

# Phi Chao Nai Revisited: In Memory of Ajarn Shalardchai Ramidhanond<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper considers major points raised in Shaladchai Ramidhanond's *Phi Chao Nai* (1984) in order to clarify the ways by which it is located in the 'functionalist' analysis dominant in anthropology during the twentieth century. Subsequently, I take an attention to new dimensions of study focused on such concepts as 'enchantment' and 'affective contact' in order to shed light on the interactions within the body of the spirit medium and between the spirit medium and clients or followers in the spirit cult. In this way, the paper tries to follow the way in which the study of spirit mediumship in Northern Thailand has greatly transformed its theoretical focuses since Shalardchai's pioneering work.

**Keywords:** *Phi Chao Nai*, spirit cult, spirit medium, functionalism, enchantment, affective contact

## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้พิจารณาประเด็นหลักต่าง ๆ ที่ได้มีการหยิบยกขึ้นมาในหนังสือ ผีเจ้านาย ของ ชลดาดชาญ รัมิตาณนท์ (พ.ศ. 2527) เพื่อสร้างความกระจางแจ้งใน แนวทางที่ปรากฏอยู่ในการวิเคราะห์ 'เชิงการหน้าที่นิยม' ซึ่งโดดเด่นในสาขาวิชา มนุษยวิทยา ช่วงศตวรรษที่ 20 ต่อจากนั้น ผู้เขียนให้ความสนใจต่ออิมิทิโน่ ๆ ของ การศึกษาที่เน้นในทัศน์ดังเช่น 'เสน่ห์' และ 'สมผัสทางอารมณ์' เพื่อที่จะให้เกิดความ ชัดเจนต่อปฏิสัมพันธ์ภายในร่างกายของคนทรงเจ้า (ม้าชี) และระหว่างคนทรงเจ้ากับ ผู้รับการรักษาหรือลูกศิษย์ลูกหาในลัทธิพี ในแนวนี้ บทความพยายามจะดำเนินตาม แนวทาง ที่การศึกษาคนทรงเจ้าในภาคเหนือของประเทศไทย ได้ปรับเปลี่ยนจุดเน้น ใหม่เชิงทฤษฎีไปนานใหญ่ ดังแต่งงานชื่นบุกเบิกของชลดาดชาญ รัมิตาณนท์ เป็นต้นมา

**คำสำคัญ:** ผีเจ้านาย, ลัทธิพี, คนทรงเจ้า (ม้าชี), การหน้าที่นิยม, เสน่ห์, สมผัสทางอารมณ์

## Introduction

I met Ajarn Shalardchai together with Ajarn Virada Somsawat for the first time when I was conducting fieldwork on spirit cults in Mae Hia and other places in Chiang Mai in 1985–86. The moment of our meeting was immediately after he had published a seminal work: *Phi Chao Nai* (The high-ranking tutelary spirits) from Sun Nangsue Chiang Mai in 1984. He gave me its copy and invited me to join his colleagues including Ajarn Anan Ganjanapan and other social scientists. They were often talking about quite a wide range of subjects associated with spirit mediums, spirit possession, spirit cults, or even new trends in the studies on social and economic development, gender, Buddhism, and social movements in general. (Figs. 1, 2 and 3)

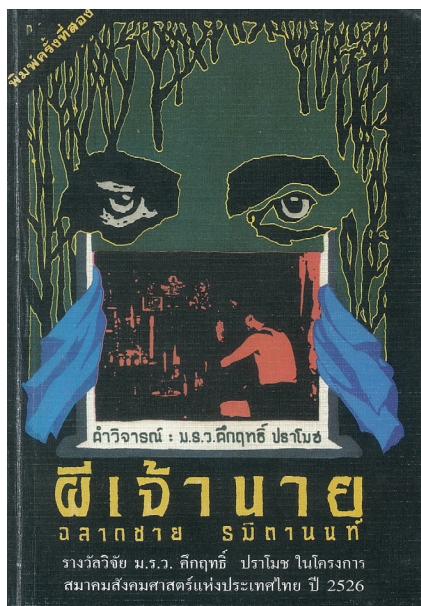


Fig. 1: The front cover of *Phi Chao Nai*, 1984 (2527).



Fig. 2 & 3: Ajarn Shalardchai and the colleagues  
at his house in Chiang Mai, c.1986.

