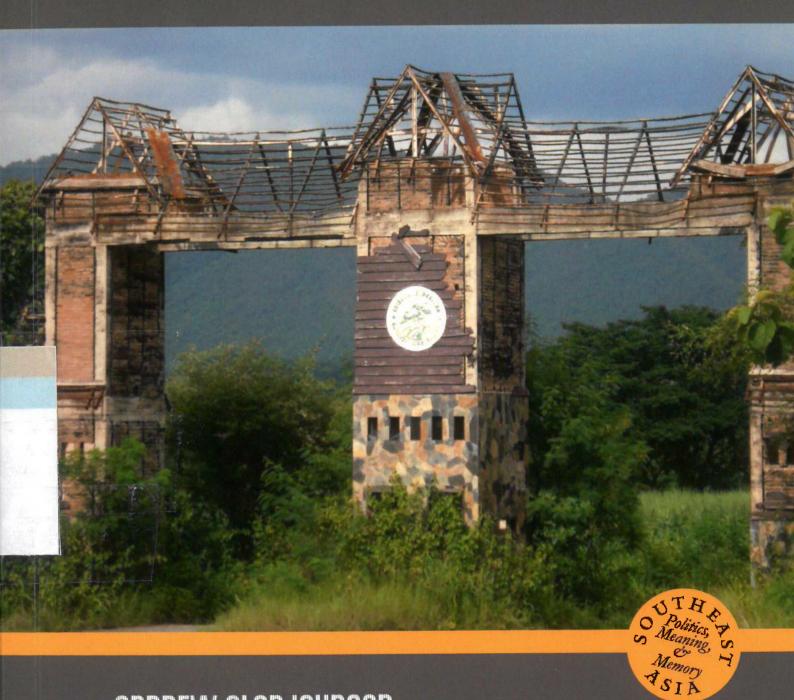# GHOSTS

SPIRITS, URBANITY, AND THE RUINS OF PROGRESS IN CHIANG MAI

OF THE NEW CITY

ANDREW ALAN JOHNSON

Southeast Asia

POLITICS, MEANING, AND MEMORY

David Chandler and Rita Smith Kipp

SERIES EDITORS

Ghosts of the New City

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For Daena

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NOTE ON TRANSCRIPTION

This book follows the Royal Thai General System of transcription for all Thai terms, except in the case of proper names of individuals, where I have followed their own preferred Romanization (e.g., Shalardchai, Sarasawadee).

Introduction
The Broken Building

Upon travelling to the northern city of Chiang Mai, Reginald Le May, a British adviser to Siam in the early twentieth century, observed of its residents: "In spite of the vast number of temples built, the innumerable images of the Lord Buddha fashioned and venerated, the endless pilgrimages to the more famous shrines, the countless store of money spent on gold leaf and incense, and the armies of priests that have been ordained during all these past centuries, the [Chiang Mai] Lao people remain at heart what they have been from time immemorial . . . animists" (1986, 125). Le May was referring to the persistence of spirit veneration alongside the very public display of Buddhist piety, and how references to ghosts or spirits (*phi*) crept into unexpected corners of everyday life.

This book is about the idea of the city as a space similarly "haunted" by magico-religious notions of charismatic power—power that retains its significance even in the face of Thailand's transformation into a nation-state and current entrance into the neoliberal economic moment. This charisma (*barami*) comes to frame how residents of Chiang Mai perceive "culture" (*watthanatham*) and "progress" (*khwam charoen*).[1] In this ethnography, I show how urban planners and spirit mediums cast themselves as professionals uniquely suited to resurrect the *barami* of the ancient kingdom of Lanna, the polity that once ruled what is now Northern Thailand. Yet in the wake of a series of economic and political crises, as the possibility of a Lanna renaissance grows more and more dubious (and, at the same time, is perceived to be more and more necessary), stories of ghosts inhabiting the shells of new high-rise construction have

increased, attesting to the doubt implicit in planners' and mediums' calls for a restoration of charismatic potential.

This book is also an anthropologist's response to Tony Day's (2002) call for historical studies that take culture into account and draw connections between premodern ways of interpreting new forms of power and modern ones (see also Kapferer 1988). Day and Kapferer see new regimes of truth as entering into a relationship with other ways of looking at knowledge. In this way, discourses such as development, nationalism, neoliberalism, or a reified "culture" merge with ideas such as *thamma* (dharma), *charoen,* and *barami.*

Both Day and Kapferer are primarily concerned with the state. Yet these states, in their origins and at their cores, are cities. The mandalic state, *mueang* in Thai,[2] radiated out from an urban center, a place whose layout, design, and beauty mobilized and enabled the power and charisma of the ruler to realize prosperity for his (or her) domain. The city is the foundation upon which fantasies of the Buddhist heavens were built; they were sites of national development and control; and they are at present places where consumption and prosperity are most manifest. In short, the city in Northern Thailand is still a "stage"—to play upon Clifford Geertz's metaphor of the "theatre state" (1980). It is a site where rituals of cosmological power are performed, even if that power is defined in such diverse ways as "cultural heritage" (*watthanatham*) or sacrality (*sak*) or simply as the monumentality of glossy new shopping malls. These new cities, like the Northern Thai urban "sacred center" (Swearer 1987), are places where demonstrations of progress and prosperity are enacted, performances intended to ensure that, owing to the potential of the past, the future will be equally prosperous.

CITIES

Looking at the city as an idea is not in itself a new concept. At the beginning of the twentieth century, in the face of rising urbanization and the prospect of the new century, many European writers explored the possibilities of the urban as such. What would the city's effect upon its inhabitants be? How best could the city be designed in order to realize its potential?

In early twentieth-century Europe, the division between rural and urban has been characterized as one of collectivity versus atomization, emotion versus intellect, and sentimentality versus rationality. Georg Simmel emphasizes the effects the city has had upon the individual: the sheer amount of stimuli it generates requires a new psychosocial mechanism, he writes, one that creates new possibilities along with new problems. Ultimately, the city is alienating: "one never feels as lonely and deserted as in this metropolitan

crush of persons" (Simmel 1950, 334), culminating in an urban character of "reserve with its overtones of concealed aversion" (ibid., 332). The individual in defense of his individuality intellectualizes and rationalizes interactions to the detriment of emotional relationships, yielding to a worldview where all things are objectively evaluated.[3]

Raymond Williams (1975) argues that in English literature the country has been consistently represented as the site of intimately connected community in opposition to the city. As with Simmel's hyperrational but unfeeling urbanity, the city becomes the realm of the mind, the country the realm of the heart. The urbanite becomes more intellectual but less feeling, less deeply committed to others. In Simmel's "blasé outlook," the urban experience is one fraught with anxiety, disgust, and alienation. Here is the quintessential Freudian subject—on the surface rational and in control, but troubled within by deeper affective forces. The Freudian uncanny is something that haunts notions of urban rationality (Vidler 1994).

However, it would be a mistake to jump from this idea of the urban, formed in early twentieth-century Paris, Vienna, Berlin, or Chicago, to present-day Asia. But might we see at least shades of Simmel's blasé affect in Chiang Mai? Certainly the "floating world" (*ukiyo-e*) of Edo-era Japan seems similar to Baudelaire's Paris as an environment of sensuality-seeking, detached observers. In doing so, we cannot assume that simply because two places are urban, "the urban" carries the same meaning in both.

