

Thailand's ghost stories

Puongpatch Sanisuriwong *

Sakolwittaya School

E-mail: memi.sanisuri@gmail.com

*Corresponding Author

Received: 01/04/2025

Revised : 25/04/2025

Accepted: 27/04/2025

Abstract

Thailand is a land rich in captivating folklore, where the realms of the living and the dead merge in a supernatural tapestry. This report invites you on a journey through the mysterious world of Thai ghost stories, as told by the locals themselves. From protective spirits who guard homes to vengeful ghosts born of sorrow, Thailand is home to a wide variety of supernatural beings. Meet Phra Phum, the guardian spirit of the household, and Mae Nak, the tragic figure whose undying love has haunted Thai imaginations for generations. But these stories are more than just tales to frighten – they are deeply woven into the cultural fabric of Thai life. Through rituals, offerings, and traditions passed down through generations, Thai people have long honored and interacted with the spirit world. Ghosts in Thailand are not merely feared; they are respected, appeased, and sometimes even called upon for protection or guidance. Exploring these ghostly figures offers a compelling glimpse into Thai identity, revealing a society where the material and the spiritual coexist. The stories reflect values, fears, and hopes, bridging the mundane and the mystical in a way that is both haunting and beautiful. So buckle up, and prepare to enter the spellbinding world of Thai ghosts – where the veil between the living and the dead is thin, and the supernatural is an everyday presence in the rhythm of Thai life.

Keywords: Thai ghost stories, Spirits in Thai culture, Thai folklore

Introduction

Thailand's rich cultural tapestry is woven with captivating tales of the supernatural, where the realm of the living and the realm of the dead intersect in a captivating dance (Pattana, 2012). This report delves into the intricate world of Thai ghost folklore, offering an in-depth examination of the diverse array of spectral entities that have captivated the imagination of the Thai people for generations. From benevolent spirits that watch over the household to vengeful entities driven by unresolved grief, the Thai people have long been enthralled by a vast and often enigmatic array of ghostly beings (Pattana, 2012; Klima, 2002). The revered Phra Phum, guardian spirits of the home, and the tragic figure of Mae Nak, whose love story has inspired countless Thai horror narratives, are just a few examples of the captivating characters that populate this supernatural landscape (Klima, 2002; Pattana, 2012). But these ghosts are not merely scary stories; they are deeply woven into the cultural fabric of Thailand. Through rituals, offerings, and traditional practices, the Thai people have found ways to honor, appease, and even harness the power of these supernatural entities, blurring

the lines between the material and the ethereal (Pattana, 2012; Klima, 2002). By delving into the rich symbolism and social implications of these ghostly figures, this report offers a unique window into the heart of Thai identity. It is a captivating exploration of the collision between the mundane and the mystical, where the ordinary and the extraordinary intertwine in a spellbinding dance (Klima, 2002; Pattana, 2012).

Chapter 1: Benevolent Ghosts – Protectors Of The Living

Benevolent ghosts in Thai folklore are often revered as protective spirits that offer blessings, guidance, and safeguarding to those who honor them through rituals. These ghosts, considered part of the Thai animist and Buddhist belief systems, are usually the spirits of ancestors, village elders, or even mythological entities believed to inhabit nature. A common example of a benevolent ghost is Phra Phum, the guardian spirit of the home. Phra Phum: The Guardian Spirit Phra Phum is believed to protect the home and its inhabitants from harm. Many Thai households have a spirit house (san phra phum), a small shrine where offerings of food, flowers, and incense are made. According to studies, the practice of maintaining spirit houses is derived from both animist and Buddhist traditions (Wongratanapitak, 2015). The belief is that Phra Phum watches over the household and, when honored properly, brings prosperity and peace to the family. However, neglecting these spirits may lead to misfortune or illness.