The topics and related arguments shared by those people seemed to me quite refreshing mainly because, if confined to spirit beliefs and cults, the arguments were focused on how these practices related to social settings including the practitioners and their audience and followers, quite apart from analyses and arguments offered by previous generations of folklorists such as Phya Anuman Rajadhon (1953) or Sa-nguan Chotisukharat (1969). All these arguments seem to be a new intellectual trend in late twentieth century, reflecting academic discourses shared by anthropologists and social scientists not only in the West but also in Japan and other Asian countries.

### *Phi Chao Nai* and the functionalist analyses

Throughout Shalardchai's work he basically takes a stance of 'functionalist' analysis, still a dominant trend in Thai cultural anthropology in the 1980s when *Phi Chao Nai* was written. The main relationships to be analyzed in his book are between *phi chao nai* spirit cult, its spirit-mediums, and the economic and social conditions in Northern Thailand. In the periods before the 1980s, most spirit mediums had worked occasionally in their own or nearby villages or towns. They were practitioners to give services such as propitiating a 'village guardian spirit' (*phi suea ban*), giving answers to the consultation from clients, divination of auspicious days for various occasions, winning numbers of lottery draws, and so forth. But since the 1980s so many 'professional' and fulltime spirit mediums began to spring up in the city and its suburbs, on which the main focus of Shalardchai's book is laid.

In explaining the whole picture involved in the *phi chao nai* phenomena, he basically follows anthropological functionalism in order to analyze and explain the complex and integrative functions of relationships concerned with beliefs, rituals, practitioners, clients and followers (PCN, 72<sup>2</sup>; also see Shalardchai

1980, 80–81). In his Malinowskian functionalist interpretation of the belief system of spirit worship in Thailand, he first draws a preliminary picture in which spirit worship at the lowest level such as ‘phi suea ban’ or the village spirit are put under the higher spirits such as ‘phi mueang’, a spirit worshiped by all the inhabitants of mueang domain. And this local hierarchical structure has been put under the political integration of Chiang Mai and other parts of Northern Thailand by the Bangkok central government since early twentieth century.

He was, however, not fully satisfied with such a picture of coherent social order in the case of *phi chao nai* spirit cults as functionalist analyses must bring about. In dealing with beliefs on spirits, ritual practices, spirit mediums (*ma khi*), medium-disciple relations, and medium-client/follower relations, he admitted that to draw a functionalist whole picture congruent with all these elements is almost impossible. He, thus, suggests the necessity of a more appropriate theoretical framework to focus on changes like in Marxist analyses (PCN, 28; also see Shalardchai 1980) rather than exclusively relied on the functionalist approach. In the end, however, he did not overtly introduce any Marxist analysis at least in his *Phi Chao Nai*.<sup>3</sup> It is yet quite evident that he had been very close to Marxist thought and the ‘anthropological political economy’ throughout his later career.

His functionalist analysis seems to be successful in drawing a picture of the system of popular beliefs. One of the focuses of his book is laid on the syncretic features of Buddhism or what he calls ‘phutthasatsana baep chao ban’ or ‘popular Buddhism’ (PCN, 33–35), as distinguished from orthodox Theravada Buddhism. This concept has widely been adopted by many other anthropological studies on Thailand, Burma and Sri Lanka throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. Shalardchai put forwards the complex features of supernaturalism in the popular Buddhism shared by most people in Northern Thailand as follows:

“The beliefs in supernatural sacred power (*amnat saksit nuea thammachat*) concern gods (*thewada fa din*), mystical power (*itthilit pathihan*), spell (*wetmon khatha*), and especially *phi chao nai* rituals can still actively exist today” (PCN: 142).

Thus, one of the purposes of his study is to clarify, relied on the views of spirit mediums, the structural relationships between a variety of such supernatural powers within popular Buddhism (PCN, 21). From a functionalist view, such multilateral beliefs are a prominent feature in which gods, mystical power, spell, and *phi chao nai* work together to form an interconnected and colorful worldview of the people in Northern Thailand.

In this connection, Shalardchai’s analytic stance actually didn’t strictly follow the classic functionalist line but more flexibly revised in order to fit in well with the dynamic situations people then being confronted in Northern Thailand. The revised application of functionalist analysis<sup>4</sup> relates to social and economic transformation undergone during the 1980s–90s by the people in Chiang Mai city and its suburbs. Thus, he gave a special attention to the varied demands, wishes, and hopes held by clients, and a variety of spirit mediums who fit in with the former’s requests. The spirit mediums or any other religious practitioners, therefore, could be chosen by the people according to their wish, hope, or demand to be fulfilled (PCN, 142; also see Shalardchai 1980, 82).