Studies of urban centers in Southeast Asian history emphasize their intimate connection with religious concepts of prosperity and order. Chief among the characterizations of Southeast Asian urbanity has been the notion of the "mandala," a polity revolving around the charisma and prestige of a particular ruler (Tambiah 1976; Geertz 1980; Wolters 1999). The power of a mandala would depend on the ability of the urban center to attract vassal lords and residents more than on its ability to police or administer a large region. But how is the legacy of such urban models reflected in modern-day Thai cities? In short, to reverse Day's proposition of seeing culture in history, how can we take seriously the issue of history in culture? How does the idea of the mandala become reinterpreted through and reconciled with contemporary narratives of culture, nation, and mass media?

Recent scholars have looked at the vast changes undergone by cities such as Bangkok and Jakarta, the sociological impacts of urbanization (Rimmer and Dick 2009), the web of international commerce stretching across regional and national borders (Bunnell 2013), and the various "texts" to be read in order to foster or challenge nationalism (King 2010). In his excellent book *Saigon's Edge*, Erik Harms (2010) addresses Raymond Williams' binary between city

and country on the outskirts of Vietnam, where people skillfully and selectively deploy urban and rural categories in order to negotiate their own position vis-à-vis a rapidly expanding Saigon.

But in these new studies of nation-states and communities, of traffic circulation and the flows of international finance, where is the legacy of the great Southeast Asian mandala states of the premodern period? What makes urbanity in Southeast Asia distinct from how it has been conceived in the West? How might the legacy of the city as a vehicle for articulating religious notions of power come to articulate "secular" notions of power and progress? Answering these questions involves an engagement with the intense forms of presence that cannot fit into—or be accounted for within—mainstream narratives of urbanization. In short, a new study of urbanity involves engaging with ghosts.

CRACKS

"This city doesn't have a future," Bon told me. He was a man in his late forties, whose family had run the largest Hainanese-style coffee shop in town, and with whom I regularly discussed urban change in the city. Traffic noise from nearby Chang Phueak road routinely drowned out our conversation, and we had to choose the few quiet moments in between in which to talk. We had been discussing the weather—blazingly hot for December—and how it had wreaked havoc on the Thai government's new floral festival near Doi Kham, killing whole fields of flowers and frustrating Thai tourists and planners alike. Now, in the pause of traffic noise, Bon had switched the topic to the future of the city as a whole.

He had good reason to know. His family's coffee shop had been running just to the north of the city walls for three generations. They used long, Hainanese-style coffee filters and condensed milk, what is labeled in nationalist terms all across Southeast Asia as the particular drink of some specific country—for example, "Vietnamese coffee," "Thai-style coffee," "Malay kopi," and the like. Over time, Bon's shop had continually watched its business shrink, especially as younger people developed a taste for the increasingly available "good-smelling coffee" (kafae hom) produced by espresso machines. New stores had proliferated in recent years, marketing espresso as particularly "Northern Thai" in such outlets as the hill-tribe-themed Waawee Coffee or Doi Chaang Coffee, or the royal project–based Doi Tung. What had originally been Chinese coffee and had become Thai coffee was being replaced by Italian coffee marketed as Lanna coffee.

Bon showed me pictures of his business when it was in its prime: two shops, side-by-side, with long benches and stools were packed with customers,

generally older men. "Chinese men," Bon clarified, "early in the morning. Too early for you! They talk about politics, their lives, these kinds of things. But this was when I was younger." Now, according to Bon, he makes ends meet by serving iced coffee in plastic bags to people commuting to work in the morning and by renting out the neighboring shop. Bon doubted that his computer enthusiast son would carry on with the shop. "Perhaps he will become an engineer," he mused.

Shortly after his dire pronouncement on the future of the city, Bon grabbed his car keys. "Today we're going to Lamphun [a city about twenty minutes to Chiang Mai's south] for *khao soi* [Northern-style egg noodles in curry]." Bon had been eager to show me Wat Haripunchai, one of the oldest Buddhist temples in the North and located at the center of the first Buddhist city in the North. However, instead of going straight to Lamphun, Bon pulled his pickup truck off the busy Canal Road at the western edge of Chiang Mai and pointed to a tall apartment building on the edge of the road. It was made of concrete, and, as on many of the other buildings along the road, car exhaust and rain had drawn sooty black streaks down its formerly whitewashed sides. What drew Bon's attention, though, was a jagged crack running from the building's base up to its top. "Do you see that?" he asked me. "The concrete there is no good. One day, it's going to snap in two." He paused, keeping his eyes on the building. "Also, it's haunted," he added. Continuing, Bon said:

A girl was crossing the road late one night. Then, she was struck by a car and killed. If you go to sleep in one room in that building at the same hour that she died, the bed will shake. It's the ghost of that girl [that is causing this]. You have to be careful when staying in tall buildings in Chiang Mai. Many of them have ghosts. I was staying in one, years ago, for just one night when I visited my sister studying at the college [Chiang Mai University]. I woke up three or four times in the middle of the night to hear the sound of arguing just outside my door. Like there were people right outside the door. The third time, I got up from the bed and opened the door. I opened it very quickly. I didn't want the people to run away, so that I could yell [at them]. Tell them to be quiet. There was no one in the hall. It was absolutely silent.

My sister later told me that a teacher used to live in that room. He[4] was heartbroken [about something]. Late one night, at three a.m., he took a gun and put it in his mouth [and killed himself]. It was exactly at three a.m. when I heard those voices for the third time. When I knew that story, I never went back [to that building].

Bon continued to tell me other stories of haunting incidents in Chiang Mai, including some that he had experienced personally and others that he had

only heard of. Each one occurred in the same kind of space: tall, one-room hotels and apartment buildings.

In Bon's stories, buildings, death, and haunting are all somehow connected—the ruin of a young life, the ruin of a broken building, and the ruinously bad traffic. He also links each with the future of the city—specifically, with the impossibility of "progress" and forward motion within its confines. Spirits, unable to be reborn, cars stalled in traffic, and abandoned buildings crumbling in the heat are all linked to the inability of the city to progress. It is this connection between ghosts, progress, and the city that I shall follow throughout this book.

I situated this study in Chiang Mai rather than Bangkok because the Northern Thai capital has often been described by Thai authors as a place that preserves some kind of cultural essence (Seri 1966; Sit 1980; Charuphat and Thirapap 2007), either an essence of "Thainess" preserved from corrosive "Western" influences in Bangkok or a similarly pristine "Lanna." In these utopian readings, Northern Thailand is a place where material development (*kan phatthana*) exists alongside spiritual progress (*khwam charoen*). It is this harmonious progressiveness that is being challenged by the spirits inhabiting Chiang Mai's high-rise architecture. The ghosts haunting the abandoned buildings can be seen through Jacques Derrida's sense of "hauntology" (Derrida 1994, 161), by which he means seeing both the instability of what we assume to be taken for granted and the impossibility of ever having such certainty (and the subsequent haunting of that which we thought we knew). In this case, the haunting of Chiang Mai's abandoned architecture points to a failure in the system of charisma and power, a haunting of which the broken buildings are a sign. In Bon's characterization, there was even something flawed in the concrete used to build them. The foundations are bad. The buildings are cracking. Ghosts come in.