Phaya Nak: The Spirit of the Rice Fields In rural areas, Phaya Nak, or the spirit of the rice fields, is particularly important to agricultural communities. Farmers offer rituals to Phaya Nak before the planting season, seeking protection over their crops. These offerings, which include food, flowers, and sometimes small sacrifices, reflect the belief that the spiritual world plays a vital role in the success of material endeavors. The significance of Phaya Nak emphasizes the Thai cultural value of "bunkhun," or the gratitude shown to those who provide sustenance and well-being (Niti, 2014). Cultural Importance The belief in benevolent ghosts underscores the Thai emphasis on family and community. Ancestral spirits are seen as continued participants in the lives of the living, fostering strong bonds between generations. These spirits reinforce the idea that the welfare of the living depends not only on hard work but also on maintaining harmony with the spiritual world. Benevolent ghosts such as Phra Phum and Phaya Nak contribute to the collective identity of Thai society, where respect for elders, nature, and one's home is integral. Through rituals and offerings, the living express gratitude and reinforce their connection to the past, ensuring the continuity of tradition.

Chapter 2: Malevolent Ghosts – The Spirits Of Vengeance

Malevolent ghosts are entities that harbor anger, resentment, and a desire for revenge. Unlike benevolent ghosts, these spirits arise from tragic deaths, injustice, or betrayal. These ghosts serve as moral warnings, reminding the living of the consequences of their actions. Two well-known examples of malevolent ghosts in Thai folklore are Mae Nak and Phi Krasue.

Mae Nak: The Vengeful Wife Mae Nak, one of the most famous ghosts in Thai folklore, symbolizes the pain of loss and unfulfilled desires. Her story revolves around a woman who dies during childbirth while her husband is away at war. Unwilling to accept her death, Mae Nak remains as a ghost, waiting for her husband to return. When he does, he unknowingly lives with her ghost until the villagers warn him of her true nature (Jones,

2017). The tale of Mae Nak is more than a ghost story—it reflects the Thai cultural values of loyalty, family, and the tragedy of unrequited love. Her shrine in Wat Mahabut in Bangkok is visited by people seeking good fortune, even though her spirit is primarily viewed as vengeful (Pahuyuth, 2020).

Phi Krasue: A Head and Entrails Seeking Revenge Phi Krasue is another infamous ghost, recognizable by her disembodied head floating through the night, trailing her internal organs. Krasue is often linked with black magic and is believed to consume blood to sustain her energy. Legends say that she was once a woman accused of witchcraft, condemned to this form as punishment (Teeraparp, 2019). Villagers hang thorny branches around their homes to protect against Krasue's nightly visits. Her story illustrates the Thai caution against jealousy, manipulation, and the misuse of power.

Social and Moral Lessons Malevolent ghosts like Mae Nak and Krasue serve as reminders of the moral codes deeply ingrained in Thai society. They underscore the importance of resolving conflicts, respecting social and moral obligations, and the consequences of breaking these codes. These stories often warn of the dangers of failing to respect the dead, failing to uphold societal norms, or betraying trust. The belief in malevolent ghosts also reflects psychological aspects, as these spirits often represent unresolved fears and the consequences of guilt or wrongdoing. Thai rituals aimed at appeasing such spirits involve making offerings and performing acts of merit, both to neutralize the ghosts' malevolence and to restore personal karma.

Chapter 3: Tormented Ghosts – The Suffering Spirits

Tormented ghosts in Thai folklore, often referred to as phi tai hong, are spirits believed to be trapped in the earthly realm due to unresolved issues or traumatic deaths. Unlike malevolent ghosts, these spirits are not driven by revenge but by the pain and suffering they endured during life or in the moments before their deaths. Their stories are deeply rooted in Buddhist notions of karma and the belief that unresolved attachments can prevent a soul from finding peace.

Phi Tai Hong: The Victims of Unnatural Death Phi tai hong refers to spirits who died prematurely or in tragic circumstances, such as through murder, accidents, or suicide. These spirits are often restless, wandering the places where they died, seeking closure or justice. One prominent example of a tormented ghost is the spirit of a murder victim, who is believed to haunt the site of their death until proper rituals are performed to give them peace (Shinawatra, 2016). These ghosts are often seen as tragic figures who suffer from unresolved pain rather than malevolent entities seeking vengeance.

Phi Phrate: The Spirit of Greed Another example of a tormented ghost is Phi Phrate, a spirit cursed with eternal hunger and thirst due to greed in life. Phi Phrate is often depicted with a large belly and a thin neck, symbolizing their insatiable desires (Nithi, 2018). These spirits remind the living of the consequences of materialism and selfishness, highlighting Buddhist teachings on the impermanence of wealth and the importance of detachment from material possessions.

