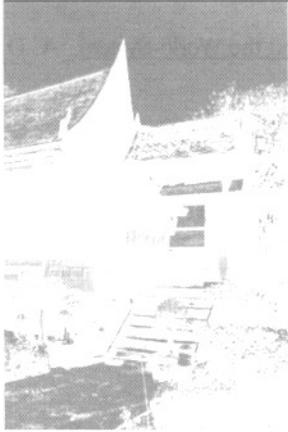

Fear in the Contemporary

Thai Domestic Space*



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Abstract

The Thai domestic architecture has been a subject of study by many Thai scholars, however, the discourse of domestic architecture has been limited to the functional and structural understanding within its traditional context, i.e. the meaning of its ideological and symbolic representation. (Jaijongrak, 1973; Chanthavilaswong, 1988; Themiyabanda, 1995) Very few researches have been carried out on the domestic space and architecture in the Thai contemporary context. (Thevakul, 1999)

This paper concerns precisely on the contemporary domestic space in relation to the notion of 'fear and danger' within the psyche of the modern home dwellers in urban area. In the Thai traditional context, house was ritualized through the 'ritual of house building.' Those traditional aspects, for the purpose of the paper, are recognized as defenses against fear: the fear of the supernatural powers and beings. The traditional defenses provide assurance to the Thais, and ensure that the house is an auspicious domain for common dwelling.

The main question of this paper is what extent to which the traditional sanctities and defenses (against fear) exist within the modern context (through the preservation, abandonment and modification), especially in Bangkok. From the empirical study of a collective set of contemporary domestic spaces, their arrangements and their dwellers has demonstrated certain spatial conducts to which how the modern Thais define the notion of 'sacred' within their households. However, it is the paper's attempt to problematize those notions of 'contemporary sacredness' in the domain of domestic space the way in which the sacredness has been recognized as a potential danger. The finding indicates not only that certain traditional arrangements and/or architectural elements have been carried out to sanctify the house, but also the recognition of domestic sanctification, which related to danger, evokes fear and anxiety among the modern dwellers.

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Introduction

Defining fear

It is important, for the purpose of this paper, that we agree on a specific definition of what we mean by “fear”, and how it is relevant in this particular analysis. Fear is commonly understood as a physiological reaction to an external stimulus. This paper, however, while not contradicting the above understanding, has as its objective focus on fear as a cultural phenomenon. Treating fear as a cultural phenomenon means precisely that what we fear and how we fear are always mediated by culture.

In the study of animal behaviour, fear is thought to originate in the experience of danger. However, at a cultural level we can easily see that much of what is experienced as danger is culturally defined. This depends upon how culture organises and distributes the phenomenon of danger. Considering fear as a cultural phenomenon involves us in the study of how the objects of fear and experiences of fear differ from culture to culture, despite the fact that in some senses the experience of fear is universal.

Fear in western society is most discussed in relation to internal psychological states, and external dangers, although not of the spiritual type. The Thai concept of fear differs from the western concept in that it emphasises the spiritual world, the world of “fearful beings” such as ghosts, unseen forces and evil spirits. It is a spiritual object-based-fear that has been part of the everyday, therefore, its remedies are incorporated into domestic space of the everyday, the house.

The house

In *Landscape of Fear*, Yi-Fu Tuan points out that, “Every dwelling is a fortress built to defend its human occupants against the chaotic elements; it is a constant reminder of human vulnerability.”¹ One of the Thais’ vulnerabilities is caused by the fear of supernatural powers and beings. The psychological state of fear is a tangible factor in the Thais’ everyday life. The house always has been the first line of defence against dangers and threats. The nature of its construction and rituals for living within it provide insight into the cultural fear. The Thais sought supernatural powers for spiritual protection within their domestic sphere. In the past and up until the reign of King Rama IV (Mongkut, r. 1851-1868) and King Rama V (Chulalongkorn, r.1868-1910)², the relationship between householders, their home and their belief of supernatural powers was more straightforward than today.