1

Progress and Its Ruins

In the 2010 film *Laddaland* (Golden Land), one of the highest-grossing Thai horror films, a father, Thi, moves his family from Bangkok to a suburban gated community in the city of Chiang Mai, where he has accepted a new, high-ranking job. Their first drive through the community is a montage of Americana-inspired clichés: broad streets, freshly mown lawns, two-story homes, and even a pair of children playing with a golden retriever in the spray of a sprinkler. Nonetheless, Thi's family is reluctant to leave Bangkok, knowing they will miss their extended family and suspicious of the new life in the north.

The family's reluctance soon proves to have been well-founded: Laddaland is revealed as having a dark underbelly beneath the manicured lawns and well-kept streets. The neighbor's wife shows signs of being abused, and Thi's new boss turns out to be "lending" himself money from the company's coffers. But the event that begins the community's slide into ruin is the murder of a Burmese maid by a white male foreigner (*farang*) living in a nearby house.[1] As the maid's ghost returns to haunt the streets, this clean and modern veneer begins to peel off. "Selling Urgently" signs appear on the neighbors' houses, the streets become overgrown by grass and littered with palm fronds, and the gate guard disappears, leaving the gates wide open. Other aspects of Thi's life also crumble: his boss, having embezzled much of the company's fortunes, flees, leaving his business behind to collapse; he suspects his wife of infidelity; and his daughter begins coming home late or not at all. In the end of the film, as ghosts multiply throughout the community, Thi, no longer able to distinguish between his family and malevolent ghosts, accidentally shoots his own son.

Laddaland, with its themes of chaos, poverty, and violence lying under-lying a seemingly modern, clean, and rational suburban life, resonated with many of the horror stories told to me during my field research. In the film as well as in these stories, things that appear to be modern and signs of a pros-perous life are in fact tainted by foreign presences—indeed, the communities themselves come to epitomize an unhomely way of life. As they did in Bon's story of the cracked building, financial crisis, moral crisis, and supernatu-ral crisis intertwine. In short, *Laddaland* and the tales of haunted communi-ties show the idea of (and desire for) progress made uncanny. In other words, entering an orderly, prosperous, and exclusive community does not protect one from ruin. Despite the gates and security guards, ghosts and criminals are able to infiltrate it, and the dream of living in such a place has in itself become something foreign.

For many, the film neatly captured a sense of crisis at large in Chiang Mai, especially since the Asian economic crisis of 1997. Many of my interlocutors saw high-rise buildings and suburban gated communities—both of which I will henceforth term "communities of exclusion"—as symbols of Chiang Mai's progress and development; but the images of ghosts and foreigners that appear repeatedly in these sites in everyday popular stories are manifestations of this anxiety over something fundamental felt to be lacking in this "prog-ress." Here, the ideas of the urbane dwelling within the city, that quality of urban life which civilizes and renders things prosperous, is seen to have failed, opening the gateway to admit forces thought to have been overcome.

Indeed, the present moment becomes a ruinous one. As tropes of cul-ture (*watthanatham*) promise to mobilize the charismatic power of the past for future benefit, they do so in a present full of doubt. In this chapter, I analyze stories of ghosts and hauntings as expressing anxiety about the possibility of knowing for sure whether one has actually attained progress, a quality that, in the Thai sense of *khwam charoen,* points to the inner essence of a place and of a person. In this way, I complicate Avery Gordon's (2008) idea of haunt-ing as an unexpected reminder of "historical alternatives" or past injustice in present-day social relations by bringing such "haunting" into dialogue with Buddhist conceptions of progress and development as well as a deep engage-ment with haunting as a Thai concept.

In each of the stories that follows, those living in these communities of exclusion express their desire for a particular form of existence—one that is progressive (*charoen*), orderly, and prosperous. But also in each story, the com-munity is not what it had seemed to be. Instead, it is invaded by forces that this discourse of *charoen* purports to have overcome—namely, "undeveloped" ethnic others or "superstitious" ghosts.

THE UNCANNY, *CHAROEN,* AND ESSENCES

As I argue that Thai residents interpreted abandoned buildings as being haunted by supernatural forces, I do not mean to suppose a direct binary between "Thai" and "Western" thought, or of Thai thought "old" and "new." Such a construction would present a Victorian-era anthropological characterization of culture as consisting of exotic "survivals" from a prior time, or at best create an image of a "Northern Thailand" that, as Pemberton cautions for Java, would "be so recognizably different that it would have to be acknowledged as a self-contained totality: another time, another epistemological space, another culture" (1994, 17). Indeed, as Day suggests, just as the past was not a totality, neither is "modernity." Rather, as the literature on the re-enchantment of modernity suggests (Dube 2010), neoliberal ideas of space as standing reserve become loaded with other meanings, ones that fall outside of the realm of the "rational" and thence become categorized as "superstitious." In other words, the supposition of the "modern" as such has the side effect of categorizing all of that which becomes considered not a part of it as something else—something "superstitious," "traditional," or "Northern Thai." Such reifications do not do justice to the nuances of modern Chiang Mai or to anthropological data in general.

Magic within this category of the modern can be teased out through examining Thai terms about prosperity, specifically *khwam charoen.* When I described the abandoned buildings dotting the Chiang Mai skyline to Choke, an architect friend of mine, he smiled and shook his head, repeating a common saying: *"phatthana, tae yang mai charoen"* (developed, but not yet progressed). In other words, while the bricks and mortar appear "developed" (*phatthana laeo*), something insubstantial is lacking, something that causes all that wasted capital and space.

The Thai word *charoen* derives from the Khmer (Cambodian) word *chamraon,* meaning "to advance, progress" (Headley et al. 1977, 196–197), or "to expand until complete in a positive sense" (Thongchai 2000a, 531), a forward motion that allows a thing to reach its fullest potential. The use of the term *charoen* links ideas about tangible progress (e.g., development) to an essence of progressiveness, the quality that is promised by sources of charismatic power (*barami*). There is, in this idiom, an animating force behind the city: that charismatic property—articulated by the word *watthanatham* for some and embodied by the guardian spirits of the city for others—that allows for *charoen* and the drawing-in of prestige, new immigrants, power, and wealth. Lucien Hanks, in his classic study "Merit and Power in the Thai Social Order" (1962), terms this power "merit" (*bun*), although I prefer to

focus on the more specific *barami*. *Barami* contrasts with *atthan*—cursedness, misfortune, the result of bad ghosts and spirits. Each is selectively deployed in the new supernatural imaginary of Chiang Mai, as plagues of bad ghosts rise at the same time as upsurges in charismatic spirit mediumship.

