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PROGRESS AND ITS RUINS: Ghosts, Migrants, and the Uncanny in Thailand

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In the 2010 film *Laddaland* [Golden Land], one of the highest-grossing Thai horror films of all time, a father, Thi, moves his family from Bangkok to a suburban, gated community, Laddaland, in the northern city of Chiang Mai, where he has accepted a high-ranking new job. The family's initial drive through the community's streets is a montage of Americana-inspired clichés: broad streets, freshly mowed lawns, two-story homes, a friendly guard at the gate, and even a pair of children playing with a golden retriever in the spray of a sprinkler. Thi's family members are reluctant to leave Bangkok, however, and view coming to Chiang Mai with a mix of resentment and dread.

Such reluctance proves to be well founded: Laddaland reveals a dark underbelly beneath the manicured lawns and well-kept streets. The neighbor's wife shows signs of being abused, and Thi's new boss turns out to be "lending" himself money from the company's coffers. But the event that sets off the community's slide into ruin is the murder of a Burmese maid by a Caucasian man living in the neighborhood.[1] As the maid's ghost returns to haunt the streets, the town's clean and modern veneer begins to peel away.[2] "Urgently Selling" signs appear on the neighbor's houses, the streets become overgrown with grass and littered with palm fronds, and the gate guard disappears, leaving the gates wide open. Other aspects of Thi's life also crumble: His boss, having embezzled much of the company's fortunes, flees and leaves the business to collapse; his wife's lecherous former boss reappears; and his daughter begins coming home late or not at all. At the end of the film, as ghosts

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multiply within the community, Thi, unable to distinguish between his family and malevolent ghosts, accidentally shoots his son.

Laddaland, with its themes of chaos, poverty, and violence lying underneath seemingly modern, clean, and rational suburban life, resonated with many of the horror stories people told me during my field research. In the film as well as in these stories, things that appear to be modern and full of prosperity are in fact tainted by foreign presences—indeed, the communities themselves come to epitomize a profoundly unfamiliar way of life. Financial, moral, and supernatural crises intertwine. In short, *Laddaland* and the stories of haunted communities show the link between the idea of (and desire for) progress and the uncanny. Entering an orderly, prosperous, and exclusive community does not protect one from ruin. Despite the gates and security guards, ghosts and criminals are able to infiltrate. Many residents with whom I spoke wondered why they had wanted to live in the communities in the first place and felt thus alienated from their own desire and the reasons for their move.

Many of my informants saw high-rise buildings and suburban gated communities—both of which I henceforth call "communities of exclusion"—as symbols of Chiang Mai's forward progress and development. However, the images of ghosts and foreigners that appear repeatedly in these sites in everyday popular stories represent the manifestation of anxiety about something fundamental lacking in this "progress." Here, I analyze stories of ghosts and hauntings as expressing anxiety regarding the impossibility of knowing whether the community has "progressed," in the Thai idiom of *Khwam charoen*, or if such seeming progress is only a veneer over something more sinister.[3]

In each of the stories related here, those living in these communities of exclusion express their desire for a particular form of existence—one that is *charoen* (progressive), orderly, and prosperous. But in each story, the community is not how it appears. Instead, it is invaded by forces that this discourse of *khwam charoen* purports to have overcome: "undeveloped" ethnic others or "superstitious" ghosts. These stories and their popularity indicate that this idea of a modern, progressive, and unbreachable community rests on uneasy foundations.[4]

THE UNCANNY, *CHAROEN*, AND ESSENCES

Max Weber (2003) famously predicted that modernity would disenchant, removing the realm of the magical and religious from rational, modern society. But his prediction is contradicted by much recent anthropological work on the uncanny reemergence of the magical and ghostly. Mladen Dolar (1991:7) argues

that this should be no surprise: modernity and the uncanny are, in fact, connected, as the decline of the formal religious sphere as the sole location of the unearthly has led to the release of the uncanny into the realm of the everyday. In citing the uncanny, Dolar draws, as I do, on the Freudian idea of *unheimlich*, that species of horror that emerges when what was previously thought to be surpassed (and not merely repressed) reemerges (Freud 2003). As such, the uncanny is especially relevant when looking at concepts of progress and the middle class—that group so heavily invested in progress and modernity—as well as the doubts and disturbances in appearance of outward prosperity and rationality. It is precisely this connection between the uncanny and tropes of progress that I seek to build on here.

The rise of new realms of the uncanny has increasingly become a focus of anthropological attention. In Diane Nelson's work in Guatemala, similarly to my Thai case, such occult forces have to do with the breakdown of national (middle-class) conceptions of the home. For Nelson, when indigenous groups began to assert their difference from the body politic, the end result was, for many, a horrific doubling of the national "family": "modes of Latino identification—being that which everyone else aspired to because of its attachments to whiteness, the modern, and the future—are suddenly under question and rendered uncanny" (1999:26). Such a breakdown of familial ideas—in the Thai case, of the living and the dead—is what makes my work different from that of others in Thailand and Laos (cf. Klima 2002, 2006; Morris 2000; Langford 2009), for whom the living have active relationships of exchange and obligation with the returned dead. In my work, such familiar ties do not exist; as notions of progress break down, the ghosts that emerge are alienated from the living much as the living are from them (see also Johnson 2012).

