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A spirit shrine outside an abandoned house in the Thonburi district of Bangkok that some residents believe to be haunted.

A tour of the old haunts

In Thailand, abandoned buildings and dwellings in which people died in grisly ways are often believed to harbour ghosts and spirits. We visit some of Bangkok’s spookiest spots

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Among residents of an old shanty town in an outlying district of Bangkok, Thailand, there is talk of a haunted house.

It isn’t hard to find, beside a small stream blackened with putrid effluent and flanked by a concrete pathway. The weather-beaten wooden dwelling looms behind a corrugated aluminium fence. Even at a glance it looks vaguely sinister.

Made from planks, the small, rectangular two-storey structure has pairs of thin horizontal windows on the front and back of its upper floor. They resemble evil eyes squinting menacingly.

The home is shaded by two large fig trees, from whose tangled branches cascade thick curtains of aerial roots that cloak it in a gloomy, woody veil. Fig trees such as these are believed to be inhabited by arboreal spirits. Standing by one of them is a hand-carved shrine with votive offerings.

It is not the spirits of the trees that worry some people in the neighbourhood, though. It is the suspected presence of ghosts in the house.

“It’s a deserted place and looks scary,” says Suwanna Sukwiboon, 75, an impish Thai-Chinese grandmother who lives nearby with her husband, Tanapon, a retired car salesman. “I’m terrified of ghosts. If I see so much as a shadow, I’ll flee,” she adds with a chuckle.

The couple have fortified their home against baleful influences



with an eclectic collection of religious objects. Laminated pictures of venerated Buddhist monks hang from their anteroom’s ceiling. On one wall-mounted shelf stand porcelain figurines of Chinese deities. On another are effigies of Hindu gods and goddesses.

“After dark, children don’t go near that house,” Suwanna says. “Nor do I.”

I’ve seen plenty of dead bodies over the years. But I’ve yet to see a ghost. The dead lie peacefully and never say a word

MONGKHON TEKKET, UNDERTAKER

The abandoned dwelling, locals theorise, is perhaps haunted by *kuman thong* – childlike apparitions conjured up by witch doctors from aborted fetuses or stillborn babies. Or, perhaps, it is home to a *phi am*, a female demon who paralyses people in their sleep by squatting on them.

“I woke up one night to find a shadowy figure pinning me down,” says Robiyon Mongpra, a clothing store manager. “I tried to push it off, but I couldn’t move. I cried out and then it left me.”

Sleep paralysis, which involves a momentary inability to move or speak while falling asleep or waking up, is a well-attested natural phenomenon. Yet for

A woman tends to the shrine of Mae Nak, Thailand’s most famous ghost.



neighbourhood than they used to be – or so several locals say. It was here in Thonburi, a short-lived capital city that is now part of a sprawling metropolis, that the son of an immigrant Chinese trader was crowned king after helping liberate Siam from Burmese invaders as a warrior.

King Taksin moved his capital here from Ayutthaya, the badly ravaged old capital, in 1767. Taksin reigned until 1782, when he was executed by some of his generals for claiming to be a living Buddha. His successor, the founder of the current Chakri dynasty, relocated the capital to Bangkok, on the other side of the meandering Chao Phraya River.

Taksin’s cremated ashes were buried at a Buddhist temple in Thonburi, within easy walking distance of the spooky house.

The historic neighbourhood is criss-crossed by scenic canals plied by long-tail motorboats. Parts of the area, until recently, still had a semi-rural feel with shady corpses of betel nut and coconut trees. Yet where patches of greenery once gladdened the eye, now massive new flat blocks dominate the landscape.

A few years ago, one of Bangkok’s two elevated light-rail lines was extended into this area, making commutes into the city faster and more convenient. Crowds of new residents followed.

“In the past, there were lots of ghosts but few people,” says Tanapon Sukwiboon, 75, who has lived in the community most of his life. “Now there are lots of people but few ghosts. Ghosts don’t like being around too many people.”

In nearby woods at night, there were once reported sightings of a *pret*, a giant skeletal apparition with stick-like limbs and a lolling tongue. The trees are long gone and the spectre has not been seen for years.

“The Skytrain came, the ghosts went,” says Napporn Ruangaroonwattana, a taxi driver.

A local who is well placed to testify about ghosts is Mongkhon Tekket. An ethnic Chinese man with wry wit, Mongkhon is an undertaker at the crematorium of a century-old temple where he plays chess with retirees between funerals.

“I’ve seen plenty of dead bodies over the years. But I’ve yet to see a ghost,” Mongkhon says. “The dead lie peacefully and never say a word. None of them have come back to haunt me.” Mongkhon believes in ghosts, but assumes only those with a sixth sense can see them.

Anong Sukjam claims to have just such a sixth sense. She works as a fortune-teller, with hair



Suwanna Sukwiboon says she is terrified of ghosts; fortune-teller Anong Sukjam with her pet shih-tzu. Photos: Tibor Krausz



I’ve seen ghosts many times. They’ve never done me any harm ... Sometimes I hear them playing

ANONG SUKJAM, FORTUNE-TELLER



A passing motorcyclist stops to make a donation to a Buddhist temple guarded by an automaton skeleton.

dyed carrot-red and hands adorned with jewellery.

“I’ve seen ghosts many times. They’ve never done me any harm,” Anong says, while stroking her pet dog, a shih-tzu.

“I have *kuman thong* living in my house. Sometimes I hear them playing.”

The fortune-teller plies her trade at the shrine of Mae Nak in another old community across town in eastern Bangkok. The shrine is devoted to Thailand’s most famous ghost: the spirit of a pregnant young woman whose soldier husband went off to war.

She died in childbirth while he was away, but she kept on waiting faithfully for him. Soon after he returned home, the story goes, the husband realised his wife was no longer a flesh-and-blood woman, but a spectral creature in human form. He fled in terror.

Distraught, Mae Nak began tormenting local people until an exorcist placated her through magic rituals.

“We’ve never seen her spirit, but we know she’s here,” says Phra Somkiet Chantaseelo, a Buddhist monk who lives at Maha But Temple, where the Mae Nak shrine is housed.

The shrine is bedecked by dolled-up effigies, oil paintings and figurines of Mae Nak. All day long people flock to her, pleading for good luck, better health or more money. “Even if you cannot see her, she can still have her influence felt,” the monk says.

In this part of Bangkok, too, helter-skelter urban development – which has transformed a once largely rustic area – has driven ghosts away, residents say.

Mae Nak has not gone completely AWOL, though, according to Suphab Chanjaroen, an elderly woman who sells food and refreshments beside souvenir stalls at the Buddhist temple’s entrance.

Now 70, Suphab has lived here since she was a young girl. Decades ago, her late brother, who was a monk in the temple, fashioned a still-popular effigy of Mae Nak from plaster into which he had mixed soil collected from seven burial grounds for extra occult potency.

A few years ago, Suphab was sitting outside her house when, she says, a young woman in an old-fashioned dress approached her. “She stood right there silently,” Suphab says, pointing at the spot.

“She was so beautiful,” the elderly woman adds. “I knew it was Mae Nak immediately. She came to see me. She smiled sweetly, then she turned around and disappeared.”