When I began to ask about concepts of space in the city, the subject of the supernatural repeatedly arose, ranging from the influence of the city's guardian spirits to the supernatural power (*sak*) of sacred space and from there to sacred space's inverse: places like the cracked and haunted building to which Bon pointed, places of misfortune and malevolent ghosts (*phi*). Thai academics (cf. Mala 2008) often frame such beliefs in benevolent or malevolent spirits as "cultural" remnants of a prior worldview attributed to Chiang Mai's "Lanna" past in ways that mirror the construction of "Java" (Pemberton 1994); although in the case of Northern Thailand, academic writing on "Lanna" is juxtaposed not only with "the West" but also with Bangkok. In Thai academic writing, Northern beliefs are often mined for gems of "local wisdom" (*phumpanya*) deemed to have practical value (see Johnson 2011; also cf. Charupat 2007) or, when this attempt fails, dismissed as "not deeply meaningful" (Sit 1980, 22). Authors such as Sit, Mala, or Charupat present this quantity of "Lanna wisdom" or "culture" as being under threat by a homogenizing force stemming from the West, an anxiety that is also reflected in other representations of Thai nationalism (Amporn 2003). In this way, Lanna beliefs are framed as a homogeneous, unchanging set, charming and occasionally wise, but in decline under the onslaught of rationalization (Kraisri 1967). This stands in stark contrast with other anthropological work in Thailand (Irvine 1984; Mills 1999; Pattana 2003) that documents the increase in fears and hopes projected upon the supernatural in the present.

THE EDUCATED CLASS

In Freud's notion of the uncanny, it is precisely those who believe themselves to know better—"supposedly educated people" he writes (2003, 242)—who are susceptible. Feeling haunted reminds the educated that he or she has not yet overcome superstitious beliefs. One's unconscious fears betray a secret savagery within.

It is perhaps for this reason that Chiang Mai's "educated people" figure prominently in this story of the uncanny haunting of progress. Many of my interlocutors took pains to draw a distinction between "those who are educated" and those who are not. In many discussions with me, middle-class shop owners pointed to their formal schooling in drawing a clear distinction in Chiang Mai's society in the same way that my less well-off interlocutors self-deprecatingly pointed to their lack of it.

Benedict Anderson describes such a split in his influential essay "Withdrawal Symptoms" (1977). He characterizes a divide between traditional middle-class sources of prestige (e.g., the military or the civil service) and the new middle class, schooled at Thailand's then new universities. While Anderson frames the conflict in 1970s Thailand as one between recently educated middle-class students and their older, less iconoclastically oriented parents, in the case of mid-2000s Chiang Mai, his distinctions between "old/Right" and "new/Left" forms of middle-class prestige no longer carry the same ideological weight. This marks a profound shift from the political landscape of the late twentieth century, when liberal students formed an influential and active political unit, and Left/progressive/democratic versus Right/capitalist/military/traditional units made coherent sense (Klima 2002; Saitip 1995). As faculty have grown more conservative and students become less likely to join in mass movements—as the lack of student leadership in recent political protest movements in comparison with the 1970s attests—the previously ideological split between generations has instead become something akin to a class divide between the middle and lower classes, and traditional poles of Left and Right have lost their explanatory power. The new, 2000s-era ideological divide separates the largely rural and largely lower- and middle-class "Red Shirt" supporters of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra from largely Bangkok-based, middle- and upper-class "Yellow Shirts." But these groups blur former ideological boundaries: Red Shirts incorporate former Communists and former killers of Communists, while the Yellow Shirts include army generals and former student leaders.

Yet the distinction between "educated" and not educated that Anderson draws remains, especially when the issue of culture, spirit beliefs, and urban anxiety is concerned. Those residents of Chiang Mai who style themselves the "educated class," a term by which I attempt to evoke such Thai categories as "people with education" (*khon mi kan sueksa*) or "people who have learning" (*khon mi khwam rian ru*), point to a sharp division between the rationality of national narratives of culture and Buddhism on one hand, and local spirit beliefs and Buddhist magic on the other (Pattana 2005, 174). I argue that such a rejection of the localized spirits of place in favor of a reified "culture" does not necessarily disenchant, but rather, that this culture becomes the new source of enchantment, operating with a similar logic to that of sacred magical power (*sak*). Each serves to address the problem of anxiety and misfortune in the same way that mediumship does, by mobilizing an edited, reconfigured authority rooted in past ideas of the city for future benefit.

Such a "re-enchantment of modernity" has been observed elsewhere in the world, and I analyze the Thai case in light of this. Saurabh Dube argues that modernity in itself requires other forms of magical thinking—for instance,

the abstractions and mythical thought involved in imagining such things as capital and nations (2010, 729). Such "new" forms of magic often blend with and complement ways of thinking that are normally termed "magical" or "religious." As Phillip Taylor suggests for Vietnam, folk religions are often the first points at which the enchantments of modernity become expressed in the trappings of "traditional" culture—in Taylor's case, a Vietnamese goddess experiences a dramatic surge in popularity as the Vietnamese economy liberalizes (2004, 5).

In Thailand, the positive and negative associations between wealth and magic are present: the hopes and the fears inherent in economic change are manifest in supernatural form. Pattana Kitiarsa (2005) describes how the booming business of spirit mediumship serves to address the anxieties of Thailand's modern-day lower class, and Mary Beth Mills (1995) similarly shows how the figure of the young woman as the malevolent "widow ghost" represents for poor northeastern farmers an uncanny return of modernity (*khwam thansamai*) when a wave of panic over "widow ghost" deaths swept the region. For Mills, the widow ghosts are the uncanny return of the failures of the market to deliver on promises of nationwide prosperity.

Previous studies of modernity's enchantments concern images and the fickle spectrality of the economy, an invisibility that renders economic concerns ghostly, much like the specters that emerge from them. Yet Chiang Mai's haunted buildings are concrete, in both the physical and figurative sense. Unlike in the previous studies, these ghosts are anchored in space. Indeed, fears of chaos in Chiang Mai often revolved around fears of space and concern over what dwelled in urban spaces. In the case of Chiang Mai, I argue that the "ghosts of bad death" (*phi tai hong*) inhabiting abandoned construction represent for those who fear them the unknowability of a place's inner essence and the (potential for) progress's fragility. Such anxieties and fears appeared as the precise inverse of the models of urbanity detailed elsewhere in this book.

Max Weber (2003) famously predicted that modernity would disenchant, a prediction that is contradicted by much recent anthropological work on the uncanny reemergence of the magical and ghostly. Mladen Dolar argues that this should be no surprise: modernity and the uncanny in fact became connected when the decline of the formal religious sphere as the sole location of the unearthly led to the release of the uncanny into the realm of the everyday (Dolar 1991, 7). In citing the uncanny, Dolar draws, as I do, upon the Freudian idea of *unheimlich,* the species of horror that emerges when that which had previously been thought to be surpassed (not merely repressed) reemerges (Freud 2003). As such, the uncanny is therefore especially relevant when looking at concepts of progress.

In Diane Nelson's view, fears of occult forces have to do with the breakdown of national (middle-class) conceptions of the home. For her, when indigenous groups began to assert their differences from the body politic, for many the end result was a horrific doubling of the national "family," that is, "modes of ladino identification—being that which everyone else aspired to because of its attachments to whiteness, the modern, and the future—are suddenly under question and rendered uncanny" (Nelson 1999, 26). Such a breakdown of familial ideas—in the Thai case, the obligations between of the living and the dead—is what distinguishes my work from that of others working in Thailand and Laos (cf. Klima 2002, 2006; Langford 2009). In these studies, the living have active relationships of exchange and obligation with the returned dead. In my work, such familiar ties no longer exist: as notions of progress break down, the ghosts that emerge are as alienated from the living as the living are from them.