Expanding beyond the scope of the national and the familial, many anthropologists have pointed out how, as neoliberalization pushes for rationalized linkages among the subject, production, and politics, this modern and rational plan for the contemporary moment of global economics nonetheless unearths old anxieties that such modernisms also come with limits (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Morris 2000). Some of the most inspirational work on this front has come from Jean and John Comaroff's (1999) idea of "occult economies," based on their research in South Africa. For the Comaroffs, the neoliberal economy, which enriches some and impoverishes others, parallels concepts of magical misfortune, leading to the hunt for the new, "occult" forces at large that have "stolen" the prosperity previously assumed to be coming to all.

Following the Comaroffs, one could paint the "ghosts of bad death" in Chiang Mai's urban landscape as new demons brought forth from ambivalence about the unequal distribution of power in living spaces in the city. But there is more to this story, as the sudden "enchantment" of the economic is not entirely something new in Chiang Mai. Rather, ghosts emerge owing to the failure of older magic: *charoen*. *Charoen* indicates prosperity, enlightenment, wisdom, and wealth at once. As I detail below, it is a word that points to the inner progressive state of a thing, rather than its outward appearance. During the 20th century, the mantra of *charoen* became associated with idioms of national development, the figure of the Thai monarchy, and reform Buddhism to assure Thais of the inevitable, supernaturally powered, and moral nature of increasing wealth and prosperity, especially for the middle class.[5] The 20th-century project of national development thus occurred under the auspices of supernatural forces, which ensured the motion of *khwam charoen* and the forward march of progress. Such a sense of spiritual, moral, and rational progress ensured that ghosts would not emerge, an assurance not built into other idioms of progress (*kan phatthana*, as I detail below).[6] It is now, however, as crisis after crisis challenges these assumptions about progress that uncanny specters gain greater power.

This concern with the inner essences of things might at first seem to contradict earlier ethnography on Thailand. Penny Van Esterik (2000) has characterized Thai society as concerned with surfaces over inner states, a feature Peter Jackson describes as having reversed Western privileging of essences over surfaces. For Jackson, in Thailand, "it is the surface image that has the power to mould the inner being" (2004:211). But these studies focus on the point of friction between the public sphere and the private sphere, where state power acts swiftly to correct any disruptions in the public order but remains unconcerned with private practices. In contrast, the disruptions I consider here are those that occur in the most intimate of spaces, the home.

Following Jackson's idea of the "regime of images" (Jackson 2004), the *charoen* home is assumed to inform, direct, and reflect the *charoen* status of its inhabitant. But moving into these new spaces was traumatic for many of my informants. The strangeness of these spaces is productive of doubt: my informants doubted their (or their home's) inner quality of *khwam charoen*. In short, it was the failure of Jackson's regime of images to work in the way it should. While every effort to ensure that the home's image would remain *charoen*, as cracks began to appear (occasionally literally) in infrastructure, society, and economy, those thought-to-be-overcome elements reemerged in the form of ghosts and migrants. These stories, then, are the

discursive cracks in Thai middle-class desires for *khwam charoen*. As in *Laddaland*, ghosts become the uncanny reminders that the regime of images does not always act as it should, that poverty and death can and do exist behind manicured lawns and white concrete.

RESEARCH METHODS

My research, conducted over the course of 24 months, consisted of participant-observation in and around the communities and sites, as well as interviews with key informants such as security guards, real estate agents, and residents. I selected 21 communities (nine high-rise condominium buildings and twelve gated communities) where I had at least one informant. I also shadowed an architecture department at one of Chiang Mai's technical schools as well as a new architectural firm based in Chiang Mai. My selection of informants often began with formal interviews and quickly turned to expanding informal social networks. I worked primarily in Central Thai—fluency in this language is the hallmark of the Thai bourgeoisie, although on occasion I used Northern Thai or Laotian with close friends or those informants who were more comfortable in these languages.

My informants were a heterogeneous group. They included transplants (like *Laddaland*'s Thi) from Bangkok, local-born Northern Thai, and those from the northeastern Isan region. They were from a wide variety of economic backgrounds and for various reasons had decided to work or live in the gated communities and new high-rises. All identified as Theravada Buddhist.[7]

The topic of ghosts was either extremely easy or essentially impossible to broach. As any field researcher working in Thailand can attest, ghosts are one of a handful of standard late-night conversation topics among people of virtually all ages. Yet for some, the topic of ghosts smacked of superstition and irrationality, something they took great pains to disavow in the face of the foreign researcher. Ironically, many of these more image-conscious residents simply repeated a "ghost" story with a criminal (often identified as "Burmese") in place of the spirit.

The period of my fieldwork was atypical. Many of my informants pointed to the present moment as one foreboding greater disaster—the winter was "the hottest ever," and an earthquake during my fieldwork "made a sound [unlike other earthquakes]." But the greatest upheaval during this time was the coup d'état of September 2006, and, with this in mind, I now turn to politics.