As obligation, in return of the provided spiritual protection, the rituals must be carried out and remedies must be held in high regard. From middle of the 19th century onwards, belief of supernatural powers was excluded from the formal religious doctrine of Buddhism and it was understood, as some sociologist would call it, “superstitious belief.”³ The secularisation of Buddhism initiated during the late 19th century, the period of reform and modernisation⁴, introduced a split in Thai belief system: a formal Buddhism and a superstitious belief.⁵ As a process of becoming “modern” and “urban,” the Thais were subjected to decline such traditional superstitious belief.

Although, belief of supernatural power was no longer included in the formal doctrine, it is always a part of common everyday practises hence its practises become highly personal. In modern scientific rationale, secular Bangkok, the need to render the house with spiritual protection becomes complicated. In recent years, spiritual protection has been strongly demanded, and traditional rituals of house building and domestic remedies have regained their importance. The rituals and remedies lend ambiguous character to the modern Thai house; for the ritualised and remedied house becomes a place with elaborate sense of defence, on the other hand, the rituals and remedies when incorporated within the house are said to be the causes of domestic misfortune and danger.

This paper is concerned with the contemporary condition of fear within the psyche of modern⁶ home dwellers in Bangkok. The main question is to what extent the traditional sanctification and defences exist in modern dwelling and how their existence affect modern householders. It attempts to present an example of "domestic sanctification" and examines the ways in which modern Thais identify the domestic sanctification as a cause of potential danger.

Following this, two modern examples are presented demonstrating the ambivalence of modern dwelling. The two examples are part of a larger empirical study, which were carried out during 2000 and 2001. Thirty one house surveys and interviews of ninety individuals⁷, age between eighteen to seventy, this survey provides us an insight to experience of fear

in Thai culture and reveals how fear inscribes in domestic space of Thai household.

The traditional Thai house

Before we look at the contemporary issue raised in this paper, it is necessary to outline the Thai traditional practises in relation to the Thai house: the ritual of house building and domestic remedies. The ancient Thais believed that supernatural powers caused uncertainties, natural disasters, danger and misfortune. Natural calamities were seen as departures from nature's essential harmony⁸, and dangerous and misfortunate occurrences were understood to disturb living harmony. To the archaic mind, harmony could be maintained and restored by human ritual. As Yi-Fu Tuan notes, "*Ritual has this in common with scientific procedure or effective practical action: it follows definite and predictable rules. In times of uncertainty, the performance of set gestures can be reassuring in itself; and the sense of assurance is greatly increased when the gestures individually and together are believed to transmit supernatural power.*"⁹ The Thais had developed defensive mechanisms by mobilising supernatural power for their protection. The rituals of house building and domestic remedies were among them. The traditional Thai house was treated as an auspicious domain and to build the house required a number of rituals. The Thai traditional house became an auspicious domain of the everyday life which living harmony was maintained by rituals and remedies (Fig.1 and 2).

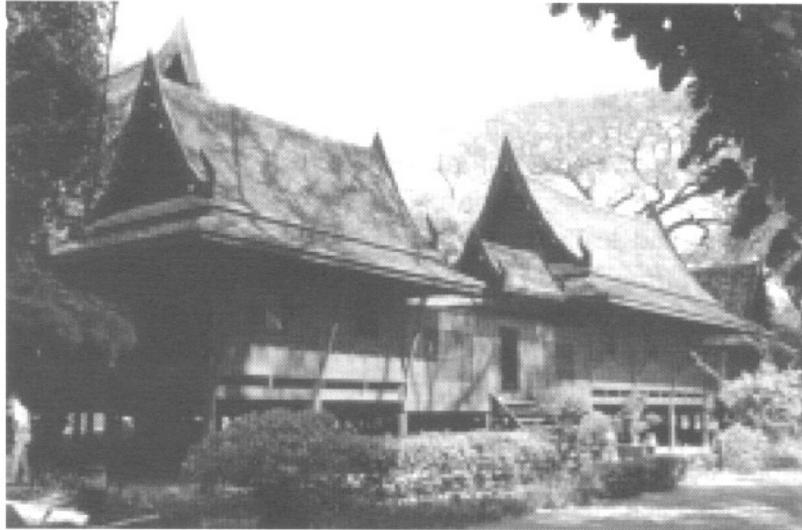


Figure 1 An example of a traditional house in the central region of Thailand: *Reun Tub Kwan*, Nakorn Pathom province (N.Karnchanaporn, July 2001)