Tracing the internal logic of haunting in Chiang Mai, the kinds of ghosts that emerge and how they emerge provide clues to the nature of Chiang Mai's crisis: ghosts emerge owing to the failure of *older* magic, *charoen. Charoen,* "progress," encloses prosperity, enlightenment, wisdom, and wealth all in one term. It is a word that points to the inner progressive state of a thing rather than its outward appearance.

Imagine a ladder. Every being in the cosmos is somewhere on that ladder and in motion. Some are climbing slowly, some quickly, others are staying still, and still others are slowly descending. Beings on higher rungs sometimes aid those on lower rungs to climb higher, just as beings on low rungs occasionally pull others down. At each new rung, there is a new level of prosperity, but also of understanding.

This act of climbing is the act of *charoen.* The beings nearby one on the ladder are fellow humans. Wealthy and kind patrons or wise teachers might be a few rungs up, while wise kings might be just beyond them. Men who ordain as monks may not start on a high rung but are actively climbing quickly, while wealthy but selfish individuals are descending from a higher place.

But humans are not the only beings on the ladder. At rungs farther up are benevolent spirits, including the *chao mueang* (described later). Beyond them might be the Hindu deities: Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva (among others), lending support to their followers in their climb. By mirroring the technique of higher climbers, those below seek to improve their speed. That which seeks to become enlightened or wise first imagines the desired state of being. Below, the misfortunate, poor, or ill also struggle. Farther below them on the ladder lie ghosts and demons, still in motion but with great distances to climb. Worse, owing to their ignorance and wickedness, they pull others down with them or hold them back.

During the twentieth century, this religiously informed notion of *charoen* became associated with idioms of national development, the figure of the Thai monarchy, and reform Buddhism to assure Thais of the inevitable, supernaturally powered, and moral nature of increasing wealth and prosperity (see Jackson 2010, especially in regard to the monarchy, and Morris 2000 for modernity). In this line of thought, the twentieth-century project of national development thus occurred under the auspices of supernatural forces that secured the motion of *charoen* and the forward march of progress. Such a sense of spiritual, moral, and rational progress ensured that there would be no uncanny visitors from lower down the ladder, in other words that ghosts would not emerge—an assurance not built into other idioms of progress (e.g., *thansamai, kan phatthana*). It is now, however, as crisis after crisis challenges these assumptions about progress, that uncanny specters gain ever greater power.

This concern with the inner essences of things might at first seem to run counter to some earlier ethnography on Thailand. Penny Van Esterik (2000) and Peter Jackson (2004), for example, characterize Thai society as concerned with surfaces over essences, a reversal of Western privileging of essences over surfaces. For Jackson, in Thailand, "[i]t is the surface image that has the power to mould the inner being" (Jackson 2004, 211). But these studies focus on the point of friction between the public sphere and the private sphere, where state power acts swiftly to correct any disruptions in the public order and remains unconcerned with private practices. In contrast, Chiang Mai's disruptions occur in intimate spaces: homes, hotel rooms, and so on. Haunting, in this sense, is not the private invading the public, but the destabilization of the homely. It is a reflux on the ladder of *charoen* and a destabilization of the assumed-to-be-inevitable motion of progress.

Following Jackson's idea of the "regime of images," the *charoen* home is one that is assumed to inform, direct, and reflect the *charoen* status of its inhabitant. But, as I argue, moving into these new spaces was, for many of my interlocutors, traumatic. The strangeness of these spaces is productive of doubt—my interlocutors doubted their (or the homes') inner quality of *charoen,* and by extension their own. In other words, it was the failure of Jackson's regime of images. While every effort to ensure that the home's image would remain *charoen,* as cracks began to appear (sometimes literally, as Bon showed me) in infrastructure, society, and economy, those thought-to-be overcome elements reemerged in the form of ghosts and migrants. These stories, then, are the discursive cracks in Thai middle-class desires for *charoen.* As in the film *Laddaland,* ghosts become the uncanny reminders that the regime of images does not always act as it should, that poverty and death can and do exist beneath manicured lawns and behind white concrete.

CRISIS

Thailand's recent political history has been dominated by the figure of Thaksin Shinawatra (prime minister 2001–2006). The Chiang Mai–born police official turned businessman turned prime minister embraced a technocratic idea of the Thai future, one that rejected the status-obsessed monarchical and military-oriented Central Thai elite in favor of neoliberal rationality. His slogan "Think New" (*Khit mai*) and his numerous North-based construction projects promised a fundamental change in Chiang Mai's fortunes and the potential for Thailand's second-largest city to emerge from Bangkok's shadow. Academics and activists (Thai and foreign alike) were often critical of Thaksin's plans, but for many others he embodied a real, physical connection with an intangible well of modernity; like other Southeast Asian "men of prowess," he channeled outside forces and turned them into tangible profit for his supporters (Sidel 2004). Thaksin's policies also funneled wealth into the provinces, and his business partners in Chiang Mai were awash in contracts. After his ouster in 2006, his supporters blamed even unrelated problems on his absence. For example, when Chiang Mai experienced a citywide Internet slowdown, one older supporter[2] confidently told me that such a thing would never have happened under Thaksin; according to this man, Thaksin had had a plan to give every Northern Thai his/her own personal Internet link—"by stars, by satellite."

These promises were especially appealing to a Chiang Mai still reeling from the 1997 economic crisis. During that year, the Thai baht lost nearly half of its value and Thailand became technically bankrupt. Especially hard-hit were real-estate speculators who, as much of their wealth was based on debt, found themselves defaulting on their loans and losing their property. Chiang Mai became a clear demonstration of the Thai real-estate market's overreach—the crisis left behind a ring of abandoned structures around the city and empty high-rises dotting the skyline—there was even a stock exchange, complete with banks of monitors and a trading floor, that fell into ruin, never used.

Chiang Mai's recovery largely coincided with Thaksin's rise to power, and, for many in the city, he represented a new face to the Thai government, someone they saw as clued in to the actions of the international market instead of inwardly patronage-oriented, and therefore capable of preventing a recurrence of 1997. In the eyes of his supporters, the face of the Thai political scene had changed from one favoring the well-connected to one that favored the common man. To his detractors, in contrast, Thaksin represented amoral, avaricious power—progress without *charoen*, rule without morality, power without merit.

Responding to the latter view, the Thai military ousted Thaksin in a royally backed coup d'état in September 2006 and replaced him with military-appointed rulers. As a result, many among his supporters feared that the Asian financial crisis of 1997 would occur all over again, while among his detractors, many assumed that Chiang Mai's development under Thaksin had been carried out purely for profit, without regard to quality. For both groups, the remains of post-1997 construction after ten years of being exposed to the tropical elements and the shells of new construction halted during the uncertainty of 2006 looked identical—only the darker gray hue of the old concrete and the vines growing over the structures indicated which one had no future and which one's future was merely unlikely (figures 1–4).

These fears were somewhat warranted. The Thai economy did suffer (although not to the extent it did in 1997), and the coup's destabilizing influence echoed throughout Thai politics for years. My study came at the moment before the anti-coup sentiment coalesced into political action. In 2006 and 2007, during my field research, anxiety about the country's future was more diffuse than it would become in 2008–2010, when protest and political violence rocked Bangkok's streets. Elsewhere, other authors (Keyes 2006; Wassana 2010) have explored the magico-religious interpretations of such political and social anxiety.