CRISIS

Thailand's recent political history has been dominated by the figure of Thaksin Shinawatra (prime minister from 2001 to 2006). The Chiang Mai-born

businessman-turned-prime minister embraced a technocratic idea of the Thai future, one that rejected the status-obsessed monarchical and military-oriented Central Thai elite in favor of neoliberal rationality. His slogan *khit mai* (think new) and his numerous Chiang Mai-based construction projects promised a fundamental change in Chiang Mai's fortunes and the potential for Thailand's second-largest city to emerge from Bangkok's shadow. Academics and activists (Thai and foreign alike) were often critical of Thaksin's plans, but for many others, Thaksin embodied a connection to a deep store of modernity. Thaksin's policies funneled more wealth into the provinces, and his business partners in Chiang Mai were awash in contracts. After his ouster, his supporters blamed even unrelated problems on his absence. When Chiang Mai experienced a citywide Internet slowdown, one older man told me with confidence that such a thing would not have happened under Thaksin.[8] According to him, Thaksin had had a plan to give every Northern Thai a personal Internet link: "by stars, by satellite."

These promises were especially appealing to a Chiang Mai still reeling from the 1997 economic crisis. During 1997, the Thai baht lost nearly half its value, and Thailand became technically bankrupt. Hit especially hard were real estate speculators who, found themselves defaulting on their loans and losing their property. Chiang Mai became a clear demonstration of the Thai real estate market's overreach. The crisis left a ring of abandoned structures around the city, empty high-rises dotting the skyline. There was even a stock exchange complete with banks of monitors and a trading floor that fell into ruin, never used again.

Chiang Mai's recovery largely coincided with Thaksin's rise to power, and for many of his supporters in Chiang Mai, Thaksin represented a Thai government clued in to the actions of the international market instead of being inwardly patronage oriented. Concrete shells for new high-rise buildings began to rise around the city in anticipation of new wealth that Thaksin would give to the city. Thaksin's supporters viewed the political scene as having changed from one favoring the well-connected to favoring the common people instead. To his detractors, Thaksin represented amoral, avaricious power—progress without *khwam charoen*, rule without morality.

Owing to these fears, the Thai military ousted Thaksin in a royally backed coup d'état in September 2006 and replaced him with military-appointed rulers. As a result, among his supporters, many feared another Asian financial crisis similar to that of 1997, and among his detractors, many feared that Chiang Mai's development under Thaksin had occurred purely for profit, without regard to quality. For many in both groups, the shells of construction abandoned in the 1997 boom (see Figure 1) after ten years of being left to the tropical elements and the shells of

FIGURE 1. Abandoned building. (Photo by author.)

the new construction built in anticipation of Thaksin's promised boom looked identical—only the darker gray hue of the old concrete and the vines growing over the structures revealed which buildings had no future, and which ones were merely unlikely to have a future. Their fears were somewhat justified. The Thai economy did suffer (although not as badly as in 1997). Politically, Thailand suffered its worst setbacks in decades from 2006–2011, and only in 2012 began to stabilize.

My study comes the moment before the anti-coup sentiment coalesced into political action. In 2006 and 2007, during my field research, anxiety about the country's future was more diffuse than it would become in 2008–10, when protest and political violence rocked Bangkok's streets. Before many embraced a political solution to Thailand's woes, they saw these problems as endemic, as spiritual, and often as signs of supernatural involvement.[9]

STORIES OF HAUNTINGS

Chim owned a jewelry shop in a fashionable section of town and lived for a time in the same high-rise as I did. Her store specialized in designs inspired by Lanna, which refers to the 13th–19th-century semiautonomous kingdom centered on Chiang Mai. Chim styled herself as a "Lanna" woman.[10] She purchased a house

FIGURE 2. Gated community. (Photo by author.)

in a gated community in the suburb of San Sai, a district immediately northeast of the city center (see Figure 2). When I interviewed her in her store during a slow period of the afternoon, she told me how she was at first excited by the prospect of living in an exclusive, intellectual community: "They talk about the places like there will be a nice community [of neighbors]. [As if] there's only doctors [in the community]. But I never saw my neighbors. Many of the houses were empty." She paused, trying to summarize what she meant: *Man b'maen look cing* (it's not the real world). I got so scared that I moved out, back to the city."[11] When I asked her why she was so frightened, she described how she was terrified to live in the house. She would wake up multiple times in the night, listening for strange noises from downstairs. Already alert to the link between empty spaces and ghosts, I asked Chim whether she feared ghosts. She laughed. "Maybe there are ghosts," she mused, "but I fear *chon* (criminals) more. My neighbors wouldn't say anything if there were criminals [coming into my house]. They wouldn't be interested [in looking outside]; they would just stay inside" (Field notes October 20, 2007).

Chim, styling herself along neotraditionalist lines, accepted the fantasy of the gated community in which "there's only doctors."[12] This emphasis on a community

of educated, upper-class professionals was a common one for the new communities. As one advertisement read, "Come and live with people *radap khun* (of your status)." Chim's desire is to be a part of this exclusive club of intellectuals and interesting people, a desire that is never realized. Instead, as in *Laddaland*, at the moment Chim achieves her desired state of modernity and *khwam charoen*, she becomes disturbed by it. In her new *charoen* village, the neighbors are either not present or are entirely uncaring. Crime in these communities is no greater than crime elsewhere in Chiang Mai, but Chim fears it to the point where, in a reversal of the gated-community narrative (cf. Low 2003), Chim flees the gated community for the city center. What I seek to understand here is how the mismatch between Chim's desire for this progressive, intellectual community and the reality of the empty streets is productive of fear. I argue that Chim's questioning of the security of the community is an effect of this fantasy—and her very desire for it—being made uncanny.