Concerning this major role of *phi chao nai* spirit cults, Shalardchai further explained *kho mue lek*, *chao pho suea dao*, *chao pho saen la*, and so forth. Those spirits or sources of power are in many cases derived from heroes in the past which appeared in certain *tamnan* (chronicles) (PCN, 142–143). While there are some differences in terms of the deities, spirits, or the class-affiliation of clients and followers, most spirit cults have quite similar features regarding

the spirit possession rituals (*khao song*), worshipping the teacher's spirit (*wai khu*), mediums' dresses, dancing, offerings, and so on (PCN, 143).

While Shalardchai's study provides a whole picture of *phi chao nai* spirit cults in the mid 1980s, Anan Ganjanapan's work on spirit beliefs in that period focuses more overtly class differentiation among the peasantry in terms of 'anthropological political economy'. Anan's analysis of '*phi kha*' or witch-spirit phenomena in San Pa Tong district of Chiang Mai is one of such instances of political economy analysis applied in explaining the class differentiation among the peasantry in relation to spirit beliefs and rituals (Anan 1984; also see Tanabe 2008). The central argument in his study is laid on how class differentiation works in the exclusion of a certain group of villagers as a horrible witch from the village community. It should be noted that witch-spirit beliefs and its accompanied exclusion are viewed from a revised functional totality of the peasant village community. In this sense Anan's analysis seems to share the theoretical horizon of the revised functional analysis as in Shalardchai.

In this way, the anthropological studies on spirit cults in Northern Thailand intended to clarify how the spirit cults had significance in people's beliefs and practices, social relations, life circumstances, and their changes. This anthropological subject matter became quite prevalent not only among Thai but also many foreign anthropologists, and the overview of the subject could be found in the special issue of *Mankind*, vol.14, no.4, published in 1984, edited by Paul Cohen and Gehan Wijeyewardene. Many articles in that volume are concerned with a variety of spirit cults and their relations to women. Here, we also find that a variety of spirit cults in Northern Thai society are analyzed not only by revised functionalist ways but more plausibly in terms of social transformation which most of Northern Thais had experienced in the 1980s. Such aspects are shown in the volume, among others, by the papers on the matrilineal kinship

and *phi pu ña* domestic spirit cults by Paul Cohen (1984) and the rise of *phi chao nai* professional spirit cults in the 1980s by Walter Irvin (1984).

### Spirit cults and ‘enchantment’ in modernity

Shalardchai's *Phi Chao Nai* deals with spirit cults in the midst of social and economic development experienced by the people all over Thailand. At the beginning of the book he raised a fundamental question:

“The influence of the scientific worldview has spread over and entered into the various aspects of livelihood among the people for quite a long time no less than a half century.....What elements do make the tradition of *phi chao nai* spirit possession can continually exist in the midst of the wave transforming towards modernisation of various aspects of lives among the people in the society” (PCN: 22).

The core of his question is laid on why apparently old-fashioned and unscientific beliefs and practices like spirit beliefs and cults could go along with the tide of modern development. His solution for this question relates again to his functionalist position.

Shalardchai puts forwards his idea that the multi-religious situation consisted of different belief systems such as spirit worship, Brahmanism, and Buddhism can respond to and cope with a variety of demands from the people in modernity. This is because spiritual or material demands of the people are differentiated in terms of groups and ranks (classes) within the stratified society like modern Thailand. The different groups and ranks have their own worldview under which they try to solve their own life problems. He then put forwards

that a variety of beliefs concerning the sacred powers, such as gods, mystical beings, spell, and, above all, *phi chao nai* can still be actively accepted by the people in terms of differentiated groups or ranks. This functionalist interpretation has often been applied for multi-religious situations in modernity of many European or Asian countries since last century.

It seems to me that such a view represents a functionalist class analysis of religious beliefs and practices, which has been prevalent among some groups of anthropologists during the twentieth century. However, when religious beliefs and practices are entirely reduced to the categories of social groups, ranks, or classes together with their worldviews, the complicated processes of individual selection, acceptance, and decision must be concealed. I am not in a position to totally deny the preference in terms of groups or classes as *habitus* in Bourdieu's sense (Bourdieu 1977). It would, however, be inadequate to totally reduce individual preferences and choices in beliefs, affections, fascination, or enchantment to the holistic categories. This being the case, it would be pertinent, instead, to focus on individual processes involved in acceptance of or fascination with a particular spirit, spirit medium, or spirit ritual by clients or followers.