FIGURE 1 | Abandoned building, Hai Ya district

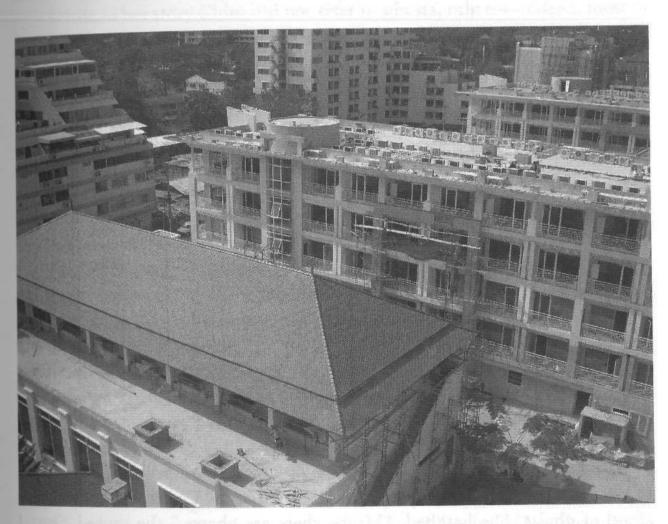FIGURE 2 | Abandoned gated community

FIGURE 3 | New construction

FIGURE 4 | Cars in the abandoned Boi Luang Hotel

HAUNTINGS

"It's Not the Real World"

Chim owned a jewelry shop on fashionable Nimmanhaenmin Road and lived for a time in the same high-rise as I did. Her store specialized in Lanna designs and she styled herself as a "Lanna woman."[3] Chim purchased a house in a gated community in the suburb of San Sai, a district immediately to the northeast of the city center. When I interviewed her in her store during a slow period of the afternoon, she told me how at first she had been excited by the prospect of living in an exclusive community. "They talk about the places like there will be a nice community [of neighbors]. [As if] there's only doctors [in the community]. But I never saw my neighbors. Many of the houses were empty." She paused, trying to summarize what she meant: "It's not the real world [man b'maen lok ching]. I got so scared that I moved out, back to the city."[4] When I asked her why she was so frightened, she described to me how she was terrified to live in the house—she would wake up many times during the night, listening for strange noises from downstairs. Already alert to the link between empty spaces and ghosts, I asked Chim whether she was afraid of ghosts. She laughed. "Maybe there are ghosts," she mused, "but I fear criminals [chon] more. My neighbors wouldn't say anything if there were

criminals [coming into my house], they wouldn't be interested [in looking outside], they would just stay inside."

Chim, already styling herself along neotraditionalist lines,[5] took up the fantasy of the gated community in which "there's only doctors." This was a common slogan for the new communities—as one advertisement read, "Come and live with people of your status [*radap khun*]." Chim's desire is to be part of this exclusive club of interesting people, a desire that was never realized. Instead, as in *Laddaland,* the moment Chim achieved her desired state of *charoen,* she became disturbed by it. In her new, *charoen* village, the neighbors were either not present or were entirely uncaring. Crime in these communities is in fact no greater than crime elsewhere in Chiang Mai, but Chim feared it to the point where, in a reversal of the American phenomenon of "white flight" (cf. Low 2003), she fled the gated community for the city center. What I am seeking to understand here is how the mismatch between Chim's desire for this progressive, intellectual community and the reality of the empty streets is productive of fear. I argue that Chim's questioning of the security of the gated community is an effect of this fantasy—and her very desire for it—being made uncanny.

While in her story Chim did not refer to ghosts, others—indeed, most of my interviewees—did. Som, another gated-community resident in her early thirties, told me about how she remained in the community only because her husband liked it. On the very day he left for his overseas work trips, she would rent a room in the city rather than stay in an empty house, surrounded by other empty houses. "Ghosts," she said to me in a low voice as we sat on the porch of her suburban house, "there are so many [here]!"

"Another Kind of Noise"

Chiang Mai has a lively and varied assembly of ghosts, much recent discussion of which in Southeast Asia points toward the dead as partners in connections of exchange or kinship (cf. Klima 2002; Langford 2009). But the dead in Klima's and Langford's ethnographies are identifiable; they are family, either actual relatives or the fictive kin of political comrades. Chiang Mai's high-rise ghosts, in contrast, are strangers. In almost no case was a ghost identified with a name or a family, and the one ghost who was in fact identified appeared to his former friends as a strange, inhuman thing to which nothing was owed. In short, these ghosts are something different, removed from the bonds of familial obligation.

The ghosts were all referred to as *phi tai hong,*[6] "ghosts of bad death," and most of them were associated with murders, suicides, or (most commonly)

traffic accidents. *Phi tai hong* are intimately bound to ideas of motion and stasis, and many sites for their propitiation lie alongside highways. Stopping at or otherwise acknowledging the site (except for perhaps a quick beep of the horn) was considered dangerous, however, and would open one up to an unwelcome visitation. As we passed one such site along the road, Noi, the daughter of a spirit medium from San Sai, warned me of what would occur should we stop there (as I wanted to do): "You would fall ill. You would have bad luck. You would not *charoen*."

This ghost at the roadside had been the victim of a traffic accident. It was both the cause and the result of bad luck. Should I be haunted by the ghost and therefore die violently, I too would be unable to move beyond the trauma of my death to be reborn and instead become a ghost. In short, ghosts of violent death, caught in and unable to progress beyond their traumatized state to be reborn, threaten to cause others to remain in stasis as well. They prevent the movement of individuals up the ladder of progress and spread this same hindrance to others in the manner of an epidemic—hence their uniquely antagonistic relationship to *charoen*. The (perceived) violence, disorder, and urban chaos in the city, reflected and amplified by newspaper reports that splash ghost stories and bloody deaths across the front pages (cf. *Chiang Mai News* 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d), support the sense of impending crisis: the explosion in violence and the economic decline of the city are both causes and results of the rise in bad ghosts. In short, ghosts represent a lack of mobility: they block "correct" motion.

Many ghost stories were concentrated around Chiang Mai's most rapidly growing part of town, Nimmanhaemin Road. This was also a place most identified with wealthy visitors from Bangkok, fashionable boutiques, and expensive cafés. The area was lauded as the center of Chiang Mai's revitalization (expressed as *khwam charoen*) by many architects, artists, and writers, and had become a hotspot for new construction projects. But even though (or, rather, because) Nimmanhaemin was cited as the center of Chiang Mai's boom by much of the popular press, it was also the location for many of its ghost stories.

"One day at work, a man died," said a middle-aged laborer, referring to the construction of a high-rise building along this road. "A beam fell through his head and he died *bup!* Just like that. Now these days at night you can hear him sometimes. I went over there with the guard from up the road and we heard it. It wasn't a noise like any animal would make, or any person—it was *another* kind of noise." His friend, the night watchman, nodded understandingly and pointed out toward the busy street. "That's why this place will never *charoen!* There are too many ghosts around here!" He waved his hand at

Nimmanhaemin. His statement that the avenue would never *charoen* was a jab at the expensive restaurants, luxury condominiums, and rocketing real-estate values—in other words, this road seems to be prospering, but the prosperity is hollow.