While Chim's story did not make reference to ghosts, others—indeed, most—did. Som, another gated-community resident in her early thirties, told me about how she remained in the community only because her husband liked it. The day he would leave for his overseas work trips, she would rent a room in the city rather than staying in an empty house, surrounded by other empty houses. "Ghosts," she said to me in a low voice as we sat on the porch of her suburban house. "There are so many [here]!"

The Ghost

Much recent discussion of ghosts in Southeast Asia points to the obligation the living bear toward the dead (cf. Klima 2002; Langford 2009). But the dead in Klima's and Langford's ethnographies are identifiable—they are family, either actual relatives or the fictive kin of political comrades. Instead, Chiang Mai's high-rise ghosts are strangers. In most cases, the ghosts are not identified with a name or a family, and the one identified ghost (see below) appears to his former friends as a strange, inhuman thing to which nothing is owed. In short, these ghosts appear as something different, removed from the bonds of familial obligation.

These ghosts are all identified as *phi tai hong* ("ghosts of bad death"), and most of them were associated with murders, suicides, or (most commonly) traffic accidents.[13] *Phi tai hong*, as ghosts of (largely) traffic victims, are intimately bound with motion, and many sites for their propitiation lie alongside the highway. Stopping or otherwise acknowledging the site was dangerous, however (except for perhaps a quick beep of the horn), and would open one up to an unwelcome

visitation. As we passed one such site along the road, Noi, the daughter of a spirit medium from San Sai, warned me of what would occur should we stop there (as I wanted to do): "You would fall ill. You would have bad luck. You would not be *charoen*."

But *phi tai hong* are also bound with the idea of stasis. This ghost at the roadside was the victim of a traffic accident. It is both the cause and the result of ill luck. Should I be haunted by the ghost and therefore die violently, I, too, would be unable to move beyond the trauma of my death to be reborn and instead become a ghost. In short, ghosts of violent death, caught and unable to progress beyond their traumatized state to be reborn, threaten to cause others to remain in stasis as well. They prevent progress and spread this same hindrance to others in the manner of an epidemic—hence their uniquely antagonistic relationship to *khwam charoen*. The (perceived) violence, disorder, and urban chaos in the city, reflected and amplified by newspaper reports that splash both ghost stories and bloody deaths across the front pages (Chiang Mai News 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d), supports the sense of impending crisis: the explosion in violence and the economic decline of the city are both cause and result of the rise in bad ghosts. In short, ghosts represent a lack of mobility—they block "correct" motion, such as rebirth or progress.

Many ghost stories were concentrated around Chiang Mai's most rapidly growing part of town, Nimmanahaeminda Road. This was a place also most identified with wealthy visitors from Bangkok, fashionable boutiques, and expensive cafés. The area was lauded as the center of Chiang Mai's revitalization (expressed as *khwam charoen*) by many architects, artists, and writers (see Johnson 2010) and had become a hot spot for new construction projects. But even though (or, rather, because) Nimmanahaeminda was cited as the center of Chiang Mai's boom by much of the popular press, it was also the location of many of its ghost stories.

"One day at work, a man died," said a middle-aged laborer, referring to the construction of a high-rise building along this road (Author's field notes October 22, 2007). "A beam fell through his head and he died. *Bup*! Just like that. Now these days at night you can hear him sometimes. I went over there with the guard from up the road, and we heard it. It wasn't a noise like any animal would make, or any person—it was *another* kind of noise." His friend, the night watchman, nodded understandingly and pointed toward the busy street. "That's why this place will never *charoen*! There are too many ghosts around here!" He waved his hand at Nimmanahaeminda. His statement that the road would never *charoen* was a jab at the expensive restaurants, luxury condominiums, and rocketing real estate values. This road seems to be prospering, but the prosperity is hollow.

In addition to this hollowness, the laborer's story introduces an element of foreignness into the construction site: he recognizes his coworker's ghost by *not* recognizing his voice. The ghost could have called out to the laborer by name, and the laborer could have recognized his voice, but he does not. He could have identified a debt to his friend's ghost and talked about how one should erect a shrine for the spirit, but he does not—he simply avoids the place at night. The spirit that lives in the construction site is, for the worker, something with which communication and exchange are impossible.

The building next to this construction site was also haunted. This place was a high-rise condominium building popular among foreign expatriates. Maew, a Thai resident of this building, told me a story popular among her friends about the ghost in this building. He was, according to Maew, a "*farang khi-nok*" ("bird-shit Caucasian"), meaning a foreigner who is poor or stingy. While most *farang* ("Caucasian"), such as those on billboards or television, were generally considered sources of wealth, others were poor and simply pretended to be someone important. This particular foreigner plunged from the top floor to his death on the road ten stories below in what Maew assumed to be suicide.[14] Now, he stands in front of the window out of which he jumped and urges Thais to do the same. His appearance is a curious mix of Hollywood ghost story and traditional Thai ghost: "You will think that he is just some Caucasian," described Maew, "but then you will see that he has no feet!" (Thai ghosts have no feet.)