Figure 2 *Reun Tub Kwan's* entrance (N.Karnchanaporn, July 2001)

Drawn from the socio-historical material concerning Thai traditional culture, a series of Phraya Anumanrajathon's *Thai Customs of Life* (1962) involves extensive investigations into traditional everyday life, the belief system and its related customs, i.e. birth, marriage, house building and death. His work on *Custom of House building*¹⁰ in particular points out important associations between one's life and one's house. *The Custom of House building* allows us to understand the rationale of the rituals of house building, and the way in which the traditional beliefs of supernatural power were attached to each element of the traditional house.

Phraya Anumanrajathon's text outlines the rituals of house building as consisting of three phases: material preparation, construction and dwelling. Outlines, which are described here, explain how the rituals of house building were commonly carried out in the Thai traditional society. In the first phase, rituals provided very specific criteria for material selection. A series of selection choices, i.e. site orientation, materials, time and spatial arrangement, must be made in order to avoid any potential domestic pollution, which was considered to be a source of danger. For example, site orientation must be carefully chosen as it foretold one's fortune.¹¹ Soil must be tasted and smelled so that all the ominous objects and evil related forces could be unmistakably removed. Moreover, trees with inauspicious name must not be used to build the house (Fig. 3).



Figure 3 *Chaw Mae Takien* [Takien Goddess]
A Takien timber column has been considered inauspicious by the Thais. As in this picture, the timber column was taken from a traditional house (source is unidentified) and has been placed in the middle of a rice field, Ayudhaya province (N.Karnchanaporn, December, 1999)

In the second phase, in order to begin construction of the house, the ritual of a principal column must be performed when the first column was plunked into the land. Only a layman with an approved spiritual power (white magic¹²) can perform the ritual. A specific time for the ceremony must be calculated in association with owner of the house's horoscope to avoid any bad luck. Upon the house's completion, the guardian spirit house was to be installed and the housewarming ceremony was performed.



Figure 4 Traditional house's threshold
Ruthai Jaijongrak, *Ruan Thai Doem [The traditional Thai house]* (Bangkok: Thammasat University Publishing, reprinted, 1996) p.230

For example, the threshold (Fig. 4), the bottom frame of the door, was said to be dwelled by a household guardian spirit. It was a well-known practice that one must step over the threshold. It was forbidden to step on the threshold since it eroded spiritual protection, leaving the house vulnerable to danger and misfortune. The bedroom must be configured in relation to direction of the rising sun. Sleeping with the head aligning towards the east was considered auspicious. Beams and girders were considered to be ghost passages. If anyone happened to sleep under the structures transversely, that person was said to experience mysterious suffocation during sleep presumably caused by a ghost.¹³ Furthermore, domestic remedies were applied to the front door to ward off evil spirits. The traditional rituals of house building established certain rules concerning how to construct and maintain the house as a sacred domain. The rituals and domestic remedies promised defences against misfortune, danger and fear. Complex spatial remedies surrounding the traditional house provided a very strong sense of protection.

The last phase involves rules of spatial arrangement and conduct for proper dwelling. The rituals suggested how one could maintain the sanctification imparted by the previous phases of rituals. An awareness of one's conduct within the house was important because certain structures and elements were considered to be common sites for fearful experiences or abodes for fearful beings.