I have known that Shalardchai himself certainly noticed such a contradictory aspect of 'modernity and enchantment' involved in spirit beliefs growing up side by side with the modern 'rationalism'. Not only Shalardchai himself but also even many educated clients and followers participated in spirit cults of any kinds have been imprinted this contradictory process on their minds in the 1980s and thereafter. Thus, two important review works appeared ten years after Shalardchai's work was published, i.e. Janice Boddy (1994) "Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality" and Jean Commaroff (1994) "Defying Disenchantment". These works, as suggested in their titles, refer to a point of 'enchantment' involved in a variety of spirit cults in modernity.

In this connection, Comaroff, with reference to a 'critical displacement', puts forwards Korean and Zimbabwe cases of spirit possession and its enchantment:

"Spirit possession, with its implications of unwilling invasion, of bodies seized by superhuman force, violates the model of selfhood central to bourgeois modernism..... [S]uch possession can also provide a critical displacement, its otherworldly authority empowering it to speak innovatively of contradictions in the world from which it comes"

(Comaroff 1994, 307).

Similarly, a spirit medium's 'critical displacements', often accompanied by joking, are observable in many sessions of the cults in which the possessed spirit gives utterances and actions during the divination or answering to the consultancy. Among the spirit mediums' incoherent or chaotic utterances, we can also often come across gossips of gender relations and parodies of local and national politics. Such a transformation of spirit mediumship also relates to the new sites for cultural production and 'politics of difference' in diverse fields such as gender, hybrid rituals, or local politics (cf. Meucke 1992; Pattana 2003; Fukuura 2011; Johnson 2011).

Another aspect engendering critical transformation through 'enchantment' relates to 'displacement' of the gender role from female to male or any other in a variety of spirit cults. As I have tried to describe in *phi meng matrilineal* domestic spirit cults in Lampang (Tanabe 1992) and in professional spirit-mediumship in Chiang Mai (Tanabe 2002), the spirit mediums including many transgendered people now, try to 'become' overtly to male figures including *phi chao nai* or any other deities. In this regard, the works on spirit cults in Northern Thailand

cannot avoid the newly developing issues on gender, sexuality, and transgendered spirit mediumship, as plausibly problematised by Rosalind Morris (2000) and Yos Santasombat (2009).

### ‘Affective contact’ in spirit cults

In the previous sections, I have made a special attention to what kinds of theoretical position could be taken in studying spirits and spirit cults, including the *phi chao nai* case. Until the 1980s, the organization and rituals involved in the spirit cults, together with the relationships of spirit-mediums, clients, and other participants have mostly been interpreted in terms of a functionalist stance. An idea that came into mind in reading Shalardchai’s *Phi Chao Nai* in 1984 was, however, that the interactive processes of a spirit medium and clients or followers rather hidden behind his functionalist picture. Actually, his detailed descriptions concerning a variety of spirit mediums’ services given to the clients (PCN, 87–93) inspired me a valid step towards the microscopic analysis of what comes out from the interactive processes between the spirit medium and the clients.

Keeping this in mind, what I have much concerned among others is to elucidate what happen to the spirit and the spirit medium’s body, and the related interactions involved in the space of the spirit cult (Tanabe 2013a: 209–211, 231–234; 2013b). Such a topic is associated with ‘affective contacts’ among the spirit, the spirit medium, clients and other participants within the cult. The ‘affective contact’, I suppose, has been one of the most prominent features providing intense ‘enchantment’ of the spirit cults in Northern Thailand up until today. (Fig. 4)



Fig. 4: During the annual 'spirit dance' of phi meng cult in Northern Thailand, 'affective contacts' spread out among the participants possessed by the guardian spirit (Lampang, 1986).

One of the instances about 'affective contact' concerns the very idea of *liang phi* or propitiating spirits which can be widely observable for quite a long time in a variety of traditional spirit rituals for the village spirit (*phi sua ban*), spirit of mueang domain (*phi mueang*) or any kinds practiced all over Northern Thailand. The *liang phi* propitiation is a means of renewing and keeping the familiar relations between the power of spirit and the inhabitants, as a result, leading to stabilised communal relations. In a spirit medium's cult, most conspicuous scenes of 'affective contact' are observable in 'spirit dance' or "*fon phi*" held in a cult at least once a year inviting the teacher's spirits (*phi khu*) and the fellow spirits within the network of the spirit medium (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5: 'Affective contacts' get around all the space of the annually held 'spirit dance' by professional mediums as an offering to the 'teacher's spirit' or '*phi khu*' (Chiang Mai, 1998).