Why did this story appeal to Maew and others as something particularly frightening? Why is it significant that the ghost is Caucasian, and why does he appear in a new building? Both the man and his building seem progressive from the outside. Indeed, the person and the building are linked via the continual use of Caucasians in advertisements for new housing projects. I argue that what makes the ghost and this ghost story particularly frightening is that such progressiveness covers over a cursed place. As the ghost's lack of feet suggests, what lies underneath the veneer is all too familiar—he seems to be a wealthy and urbane figure from abroad, but upon closer inspection he is in fact ghostly in the same manner as the local village ghost.

As the ghosts of formerly mobile people—youths on motorcycles, migrant workers, foreigners—are thought to move into the newly built communities and bring to a halt their progressiveness, the parallel figure of the criminal "Burmese" migrant also appears. In a manner similar to *phi tai hong*, the figure of the haunting criminal also arises from motion only to settle into construction and impede progress. Next, I turn to that other figure of motion and stasis.

The Criminal

In one high-rise along the road to Sankamphaeng, the walls inside were covered in graffiti. Some was in Shan script and some in Thai script, but even that which I could read was partially incomprehensible to me. Thinking these words might be in Northern Thai, I brought back photos to discuss with Chai, a Northern Thai engineer and a friend of mine. Chai read the writing and then shuddered. "What is it?" I asked him, hoping for a good story. "It's not what he's saying; it's everything," said Chai. "Half the words are misspelled; you can tell he's not Thai. . . . Looking at this, I feel like I have no idea of the person that wrote it" (Field notes July 6, 2007). Chai was unnerved because someone with whom he could not identify was secretly dwelling in the abandoned spaces in the city. His horror, like the fear of the ghost, is related to the disturbance of finding what was familiar made *unheimlich*.

Most urban residents with whom I spoke were aware of the presence of foreign laborers, and each described their own technique for identifying them. Many confessed that they could not distinguish a Shan person from a Northern Thai person physically but spoke, as Chai did, of seeing foreignness emerge in unexpected places: for example, hearing a strange accent come out of a Thai-looking mouth.[15]

I described Chai's reaction to Choke, an architect working in and around Nimmanhaeminda. Choke identified Chai's fear as a one of the *pratchagon faeng* (lurking population)—those people who live among the "regular" population but remain unseen. They are feared, according to Choke, because they are imagined to have no sense of moral or social duty—indeed, their very existence depends on their ability to blend into the general Thai populace without being seen, but not sharing that "essence of being Thai" possessed by ordinary citizens.[16] They are therefore assumed to be capable of criminal and immoral acts, and when their existence is revealed, neighbors suddenly appear foreign. While in a previous generation this fear of the lurking alien would have been the fear of the Communist infiltrator, today the locus of fear is more disparate. The imagined criminal, like the ghost, has no goal or purpose; he simply exists to sow chaos and destruction (see also Siegel 1998).

However, these stories of migrants-as-criminals often do not mention that such migrants provide the foundation for Chiang Mai's new middle-class lifestyle. The guards and the (imagined) criminals are also often Shan, as are the maids and caretakers (as in *Laddaland*). In short, Shan migrants, in the minds of the residents of these communities, contribute to and simultaneously detract from the potential for *khwam charoen*. This intimacy—the "homeliness" of the "invisible" Shan laborer—thus renders the figure of the Shan worker all the more unhomely when

he "emerges" as a criminal. One is suddenly, forcefully reminded that one has been living among such people all along.

When my informants referred to Shan as such (rather than simply "illegal alien" or "foreigner"), they did not use the word *Shan*, nor did they use the host of other ethnonyms in local languages, such as *thai-yai* (Central Thai), *ngiaw* (Northern Thai), or *tai* (Shan). Instead, they identified Shan as *khon phama* (Burmese nationals).[17]

Defining Shan migrants as "Burmese" highlights their foreignness. While communities and people referred to as *ngiaw* and *thai-yai* have long histories predating the Thai nation in Thailand's north, "Burmese" people labeled as such are considered foreigners. This identification is telling. While Chiang Mai has a long and intimate history with Burma, having been a vassal of Burma for two hundred years and sharing similar religious and cultural traditions, Burma in modern Thai nationalist historiography plays the role of the principal villain. Recent royally funded historical epics such as *Suiryothai* or *Naresuan*, as well as other historical films such as *Bang Rajan*, depict royal Thais as proto-nationalists, defending the *chat* ([ethno-] nation) from violent Burmese, who are in turn portrayed as gleefully engaging in the slaughter of children and monks (Amporn 2003). Even films set in modern day often depict Burmese as dangerous others, as in the recent "Backpackers" segment of the horror film *Phobia 2*, in which (assumed-to-be) Burmese migrants, stuffed with amphetamines and suffocated, reemerge as zombie-like killers.

These associations—Burma (Myanmar), violence, and drugs—run into everyday stories about migrants in the gated communities. Somboon ran a noodle stall in front of a nearly abandoned gated community and was full of stories about the dangerous house next door. It was abandoned during the day, Somboon told me, but at night it would become filled with Burmese drug addicts. "They had their motorbikes filling the yard; they were out drinking and taking *yaa baa* [methamphetamines]. They were not good people." Somboon recalled hiding in the closet of his stall as the sound of shouting in a foreign language echoed out of the abandoned building.[18] Eventually, his fears got the best of him, and he phoned the local army barracks. The army descended on the house and cleared out "over fifty criminals," according to Somboon.[19] Before the army captain left, he loaned Somboon a gun so that he might shoot any who returned. His story echoes that of the abandoned construction site: hostile foreign sounds echo out of a space that should be empty and spread a sense of menace around the neighborhood, rendering the entire place, named so auspiciously, a place of danger.