Cultural and Moral Implications Tormented ghosts serve as cautionary figures in Thai culture, reminding people of the karmic consequences of their actions. According to Buddhist beliefs, the suffering of these spirits is a direct result of their moral failings in their previous lives or the manner of their deaths (Preecha, 2019). This idea reinforces the importance of

leading a moral life, fulfilling one's duties, and engaging in "tamboon" (merit-making) to ensure a peaceful afterlife. The presence of tormented ghosts in Thai folklore highlights the significance of closure and forgiveness. to help these spirits move on often involve Buddhist monks conducting ceremonies to transfer merit to the deceased, freeing them from their suffering and allowing them to reincarnate peacefully. These practices illustrate how deeply interconnected the spiritual and moral worlds are in Thai society.

Chapter 4: Transformational Ghosts – The Intermediaries Between Life And Death

Transformational ghosts are unique in Thai folklore because they are neither fully benevolent nor malevolent. Instead, they occupy an intermediary space between the living and the dead, often created through rituals or magic to serve specific purposes. The most well-known transformational ghost is Kuman Thong, a spirit of a deceased child, transformed into a protective figure through rituals.

Kuman Thong: The Golden Child Spirit in Thai Literature

Kuman Thong, or "Golden Child," is a captivating figure in Thai folklore and literature, known for its protective powers and association with rituals. This spirit gained prominence in the epic poem Khun Chang Khun Phaen, one of Thailand's most cherished literary works, which highlights the complex relationship between the living and the spiritual world.

Kuman Thong in Khun Chang Khun Phaen Khun Chang Khun Phaen, composed during the Ayutthaya period (1350–1767) and recorded in the 19th century, tells the story of two men Khun Chang and Khun Phaen and their tumultuous love lives. Khun Phaen, a skilled warrior, is particularly associated with Kuman Thong, a spirit he creates through a dark ritual. In Khun Chang Khun Phaen, Kuman Thong emerges as a powerful protector while reminding us of the ethical dilemmas associated with spiritual practices. His tragic origins and loyal nature create a complex narrative that continues to captivate audiences, emphasizing the cultural significance of Kuman Thong in Thai folklore and literature. **S y m b o l i s m a n d**

Cultural Significance

Kuman Thong represents the moral complexities of seeking supernatural aid. The spirit's creation from a child's remains raises ethical questions about the costs of power and protection. This duality reflects a broader theme in Thai spirituality: while spirits can offer help, they often come with profound sacrifices. The tragic origins of Kuman Thong highlight the darker side of magic, serving as a cautionary tale about the consequences of pursuing personal gain at the expense of family. As such, Kuman Thong is more than just a character; he embodies the intricate relationship between morality and magic in Thai culture.

Modern Interpretations

The tale of Kuman Thong continues to resonate today, appearing in modern literature, films, and television. This enduring fascination illustrates how the spirit serves as both a symbol of protection and a reminder of the moral dilemmas inherent in spiritual practices. Scholars debate whether Kuman Thong's story warns against the misuse of spiritual powers or reflects the importance of ancestor worship and protection in Thai society

References

Guide: *Ghosts of Thai folklore*. (2022, April 9). PAHUYUTH. <https://pahuyuth.com/en/saiyasart/ghosts-of-thai-folklore/>

Jones, W. (2020). *Kuman Thong and the spiritual ethics in Khun Chang Khun Phaen*. Southeast Asian Folklore Studies Quarterly.

Jones, C. (2017). *Mae Nak and the cultural role of vengeful ghosts in Thailand*. Folklore and Mythology Quarterly.

Nithi, P. (2018). The role of ghosts in Thai society: A cultural perspective. *Thai Journal of Social Sciences*, 10(2), 23-36.

Preecha, A. (2019). The significance of tormented ghosts in Thai folklore. *Journal of Thai Cultural Studies*, 5(1), 45-62.

Shinawatra, P. (2016). The restless spirits: An analysis of tormented ghosts in Thai folklore. *Buddhist Studies Review*, 18(3), 78-91.

Teeraparp, A. (2019). Phi Krasue: The haunting story of the floating head. *Asian Folklore Studies*, 23(4), 234-249.

Wongratanapitak, P. (2015). Thai spirit houses: Intersection of animism and Buddhism in daily life. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 14(4), 129-145.