In addition to this hollowness, the laborer's story introduces an element of foreignness into the construction site: he recognizes his coworker's ghost as a ghost by *not* recognizing his voice as that of his friend. The ghost could have called out to the laborer by name, and the laborer could have recognized his friend's voice, but he does not. He could have identified a debt to his friend's ghost and talked about how one should erect a shrine for the spirit (as do the relatives of the war dead in Langford's 2007 study), but he does not—he simply avoids the place at night. The spirit that lives in the construction site, for the worker, is a *thing* with which communication and exchange are impossible.

The Bird-Shit *Farang*

The building next to this construction site was also haunted. It was a high-rise condominium building popular among foreign expatriates. Maew, a Thai resident of this building, related to me a story popular among her friends about the ghost that haunts one of these. According to Maew, he was a *"farang khi-nok"* [bird-shit *farang*]—a rude term indicating a foreigner who is poor or stingy. While most *farang*, such as those seen on billboards or television, were thought of by Maew as sources of wealth, others were poor and simply pretending to be someone important. This particular pretender to riches plunged from the top floor to his death on the road ten stories below in what Maew assumed to be a suicide.[7] Now, he stands in front of the window out of which he jumped and urges Thais to do the same. His appearance is a curious mixture of a Hollywood and traditional Thai ghost: "You will think that he is just some *farang*," Maew continued, "but then you will see that he has no feet!"—footlessness being a common attribute of Thai ghosts.

Why did this story strike Maew and others as particularly frightening? Why is it significant that the ghost is *farang*, and why does he appear in a new building? Both the man and his building are things that seem progressive from the outside. Indeed, the person and the building are linked through the continual use of *farang* in advertisements for new housing projects. I argue that what makes this ghost story particularly frightening is that in it the veneer of progressiveness covers a cursed place. As the ghost's lack of feet suggests, what lies beneath the veneer is all too familiar—he seems to be a wealthy and urbane figure from abroad, but upon closer inspection he is in

fact ghostly in the same way as any local village ghost. Progress, cosmopolitanism, and wealth have proved to be illusions.

Too Cheap to Get a Monk

Aong worked as a night watchman at a high-rise building in one of Chiang Mai's quickly growing suburbs. A Shan,[8] he had fled from Burma[9] as a child and was raised in Mae Ai, a town on the Thai-Burmese border. In his early twenties in 2006, he had just come to to Chiang Mai. Without formal refugee status or a listing as a registered hill-tribe member,[10] Aong faced a host of difficulties involved with life in the city: he was subject to a forced bribe or deportation to a hostile Burma should the police discover him; he lived in a squatter's community on the outskirts of the city without running water; and he was working outside the bounds of any sort of labor law. Each of these factors contributed to the instability of his life in the city, and each weighed on his mind. One of these probably led to his disappearance, as after three months of working every night, seven days a week, he suddenly vanished without a word to me, his Shan friends who worked on the same street, or his employer. But, before his disappearance, when I sat alongside Aong as he worked, eating noodle soup and drinking instant coffee with him, his chief concern about the city was its ghosts.

After telling me how a girl who lived in his Shan squatter compound was possessed by a wandering spirit, a possession that manifested in shouting fits and violent spasms until an exorcist could be located, Aong pointed across a parking lot to a nearby nightclub that catered to wealthy local youth. "You heard about the shooting, right?" Aong asked me, referring to a fight that had broken out in the nightclub the week before. A police officer, the son of a sergeant, had flown into a drunken rage at a table of youths who had bumped into his table while dancing. The officer pulled out his gun and pointed it at one youth, and when the officer's friend intervened, the friend was shot and killed. The officer fled, escaping prosecution, it was assumed, through his family ties within the police force. "[The friend's] blood sat in the corner of the club," Aong continued, "and they [the club owners] were too cheap to hire a monk [to exorcise the place]. When the club reopened, a girl was dancing [there]. Her foot kept stepping on the place where the blood had stained the floor. Then, when she left, she was struck by a car and killed."[11] When I pressed Aong to make the connection between the blood and the traffic accident more explicit, he grew frustrated with me: "It was the ghost of the officer! They were too cheap to hire a monk!"

Aong contrasts his own compound's commonsense approach to ghosts to the nightclub's. Whereas his community would have pooled money to hire

an exorcist[12] in order to solve such a supernatural crisis, the nightclub owners simply cleaned up the visible stain of violence and chose to ignore its invisible trace. This lack of attention or care was something which, to Aong, made the city so dangerous: it was quite possible, and even likely, that similar inattentions had occurred throughout Chiang Mai, leading to the proliferation of hidden dangers lurking beneath the city's veneer. As for the northeastern Thai farmers about whom Mills writes, for Aong promises of urban prosperity imperfectly conceal a hidden violence.

Just as the ghosts of formerly mobile people—youths on motorcycles, migrant workers, foreigners—are thought to move into newly built communities and bring their progressiveness to a halt, so the parallel figure of the criminal "Burmese" (*chon* Phama) migrant also appears. In a similar manner to ghosts of bad death (*phi tai hong*), the figure of the haunting criminal also arises from motion only to settle into construction and impede progress. Here, I turn to that other figure of motion and stasis.

The Lurking Population

When touring one abandoned high-rise with the guard, I had taken photos of graffiti written on the walls, but I was unable to read the writing. Some of it was in Shan, which I do not read, but even the Thai writing had words that I did not recognize. Thinking it might be Northern dialect, in which I had had less training than the Central one, I brought back photos to discuss with Chai, a Northern Thai engineer and friend of mine. Chai read the script and then shuddered. "What is it?" I asked him, hoping for a good story. "It's not what he's saying," said Chai. "It's everything. Half the words are misspelled; you can tell he's not Thai. . . . Looking at this, I feel like I have no idea of the person that wrote it."

I went through the text with Chai, and he pointed out to me the numerous errors in aspiration and tone. For instance, in places that required the Thai equivalent of a *d*, the author instead had used a *t* (e.g., the word *dai*, "to be able to," was written *tai*, "south"), and the tone markers were incorrect throughout the script. Naturally, it could be that this was simply the result of someone with atrocious spelling, and not at all the sort of person Chai imagined (or, rather, found himself unable to imagine). But here, it is not the *writer* of the text with whom I am concerned. Rather, it is Chai's reaction, his recoiling from the camera image. Chai imagined the author of the text as a dangerous, unknowable person rather than a foolish or confused but ultimately understandable person with awful grammar. Chai did not say, "What an idiot!" He said, "I do not know what that person might be thinking." The horror that Chai felt came from the idea that someone with whom he found

himself unable to identify was secretly dwelling in the abandoned spaces in the city. His horror, like the fear of the ghost, was related to the disturbance of finding what was familiar made uncanny.

Most urban residents with whom I spoke were aware of the presence of foreign laborers in their midst and described to me their own technique for identifying them. Many confessed that they could not distinguish a Shan person from a Northern Thai person physically, but spoke (as Chai did) of seeing foreignness in unexpected places—for instance, a Burmese-language magazine near a market vendor, yellow chalk used as a traditional sunscreen, or a strange accent emerging from a Thai-looking face.