Migrants also parallel ghosts in other ways. Another shop owner, Bonn, described "Burmese" thieves as supernaturally gifted at sneaking into houses (Field notes November 16, 2006). "[The communities] are full of *chon* (criminals), [illegal] aliens. . . . They even figure out ways to steal things inside of [your] apartment. They take a long piece of bamboo and fashion a hook on the end of it. Then, they reach it through the balcony window into the apartment. Very, very long, *na*? They will take everything!" Bonn stretched his arm out, imitating the long bamboo "arm" reaching into the supposedly secure apartment.

The image of a long arm reaching into one's domestic space also has clear parallels in ghost stories. Arguably Central Thailand's most famous ghost, Nang Nak, is identified as a ghost when her arm grows impossibly long and reaches down through the floorboards of her riverside hut. In the case of the migrants, the impossibly long arm stems not from their supernatural powers, but from their criminal ingenuity, borne out of knowledge of the wilderness. The "long piece of bamboo" is something they have fashioned out of jungle materials, and the extension of the (backward, violent) jungle into the (clean, rational) home is the element Bonn stresses in his story.

I thought about Bonn several days later, when I opened the *Chiang Mai News* to find that "Shan bandits" had been caught stealing motorcycles in the city (2007a). This story was one of many deliberately describing the foreign origins of common theft or violence in the city, as other stories described "Karen thieves" or "Burmese" or, less often, "Cambodian" car thieves.[20] But the feature linking the migrants to the uncanny is that they appear to be Thai (and therefore "homely") until they reveal themselves to be other. This unveiling then casts suspicion on neighbors and other homely types and recalls Thi's wild confusion between ghosts and the living in *Laddaland*. In one example of such a confusion of dangerous others with "safe" Thais, in 2004 men opened fire on a school bus near Ratchaburi. Lertrat Ratanavanit, the army's assistant chief-of-staff, commented that the men were likely Burmese or Karen, as "Thai people are not that evil" (Bangkok Post 2002). He added, "We wonder why incidents like this usually happen in Ratchaburi. There must be some alien movements in the province. A number of Burmese people work there. The men might have fled to the forest, changed their clothes and then come out looking like ordinary people" (Bangkok Post 2002). Here, the police chief shows how the migrants destabilize the everyday—suddenly "ordinary people" might be foreigners capable of horrific acts.

Presences

In each of these stories, clean, ordered, and progressive communities are suddenly (imagined to be) invaded by reminders of disorder, violence, and backwardness. Those spaces meant to be symbols of progress and exclusivity bring with them the specter of decline and invasion via foreign presences that haunt seemingly ordered and safe spaces.

The English word *haunt* evokes a reminder of a past moment, and it is in fact this idea of a sudden, unexpected connection between two points in time that dominates scholarship about haunting (Cheung 2010:176). In many ways, Thai ghosts and criminals also "haunt"; they forcefully draw connections between a place and a past time. But a more productive analysis might be gained by looking closely at the words used in Thai to describe ghosts. The action of Thai ghosts is defined by deception: they most often *lohk* (trick or fool).[21] Criminals can *lok* as well, especially when they appear to do something innocuous but end up doing something harmful. In this way, criminals who appear "normal" but then emerge to spread violence, ghosts who emerge suddenly out of an empty street, and communities that seem modern but are not are all things that have inner essences that differ from their surface appearance. They are all, in a sense, deceits.

The idea of surface progressiveness but inner deceit becomes important when analyzing Thai ideas of progress in the idiom of *khwam charoen*. Next, I examine *charoen* and its counterpart, *phatthana* (to develop), and the ways these concepts relate to the idea of the fundamental unknowability of such inner essences.

PROGRESS, DEVELOPMENT, AND GHOSTS

The links among gated communities, social isolation, and fear are not unique to Thailand. Indeed, this seems at first glance an American issue. Setha Low (2003) points to the connection between gated communities and fear in the U.S. context, arguing that, contrary to a statistical decrease in crime, stories of criminals and fear of crime actually have increased among those living in gated communities. In these narratives, the gated community is a refuge in a sea of danger, a culturally and ethnically homogeneous island in a country (perceived to be) overrun by diversity. But in Thailand, instead of a rhetoric of retreat, where the homogeneous few take refuge from a worsening city, gated communities are thought of in aspirational language: to be places where the wealthy congregate (as Chim says, "there's only doctors") and where one can live like and among wealthy foreigners. Anxieties about gated communities manifest, then, not as a fear of the urban hordes howling

at the gates, but rather as fears that these aspirations have in fact become hollow: that the foreigners (as in *Laddaland*) are petty and violent, that the community of doctors will turn out to not be a community at all (as in Chim's story), and that the empty spaces next door will be full of danger and contagion (as in Bonn's or Maew's story).

Chiang Mai's ghosts emerge at a particular point in time, when hopes about increasing prosperity and future progress fall into doubt. For those fearing ghosts, when one finally achieves the desired state of modernity (e.g., when one moves into the gated community), suddenly one becomes afflicted by ghosts. But how might we interpret these fears? How might Chiang Mai's ghosts help us understand the notion of the *unheimlich* and questions of progress?

