for offerings of model phalluses.

The origins of the spirit house in Thailand are obscure, some experts holding that the custom was prevalent amongst Tai peoples as early as the 10th century, before they began migrating from southern China. Be that as it may, it has been common among people of all nationalities to believe in spirits in the face of the inexplicable and the uncontrollable.

The Thais themselves explain the reason behind spirit houses in a rational and endearing fashion. When asked why, they will smilingly reply, "We are taught to be good to our neighbors, so why can't we be generous to the spirit who is living in our own home?"