

# The Thai Spirit House

By Marisa Cranfill Young

It is 6:00 a.m. and the first rays of sunlight extend over Thailand's horizon. Morning rituals are taking place all over the country. In a village, a woman preparing offerings to the grandmother and grandfather spirits of the land, cracks coconuts open on her front porch. Melodic vibrations fill the air as a farmer chants by the rice goddess' home, nestled under a tree in the middle of his field. In Phuket, at a posh beachside resort, the air is redolent with fragrant smoke as two security guards place nine sticks of incense on the veranda of a miniature palace. A businessman presses his hands together as he passes by a small marble pyramid structure at the entrance to his Bangkok office building.



The classic cement style San Praphoom, modelled after a heavenly palace.

assist and communicate with the humans within their sphere of influence. To honour the presence of these guardian energies, a special dwelling, commonly called a 'spirit house', is built for them to reside in. The offerings made at these dedicated places cultivate a relationship of giving and receiving between the Thai people and nature, further consummating their roles in the cycle of life.

Spirit houses are everywhere in Thailand. In the countryside, wooden spirit dwellings blend with the landscape in rice fields, on bridges, barns, crossroads and Buddhist temples, termite mounds and gigantic trees. Vibrantly painted cement palaces typically sit in the gardens of rural and urban homes alike. In densely populated cities, spirit houses are placed at the entrance to gas stations, shopping malls, convenience stores, restaurants, and local markets. Modern and trendy designs guard government buildings, skyscrapers, condominiums, nightclubs and abandoned properties. Virtually every building in Thailand is erected with an accompanying spirit house. It's fair to say that when real estate booms in Thailand, so does the spirit house industry.

The most popular spirit houses are the *San Chaothi* and

the *San Praphoom*. The word *Chaothi* echoes the language of the indigenous Thai people who began their migrations into Thailand from as far away as China, Laos and Vietnam. It is one of the oldest kinds of spirit houses and most often takes the form of a wooden house rooted in the earth by four pillar posts. A peek inside reveals tiny statues of a pair of white-haired, spectacle-wearing old man and woman called *Da Yai*, meaning 'grandmother grandfather'.



A San Chaothi spirit house with offerings of unhusked rice, liquor and an orange in a rice field

It is also common to find a statue of a female called *Nang Mai* (a tree spirit), dressed in a glittering costume. The figure of *Nang Mai* has evolved, but her likeness is found in the practice of tying colourful cloths around large trees, still a common sight in Southeast Asia. These animistic archetypes represent the ancestral energies of the place; they are ageless and date back to time immemorial. Their powers influence agricultural and household functions that interact with the Thais' immediate lives such as when threshing rice, building a home, running a business or getting married.

In contrast, the *San Praphoom* tends to be more formal and impersonal as it bestows protection and blessings from an angel's grace. His residence represents Mt Sumeru, the cosmic realm of the gods, and is an ornate heavenly palace perched upon a single pillar post. The word *Praphoom* has



Offerings covered in plastic for sale at a local market





*Ancient beliefs meet modern culture, cement San praphoom spirit house at Starbucks in the popular Siam Square*

Sanskrit roots, meaning ‘earth’, and the resident angel named *Pra Chai Monkol* has links to the Hindu myths of Vishnu, brought to Thailand by Indian traders and the Khmer Empire. Most often he is represented as a bronze or resin statue covered in gold paint, holding a money bag symbolising success in his left hand and a sword for protection in his right. The *San Praphoom* can be likened to a satellite dish that tunes into a powerful cosmic frequency. His power is all pervasive and accessible to everyone through a spirit house, regardless of locale.

*Praphoom* and *Chaothi* are only two of the vast pantheon of spirits that populate the Thai universe and belong to an unpredictable realm of invisible forces that have very visible temperaments. Their powers can grant wishes and ensure crops, as well as cause nightmares, accidents, sickness and even death. The best way to maintain harmony and attract their grace is through the daily ritual offerings of fruits, incense, garlands and pleasant words. The land guardians also enjoy servants, horses or elephants for transportation and traditional dancing performances. Traces of ancient fertility cults revealing the spirit houses chthonic (underground)connections to Mother Earth can be found



*Employees of Thailand’s largest central department store chain make morning offerings*

in curious offerings such as red Fanta soda (symbolising blood) and carved wooden phalluses ranging from five centimetres to four metres in height.

The average Thai knows how to perform daily offerings, but the complex rituals and rules to install or take down a spirit house must be made by a ritual expert called a Brahmin priest. These masters of ceremony are

skilled in astrology, chanting and Hindu rituals and are the keepers of the spirit house tradition. Most importantly, they are able to communicate with the spirit world and invoke the land guardians into the statues that will be put inside the spirit house, transforming an otherwise normal object into a holy one.

The form and size of a spirit house is chosen under the guidance of the priest. Using a combination of astrology and the land owner’s budget, he will determine the proper location, cardinal position, height and colour. Most people choose traditional models of spirit houses, but innovative exceptions are emerging. The owner of the Dream Hotel in Bangkok had a custom-made, glass spirit house sculpted like translucent blue ice to match the modern décor inside the hotel. In the evening, colourful purple lights illuminate the inner sanctuary.



*A modern marble pyramid San Praphoom spirit house in front of a high-rise building with the guardian angel inside*

The diversity and persistence of spirit houses demonstrate the Thais’ ability to adapt their culture into the present with skilled tolerance. Regardless of age or profession, Thais dutifully honour the guardians of the land. That these ancient traditions can be integrated into modern lifestyles shows that while Thailand is serious about developing a twenty-first century economy, its people are not about to forget where they came from.

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*All photos by the author*