In the context of Isan (northeastern Thailand), Mary Beth Mills (1995) suggests that fears of "modern" ghosts are a critique of modernity. In her account, cases of "sudden unexplained nocturnal death syndrome," a condition in which a seemingly healthy young man dies in his sleep, among Thai factory workers in Singapore were interpreted in rural Isan as a problem of "widow ghosts," sexually attractive and stylishly dressed spirits, assaulting young men. These ghosts, Mills argues, reflected an ambiguity surrounding figures of modern femininity in Thailand, where the increasing presence of migrant female workers and the decreasing importance of male labor led to an unspoken concern about the effects of such an economy.

But for Mills, haunting has a carnival air. The village gathers in the evening to give out protective measures. Old women dress young men up as women in order to delude the spirits, and each house hangs a large wooden penis to "distract" the ghost, amid "much joking and laughter" (1995:254). Those fearing widow ghosts turn to traditional spirit beliefs as a guard against a modern plague, and they do so with the confidence that they have the cure.

Though the original ingredients might seem similar (modernity, ghosts, Thailand), in my study, haunting was a profoundly isolated and isolating experience. *Phi tai hong* haunted isolated individuals, and there was no community response to the problem of ghosts; the only precaution taken was avoidance.[22] Although Mills's informants in Isan aspired to a "modern" lifestyle, my own imagined themselves as having already successfully achieved this quality of "modernity." In short, while Mills's villagers were able to displace the ghostly threat as something from outside to be resisted through community cohesion, my informants felt their own communities as the site and source of haunting. For this reason I invoke

Freud's uncanny as the analytic through which to understand the haunting of gated communities: the home has become unfamiliar, and one's own idea of oneself as modern and advanced (and the desire to be so) is likewise estranged. Unlike a public menace, which can be combatted via collective action, Chiang Mai's fears were those that encroached on the most intimate (and individual) spaces of the home.

As I mentioned above, Choke was an architect at one of Chiang Mai's technical universities. He met with me often to discuss my interest in the new construction in and around Chiang Mai, and he often invited me to openings or exhibitions of new architectural works. When I brought up Chiang Mai's examples of failed architecture—post-1997 abandoned high-rises or gated communities—he responded, "[Chiang Mai has] *phatthana, tae yang mai charoen*" [It has developed, but not yet progressed]. It was not the first time that I had heard this in reference to the communities. This phrase and its application to these communities sheds light on the idea of progress and the buildings' role in signifying for (or against) progress. The humor in the phrase "*phatthana, tae yang mai charoen*" hinges on the similarity between the terms *phatthana* and *charoen*. These terms are occasionally used interchangeably to refer to things that are modern, high-tech, or advanced.[23] They place the referent on a hierarchy of development, such as when my interlocutors would refer to countries such as Japan or the United States as *charoen laew* or *phatthana laew*, (a "developed" place).[24] At first glance, the idea that something could have *kaan phatthana* but not *khwam charoen* was paradoxical, but the example of Chiang Mai's new construction is nonetheless one and not the other—hence, the joke. The chief distinction between these two terms is that *charoen* makes reference to the hidden, unseen qualities of an object, while *phatthana* refers to its more superficial qualities. This reference to the unseen qualities of development draws connections between (a lack of) *khwam charoen* and the figure of the ghost.

Charoen derives from a Cambodian word meaning "to expand until complete in a positive sense" (Thongchai 2000:531), a forward motion that allows a thing to reach its fullest potential, as in Buddhist enlightenment. *Khwam charoen* is what inheres within something and renders it actually wise, advanced, or progressive, instead of simply appearing so. For Choke, while the communities appear "developed," there is something lacking, something that causes the structure's potential to fail and the buildings to fall into ruin. *Khwam charoen* is, in this idiom, what renders potentially prosperous things actually prosperous. This power contrasts misfortune and the haunting of bad ghosts and spirits. Saying that the city has "*phatthana*, but

not yet *charoen*" is describing a place where only the surface appears developed, whereas beneath the surface lies that which is thought to have been overcome.

Charoen and *phatthana* share with the idea of haunting a concern with invisible essences, which are unknowable but nonetheless powerful. One does not know if a place has *khwam charoen* (and will therefore give prosperity and become prosperous) or simply has *phatthana*. Thus, the seemingly progressive and prosperous facade never seems right, as doubts always arise regarding these essences.

When these doubts emerge, they emerge as stories of hiding migrants and haunting ghosts. Migrants and ghosts have their roots in mobility—whether international refugee networks or on the highway—but when they emerge they are signs of stasis. They each show failed moments of potential and introduce foreign elements into the everyday. Like the fictional ghost in *Laddaland*, they question the power of progress to change lives for the better.

But more than this, I argue here that Northern Thai urbanites find Chiang Mai's high-rise structures and gated communities particularly haunting as they introduce unwelcome associations that question the assumed-to-be inevitable and morally informed notion of progress encompassed by *charoen*. At the moment when modernity is seemingly under way, *sing* (possessing) ghosts or *faeng* (hiding) migrants are believed to exist with the power and will to render such spaces hollow, infertile, and meaningless. This was doubly the case during the political turmoil and subsequent economic crisis of 2006, when, for many, promises of change and Chiang Mai's reinvention were rendered hollow. *Charoen* promises forward motion, but for my informants, the fantasy of prosperity is undercut by the idea of stasis and that such progressiveness is not truly achieved, fears that manifest in the images of dangerous, lurking others.