Moreover, spirit-related rituals held within the cult often accompany a variety of expressions of 'affect', including joy, sorrow, love, hate, anger, fear, despair, security, and so on. These affective expressions often move others and engender many contingent events and encounters among the people assembled. Furthermore, 'affective contact' is an essential element in the communal relations of spirit mediums, in which affection, images, and bodily communication are dominant rather than discourses and concepts. I think we need to direct much attention to affective experiences as a crucial means of constructing communal relations not only in spirit cults but also in other types of social groups including, friendship, association, gathering and network, as well.

As I have put forwards in a recent work, 'affective contact' drives the participants to 'become' something else, blurring the boundaries between the spirit medium, clients and other participants, leading continuously to new experiences of relief and liberation (Tanabe 2013a, 232–234; 2013b, 189). The notion of 'affective contact' is completely different from the functionalist assumption of the idea of coherent social order underlying many anthropological works. Furthermore, it is also different from the recent anthropological formulation of 'emergent property' which lays an emphasis on incongruities between actors and others in constructing meaning of event. As Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1992, 23–24) puts forward, it lays an emphasis on the way of constructing meaning of event from completely different parties and individuals within the social network, rather than norms and shared ideas as blueprint for acts.

In this regard, spirit medium's 'affective contact' follows a quite different direction. The spirit medium tries to create in the communion the meanings as the capacity among the clients or participants to deal with their fortune, misfortune and fantasy through affective interaction with the imagined other, or the spirit. In this process, what the spirit medium relies on are still based on moral teachings in terms of 'norms and shared ideas as blueprint for acts' (See Anan 1992). Furthermore, in the guidance or teaching given to the clients and audience in recent years, a particular emphasis is laid on the Buddhist moral precepts (Tanabe 2013b, 187). It should, however, be noticed that such norms and shared ideas are sometimes critically displaced by parodies given by spirit medium's utterances, as I touched on before.

## Conclusion

For me, Shalardchai's *Phi Chao Nai* has long been a source of inspirations in considering spirit mediumship and spirit cults up until today. He had enlightened me in many ways concerning the styles in which villagers talk to us and use their own rhetoric in expressing delicate matters or sensitive gossips in local politics. Although many decades passed since Shalardchai had taken me to the field of ethnographic research, I am still poor and far behind him in techniques of interacting with villagers. I can often recollect, however, that we came across to observe how many spirit mediums often expressed in thought-provoking ways their critical comments on absurd everyday life or collapsed local politics. I still remember that we had many delightful occasions to observe the spirit mediums having a lot of clients to exchange pleasant conversations and interactions with them. Such chatting among them is really a joy also for us in the midst of 'enchantment' in modernity.

Shalardchai's *Phi Chao Nai* is a monumental work in a sense that it is not only the first full-scale ethnography on the spirit mediumship in Northern Thailand, but also the work applying a clear-cut theoretical framework of his own functionalism with which it opened up a variety of different analytic lines in the future. I still recollect that Shalardchai in some occasions talked how our academic life was fragile in a somewhat pessimistic way. But I believe his critical engagements based on anthropological research on peasant communities in Northern Thailand will continuously and thoroughly shed light on our ways in the future.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> This paper was written based on my draught read at the seminar: “Remembering Ajarn Shalardchai Ramidhanond: Ritual, Beliefs, and Community’s Right in Sustainable Natural Resource Management”, held on 28 November 2018 at the Women’s Studies Centre, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University.

<sup>2</sup> The reference to Shalardchai’s Phi Chao Nai 1984(2002) is abbreviated to PCN.

<sup>3</sup> For his fully Marxist analyses on the consciousness of Thai peasantry, see Shalardchai 1980.

<sup>4</sup> The revised functionalist analysis applied by Shalardchai is quite different from the former functionalist insight into a whole coherent social order often emphasised by shared norms and ideas. For Shalardchai, Anan Ganjanapan and other recent Thai anthropologists, what should give attention in analyzing people’s activities is an ‘emergent property’ among their interactions as asserted by Fredrik Barth (1992: 23–24). Many sessions of spirit cults in Northern Thailand, as I touch on later, seem to fit in well with such a wide range of requests from the clients.

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