The modern house

Due to western influences during the reign of King Rama IV and King Rama V in the mid 19th century, the Thais developed a taste for "western homes." This "westernisation", alongside modernisation and urbanisation, occurred largely in the central region of Thailand, especially Bangkok, which led the Thais to decline

these traditional (superstitious) beliefs and its practises as a process of becoming “modern.” The traditional house was slowly becoming unpopular and was thought to be unsuitable for modern livings. As a result, the traditional rituals of house building and domestic remedies gradually vanished. Although modern scientific technology suppressed primitive fear of supernatural powers and beings, recently there has been a trend toward regaining household spiritual protection among Thai householders. Rejection of the traditional beliefs and customs resulted in the loss of traditional defences against fear, thus when anxiety arises, modern Thais become deprive of spiritual protection. By referring to the main question; to what extent the traditional sanctification and defences exist in modern dwelling, from direct observations, we can easily submit to the fact that modern Thais simply import the traditional rituals of house building and domestic remedies into their households. However, through an in-depth observation consisted of interviews, these rituals and remedies are accompanied by the changes towards attribution of their natures and functions.

The traditional rules for material selection are no longer applicable due to the introduction of modern construction materials. The ritual performed during construction has been modified to accommodate modern construction techniques. The two examples discussed below are both typical modern Thai houses that could be seen anywhere in Bangkok. Both are detached houses, and they have nothing in common with traditional domestic architecture. Unlike the traditional house where kinship and multi-generations

co-exist, both of the modern houses are inhabited by a single family: husband, wife and children. The two houses are free of ancestral obligation and traditional customs, but their dwellers made efforts to add spiritual protection to the houses. The two examples provide evidence of modern justifications adding onto the traditional domestic sanctification. Modern householders believe that traditional domestic sanctification, when practising without expertise and great respect, would fail to establish a sense of sacredness and would turn the house into an inauspicious and misfortunate domain. By trying to sanctify the house, ambivalence of domestic sanctification have turned the rituals and remedies into the objects of fear in domestic sphere.



Figure 5 Front entrance of Ratana’s house
A house visit and interview between author and Mrs Rattana Isarangkul na Ayuthaya
(Dusit District, Bangkok: August 3rd, 2001)

Example 1

Mrs Rattana¹⁴, 60, bought her family house in 1978 (Fig.5). In 1966, when the house was commissioned by previous owner to be built, Mrs Rattana was told that the rituals of house building were properly performed and a guardian spirit house was installed (Fig.6).



Figure 6 A guardian spirit house, similar to the one owned by Ratana. Owned by Mr Chanyuth Somsap (Bang Kapi District, Bangkok: August 13th, 2001)

When her husband, a doctor, decided to add a small clinic on part of the land, it was suggested to him that the existing spirit house must face a different direction to ensure his business's prosperity. So he moved it. Soon after, the family faced economic and domestic difficulties, which forced them to sell the clinic and the portion of land where the guardian spirit house was located. The cause of such difficulties was believed to be the guardian spirit house, which by mistake was moved to face the wrong direction. Mrs Rattana felt the

lack of spiritual protection as the result of losing the guardian spirit house but she is too scared to install another one. Later on, she added a brick "threshold" painted in red to imitate a traditional threshold at the entrance door (Fig. 7,8,9). She believes that her house is now protected spiritually, and in return for her regular offerings the spirit provides defence against any misfortune.



Figure 7 Ratana's house, view of an entrance door (Dusit District, Bangkok: August 3rd, 2001)



Figure 8 The brick threshold of the door, painted in red (Dusit District, Bangkok: August 3rd, 2001)



Figure 9 View of Ratana's living room, the main entrance door is located to the far left. (Dusit District, Bangkok: August 3rd, 2001)