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes stories of ghosts and criminals told by residents and workers in urban high-rise buildings and suburban gated communities in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai. For many in Chiang Mai's "communities of exclusion," the fantasy of progressive, orderly neighborhoods and intellectual, prosperous communities coexisted with stories of empty streets haunted by violent ghosts and drug-addicted foreign invaders. With the added shocks of economic and political crises in 1997 and 2006, events that littered the Chiang Mai skyline with abandoned buildings, the idea of progress in Chiang Mai—in the Thai idiom of khwam charoen—underwent its own crisis. Through an analysis of these stories of progressive or haunted sites, I show how, for many in these communities of exclusion, the fantasy of progress and development has been rendered uncanny. [urban space, ghosts, migration, the uncanny, Thailand, progress]

NOTES

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1. The Thai word *farang* refers to white foreigners, regardless of their national origins (although they are often assumed to be English, Australian, or American).
2. Her killer does not enter the story. His identity as Caucasian and the maid's identity as Burmese do not pertain to the plot but highlight the uncanny and disruptive aspects of foreigners living within the community. Their identification as foreigners parallel the figures of foreigners (especially Caucasians and Burmese) in the oral stories I describe below.
3. *Charoen* is a verb or adjective: "to progress," or "progressive." Occasionally I use it in combination with the word *khwam* to make the noun form, *khwam charoen,* "progress."
4. Here, I refer to the popularity of such word-of-mouth stories, although, as with *Laddaland,* films are also quite popular.
5. See Jackson 2010, especially as concerns the monarchy, and Morris 2000 as concerns mediation and modernity.
6. *Kan,* rather than *khwam*, is used with *phatthana* to render it a noun. This points to a key difference. *Kan* is used with physical actions such as *kan kin* (eating), *kan wing* (running), et cetera. *Khwam* is reserved for intangibles: *khwam rak* (love), *khwam suk* (happiness), et cetera.
7. Thailand is approximately five percent Muslim. Chiang Mai itself has small Muslim, Hindu, and Christian communities, but none of my informants identified as such.
8. This man was in his late fifties, Northern Thai, and a resident in an urban high-rise. Field notes December 30, 2006.
9. For a catalog of supernatural beliefs in Thai politics, see Wassana Naunam 2010.
10. Nidthi Eeosewong (1991) writes about the Lanna woman as a fetishized object. The image, stemming from Chiang Mai's colonized status vis-à-vis Bangkok, is one of an elegant, slow-speaking but naive woman as opposed to the brash worldliness of (masculine) Bangkok.
11. She could not recoup her losses, so she kept the house in hopes that a visiting family member might use it.
12. The "reinvention" of Northern Thai heritage and its fetishization by Central Thais and Northern Thais themselves is something about which other authors (Nidthi 1991; Morris 2000; Johnson 2010) have written about extensively.
13. My informants generally identified the ghosts first as unspecified *phi.* When I pressed them about what sort of *phi*, they would next identify the former person—for example, "the ghost of a girl" or "the ghost of a suicide." When I then asked about the specific variety of ghost, the term *phi tai hong* emerged, without exception.
14. I searched local newspaper reports but could find no record of such a suicide.
15. The Shan are an ethnic group spanning the Thailand–Burma border, but they are concentrated in Burma. They speak a language similar to Thai and share many cultural and linguistic features with Thais, features my informants ignored or downplayed. Recent wars between the

Burmese state and Shan groups have led to large numbers of refugees moving into Northern Thailand.

16. This is the *khwam pen thai* about which many, including Thongchai (1994), have written in depth.
17. Here, I repeat my informants' stories of migrants fully aware of their often racist character. I do not wish to be understood as supporting my informants' ideas as facts, but rather as analyzing the figure of "the Burmese migrant" in the imagination of those relating these stories.
18. Somboon described it as "Burmese," although he admitted that he could not speak Burmese.
19. Somboon did not know what the people were charged with, or what happened to them, nor did he seem to care. Drug suspects in Thailand—often unfairly considered illegal migrants—were, during the Thaksin era, subject to harsh extralegal punishments, and Thaksin's "war on drugs" claimed more than two thousand extralegal killings.
20. The Karen are another ethnic group spanning the Thailand–Burma border.
21. Ghosts also possess *sing* (a thing, house, or person), usually causing illness or misfortune. They can also do so in *hian* (an angry manner), lashing out at people who pass by. Unlike English, one cannot be "haunted" by a memory or idea in the same way one is haunted by a ghost.
22. Some informants hung *yantra* or carried a Buddha amulet as a precaution as well, but such practices are common among most Buddhist Thais regardless of a fear of ghosts. Such amulets, unlike the talismans in Mills's village practices, are purchased ("rented") individually, at temples.
23. Mills (1995) prefers to translate modernity as *thansamai*. *Thansamai* literally means "equal with the times" and might be comparable with the English *up-to-date*. *Charoen*, as I explore here, has quite a different meaning and implies knowledge and wisdom.
24. *Laew* provides the past tense: "already developed or progressed."

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