

## GHOSTS CAN BE PEOPLE: PHYSICALITY AND SPIRITS IN THAILAND'S NORTHEAST

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Nu might have seen a ghost. He had been walking in the forest in his home province of Phetchabun, in Northeastern Thailand, when he came upon something standing in the middle of a stream. It looked like a person, but very small – no more than three feet tall, stark naked with gleaming white skin. Its hair would have dangled to its feet, but the ends were floating in the water. It stood staring into the water, arms poised and ready to snatch a fish should one pass. Stunned, Nu stopped and watched it hunt for a while until it wandered off. “It was a *phi kom koi* [liver-eating ghost]” Nu concluded, “but a real one.”

Mae Reum, a woman in her late 50s, stopped him. “*Phi kom koi* aren’t like that. They are short, yes, and look like people, but they have only one leg. They hop around the forest and if they catch you, they will eat your liver.”

Nu protested: “Yes, that’s what they say, but *phi kom koi* are real! They are a kind of prehistoric human that live in the deep forest. They don’t eat liver – they eat fish from the stream. I saw it catching fish! And it had two legs, not one!” The young man, seeing Mae Reum’s doubt and glancing at me for help explaining his idea to Mae Reum, looked for words. “It’s not a ghost [*phi*]! It’s a person! It has flesh! But it’s a different kind of person.”

Mae Reum remained unconvinced. “Ghosts can be people,” she concluded. I asked her what she meant by that and she expanded, “They can be tangible [*mi neua*], it doesn’t have to be like a spirit [*winyaan*].”

Mae Reum’s statement that “ghosts can be people” deserves some unpacking. She does not mean here that ghosts are social beings that can be incorporated into the family. This latter concept is a common one around the world and especially in Southeast Asia: ghosts of dead kin remain social entities with whom one can communicate, or one might even “adopt” a ghostly child or be “adopted by” a ghostly mother (see Langford 2013 and Johnson 2016, respectively). Mae Reum, slightly older than Nu and not having gone through the long periods of migrant work that Nu and other

Northeastern Thai men of his generation engage in, had a more nuanced view of what constituted a “ghost.” For her, “*phi*” meant something more like “uncanny being” (Baumann 2014) rather than the kinds of spectral presences indicated by the English term “ghost” or “spirit” and what Nu imagined by the word “*phi*.” For Mae Reum, ghosts could be physical. They could, in the manner of the vampiric *phi phob*, be people that might occasionally turn malevolent. They could be guardian spirits. They could also be other kinds of humans that live in the forest. In short, the term “ghost” indicates for Mae Reum a presence from beyond the everyday, a horizon beyond which knowledge is incomplete. Whereas Nu attempts to categorize the physical, social, and spiritual worlds into tangible boxes (thus insisting that the *phi kom koi* was not a real *phi* because it was a person), Mae Reum offers a variant of Hamlet’s admonishment to Horatio: “there are more things in heaven and earth ... than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Mae Reum’s challenge to a physical / spiritual divide is reflected in other “ghost stories” from North and Northeastern Thailand. Som, for instance, owned a house in a gated community in the Chiang Mai suburbs, one of those subdivisions with names either in English (“Chiang Mai Lake and Hill”) or in archaic high-vocabulary Thai (“Lanna Thara”). The house was big – too big for her and her husband’s belongings. They lived only on the first floor, and kept the upstairs dark, quiet and empty. Dark, quiet and empty also described the other houses along the street – many of them were owned by foreigners, investors, or Thais living in Bangkok. Som’s husband was also a foreigner – an American military contractor working for Halliburton, who split his time between Chiang Mai and Iraq. When he left for his six-month-long tour of duty, Som found herself alone in the house.

But Som was not alone, and that was the problem. She reported seeing a *kraseu* floating down the streets at night: the severed head of a woman trailing her intestines in long, glowing ropes behind her. Glancing down the dark neighborhood street, Som recalled how back home in the Northeast, the local authorities could deal with such beings: “We saw one once – the whole village saw it. It was flying in the middle of the rice field. So we called the police. When they showed up, they fired their pistols at it, and it flew away. Chiang Mai police wouldn’t be so interested.”

Here, the *kraseu* – hardly a “ghost” in its fear of the police and their guns – is dangerous because Chiang Mai police are less understanding of local ghosts. They, through their negligence, permit ghosts to run rampant through the streets of their community rather than responding to the danger. The Chiang Mai police here behave like Nu would; perhaps they might believe in an immaterial, insubstantial spirit, but such a thing would be the purview of monks or spirit doctors (*mo phi*) rather than a sign of disorder that they could themselves handle. For Som, because of this divide between physical and spiritual worlds, the police have in fact rendered themselves ineffectual and thus opened the gated community up to infiltration by dangerous forces (see Johnson 2014).

In these examples, we see a split between notions of *phi* as beings relegated to a spiritual, religious sphere versus *phi* as things that point to modes of being beyond the everyday. It is evident in Nu’s frustration at Mae Reum’s idea that “ghosts can be people” – Nu, a budding modern, takes the strange thing that he has seen and pulls it into the realm of the biological. But as Som’s story suggests, perpetuating this divide may in fact be dangerous, permitting as it does an assumption that one knows how the world of people and the world of *phi* work, that one knows the divide between the spiritual and the biological. It suggests that one has always already dreamt the contents of heaven and earth.

## References

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