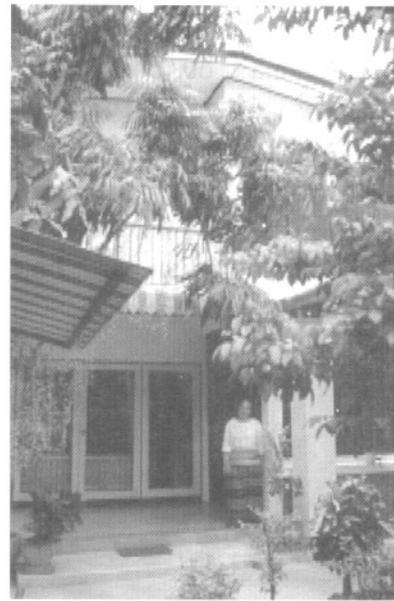


Figure 10 Front view of Pataya's house
A house visit and interview between author and Mrs. Pattaya Poomlamjeak (Bang Plad District, Bangkok: August 15th, 2001)

Example 2

Mrs Pattaya¹⁵, 64, a single mother living with her sons, owns a detached urban house built in 1980 (Fig. 10). She refused to carry out the rituals of house building, despite her mother's wishes. She has also turned down any physical form of traditional protection, especially the installation of a guardian spirit house. On the first sight, it seems as though she has abandoned all traditional practices. On the contrary, Pattaya has spoken of how much she respects the guardian spirit and she prays for spiritual protection everyday. She has given two reasons to explain her apparent abandonment of traditional practices. First, she fears that an improper ritual would cause her family to suffer misfortune, and since very few people are able to perform the proper rituals, the risk is too high. Second, she is terrified that her sons might abandon the care of the guardian spirit house, which would displease the guardian spirit and would bring about misfortune.

In the first example, the guardian spirit house was believed to be the cause of difficulties and misfortune. However, the absence of the spirit house makes the householders feel insecure. They have thus sought alternatives by modifying the traditional belief of the threshold to accommodate their particular need for spiritual protection. They imposed onto the modern threshold the ideology of the traditional threshold. In the second example, the abandonment of the traditional customs related to house building is thought to be a suitable solution to keep the house free from danger and misfortune. As an alternative to an appeal shelter for the household guardian spirit, the householder regularly prays to the household guardian spirit to acknowledge the presence of spiritual protection and to express her gratitude for such protection.

As demonstrated by the examples, despite similar beliefs, the ways of dealing with danger in the modern dwelling are different from the traditional ones. In the traditional dwelling, the rituals of house building defends the house against any danger caused by sources such as malignant spirits. Such rituals were well established and knowledge was passed from one generation to another. The relationship between the householders and the traditional practices could be characterised by its relax nature; the ritual and the remedies were part of common sense and everyday life. In the modern dwelling, the rituals of house building become a potential cause of danger due to improperly conducted rituals and the lack of respect. Both householders in the two examples recognise the importance of "domestic sanctification." They believe that improper ritual can pollute spiritual protection, by which not only is the spiritual protection violated, but also the house becomes vulnerable to dangerous and misfortunate occurrences. In order to deal with danger and misfortune which are said to cause by the established rituals and existing remedies, the modified and personalised versions of rituals and remedies, which are afterthoughts, are used in reasoning and remedying the difficulties.

Conclusion

The subject of this paper is to respond to the main question of what extent the traditional sanctification and defences exist within the context of modern dwelling. These two examples, in particular, clearly demonstrate the ambivalence within modern dwelling caused by the traditional belief of supernatural powers and the modern

justification of such belief and its practises. By trying to preserve the sacred domestic domain with rituals and remedies, these rituals and remedies can potentially cause domestic misfortune. This ambivalence of rituals and remedies is commonly expressed by modern Thais. The first example represents an ambiguity caused by existing remedies; firstly, the existing remedy did not suite the (new) house owner, and secondly, the lack of expertise in performing proper rituals was said to cause domestic misfortune. To cope with the fear of danger and domestic misfortune, many Thais come up with their version of modified rituals and remedies in order to regain spiritual protection. The second example represents an abandonment commonly practise by modern Thais. Domestic rituals and remedies are absence from the modern house as the householders fear of the improper rituals and remedies would bring misfortune to the house. With the lack of expertise, risk for dangers and misfortune is certainly said to be high.

Generally, when we look at domestic architecture in Bangkok, we are led to believe that the modern Thais have considered utilitarian and pragmatic functions to be the most important quality of their houses, as though their worldview has no supernatural (superstitious) component. On the contrary, findings of an in-depth survey,¹⁶ from which the two examples were taken, indicates that most of the modern Thais in Bangkok ritualise their homes in various manners: performing the actual rituals, adjusting the rituals to accommodate their lifestyle, or abandoning the rituals. The preservation, modification and abandonment of the traditional practises within modern households

demonstrates the way in which the modern dwelling is being symbolically and spiritually interrupted. Incorporated within the house, these rituals and domestic remedies form another realm where the repressed fear transforms the daily environment into a site of ambivalence. As we can see clearly in the examples, the modern house can be sanctified in order to make it auspicious and sacred, nevertheless, the “sanctification,” if improperly

conducted, can pollute the modern dwelling with risking for misfortune. Thus, the **double-edged** characteristic of domestic sanctification become intensively problematic in the modern dwellings; for although it establishes the sacred spiritual protection, the sacredness, when goes wrong, is believed to bring about danger and misfortune to the householders.

Notes

¹ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Landscape of fear* (USA: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), p.6.

² Nangnoi Sasri, M.R. et. al. *Ong Prakob Thang kaayapap Krung Rattanakosin [Physical composition of Rattanakosin Island]* (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1991)

³ Nithi Eawsriwong, “*Budh and Siya*” [Buddhism and Superstition] in *Pha-khawma Pha-sin khangkheangnai and etc.* (Bangkok: Matchon publishing, 1995) p. 150-173.

⁴ Clarence Aasen, *Architecture of Siam, A cultural History Interpretation* (USA: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.133.

⁵ Nithi Eawsriwong, *ibid*, p. 166-168.

⁶ The term ‘modern’ in this paper is used as the modern against the traditional.

⁷ 20 pilot study interviews, 32 home surveys and interviews of householders, 28 potential homeowner interviews, 7 architects and interior designers, 1 academic architectural lecturer, and 2 psychiatrists.

⁸ Tuan, *Landscape of fear*, p. 70.

⁹ Tuan, *Landscape of fear*, p. 70.

¹⁰ Phraya Anumanrajadhon, *Plook Reun [Customs related to house building]. Prapaynee Kiowkub Cheevit Series [Customs of life series, 4 books]* (Bangkok: Sumnukpim Samakom Sungkomsaat Hang Prathed Thai, 1962; reprinted Bangkok: Siam Publishing, 1996).

¹¹ The Thai saying, “*Yha Plook Reun Kwang Ta Wan*,” means “ not to build the house transversal to the sun’s path”. It indicates that the length-wise side of the house is traditionally aligned along the east-west axis with the front of the gable facing the east (direction of the rising sun). Cited in Phraya Anumanrajadhon, *Plook Reun [Customs related to house building]*, p. 72.

¹² Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger, An analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966, reprinted 2000), p.100.

¹³ The Thai saying of “*Phii Um*” can be explained as a suffocating feeling while asleep, especially during a nightmare. In Thai popular culture, it is believed that ghosts causes this particular suffocation, however, this ghost is not clearly identified.

¹⁴ A house visit and interview between author and Mrs Rattana Isarangkul na Ayuthaya (Dusit District, Bangkok: August 3rd, 2001).

¹⁵ A house visit and interview between author and Mrs Pattaya Poomlamjeak (Bang Plad District, Bangkok: August 15th, 2001).

¹⁶ Nuttinee Karnchanaporn, ‘Fear as a cultural phenomenon in Thailand with special reference to the spatial relations of domestic architecture.’ The research’s field study; unstructured interviews and the house visits were carried out during June-August 2000 in London and June-September 2001 in Bangkok and vicinity.

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