I explained Chai's reaction to Choke, the architect. He identified Chai's fear as one of the "lurking population" (*pratchakon faeng*)—those people who live among the "regular" population but remain unseen. They are feared, he said, because they are believed to lack any sense of moral or social duty—indeed, their very existence depends on their being able to blend into the general Thai populace without being seen but not sharing that "Thainess" (*khwam pen Thai*) which ordinary citizens possess. Katherine Bowie (1997), Thongchai Winichakul (1994), and Pavin Chachavalpongpun (2005) have all written extensively about Thainess and the construction of dangerous others in Thai nationalist writing. Others are assumed to be capable of criminal and immoral acts, and, as my interlocutors expressed, when their existence is revealed, neighbors can suddenly become foreign. While in a previous generation this fear of the lurking alien would have been fear of the Communist infiltrator, in the present time the locus of fear is more disparate: the imagined criminal, like the ghost, has no goal or purpose, but simply exists to sow chaos and destruction.

However, these stories of migrants-as-criminals often fail to mention that it is the same migrants who provide the foundation of Chiang Mai's new middle-class lifestyle. The guards (as well as the imagined criminals guarded against) are also often Shan (as was Aong), and so are the maids and caretakers (as in *Laddaland*). In short, Shan migrants, in the minds of the residents of these communities, contribute to at the same time as they detract from the potential for *charoen*. This intimacy—the *homeliness* of the "invisible" Shan laborer—renders his figure all the more unhomely when he "emerges" as a criminal: one is suddenly, forcefully reminded that one has been living among such intrinsically alien people all along.

When my interlocutors referred to Shan (rather than simply "illegal alien" or "foreigner"), they did not use the word "Shan." Nor did they use the word that Shan use for themselves, Tai, or even the Northern dialect *ngiao* (currently used to refer to those Shan who were in Chiang Mai before the recent wave

of migration, and a term often used in Northern historical records). Instead, they simply referred to migrant Shan as Burmese nationals, *khon* Phama.[13] The association of Shan migrants as "Burmese" highlights their foreign-ness. While communities and people referred to as Ngiao and Thai-Yai have histories that predate the Thai nation in Thailand's north, "Burmese" people labeled as such are obvious foreigners.

This identification is telling. While Chiang Mai has a long and intimate history with Burma, having been its vassal for two hundred years and sharing many religious and cultural traditions with it, Burma in modern Thai nationalist historiography plays the role of the principal villain (Pavin 2005). Recent royally funded historical epics such as *Suriyothai* or *Naresuan,* as well as other historical films such as *Bang Rajan,* depict royal Thais as protonationalists, defending the (ethno-)nation (*chat*) from the violent Burmese, who are portrayed as gleefully engaging in the slaughter of children and monks (Amporn 2003). Even films set in the modern day often depict Burmese as dangerous others, as in the recent "Backpackers" segment of the horror film *Phobia 2,* where (assumed-to-be) Burmese migrants, stuffed with amphetamines and suffocated in the back of a truck (recalling the 2004 killing of eighty-five Thai Muslim protesters, who also suffocated when crowded into the back of a police truck in the southern town of Tak Bai), reemerge as zombie-like killers. These associations—Burma (Myanmar), violence, and drugs—bleed into everyday stories about migrants in the gated communities.

The Village of Sparkling Gold

Somboon ran a noodle stall in front of a nearly abandoned gated community, Ban Thong Prakai (The Village of Sparkling Gold), and was full of stories about the dangerous house next door. It was abandoned during the day, Somboon told me, but at night it would become filled with Burmese drug addicts. "They had their motorbikes filling the yard; they were out drinking and taking *ya ba* [methamphetamine]. They were not good people." Somboon recalled hiding in the closet of his stall as the sound of "shouting in a foreign language"[14] echoed from the abandoned building. Eventually, his fears got the best of him, and he phoned the local army barracks. Soldiers descended on the house and cleared out "over fifty criminals," according to Somboon.[15] Before the army captain left, he lent Somboon a gun so that he could shoot any outsiders who returned. Somboon's story echoes those of the abandoned construction site—hostile foreign sounds echo out of a space that should be empty and spread a sense of menace around the neighborhood, rendering the entire place, so auspiciously named, a place of danger.

Migrants parallel ghosts in other ways. Bon, the shopkeeper who showed me the cracked building, described "Burmese" thieves as supernaturally gifted at sneaking into houses. "[The communities] are full of criminals [*chon*]. [Illegal] aliens. . . . They even figure out ways to steal things inside of [your] apartment. They take a long piece of bamboo and fashion a hook on the end of it. Then, they reach it through the balcony window into the apartment. Very, very long, *na?* They will take everything!" Bon stretched his arm out, imitating the long bamboo "arm" reaching into the supposedly secure apartment.

The image of a long arm reaching into one's domestic space has clear parallels in ghost stories. Arguably (Central) Thailand's most famous ghost, Nang Nak, is identified as a ghost when her arm grows impossibly long and reaches down through the floorboards of her riverside hut. In the case of the migrants, the impossibly long arm stems, not from any supernatural powers, but from their criminal ingenuity, born out of knowledge of the wilderness. They have fashioned the "long piece of bamboo" out of jungle materials, and the extension of the (backward, violent) jungle into the (clean, rational) home is the element that Bon stresses in his story.

I thought about Bon several days later when I opened the *Chiang Mai News* to read that "Shan bandits" had been caught stealing motorcycles in the city (*Chiang Mai News* 2007a). This story was one of many specifically describing the foreign origins of common theft or violence in the city, although more often referring to "Burmese." The feature linking the migrants to the uncanny is that they appear to be Thai (and therefore familiar) until they reveal themselves to be *other,* an unveiling that casts suspicion upon neighbors and recalls, in the film *Laddaland,* Thi's wild confusion of ghosts with the living. Thai and Burmese are hopelessly mistaken for one another, and one cannot easily tell the difference.

An example of such a confusion of dangerous others with "safe" Thais is an incident that took place in 2004 when unidentified men opened fire on a school bus near Ratchaburi. Lertrat Ratanavanit, the army's assistant chief-of-staff, commented that the perpetrators were likely to be Burmese or from hill tribes, as "Thai people are not that evil" (*Bangkok Post,* June 5, 2002). He added: "We wonder why incidents like this usually happen in Ratchaburi. There must be some alien movements in the province. A number of Burmese people work there. The [guilty] men might have fled to the forest, changed their clothes and then come out looking like ordinary people" (ibid.).

Presences

In all of these stories, clean, ordered, and modern Thai communities are suddenly imagined to be invaded by reminders of disorder, violence, and backwardness. Spaces that were meant to be symbols of progressiveness and

exclusivity bring with them the specter of decline and invasion in the form of the foreign presences that haunt them.

The English word "haunt" implies a reminder of a past moment, and it is in fact this idea of a sudden, unexpected connection between two points in time that dominates scholarship about haunting (Gordon 2008; Cheung 2010, 176). In many ways, Thai ghosts and criminals also "haunt"—they forcefully draw connections between a place and a past (thought to be overcome) time. But a more productive analysis may be gained by looking closely at the words used in Thai to describe ghosts.

Ghosts can *sing:* "possess" a person or place (e.g., a "haunted house"). They can do so in an angry fashion (*hian*), lashing out violently around them. The word *lon,* often used in the combination *lok-lon,* implies something more similar to the English "haunt": it means a frightening recollection of a past event, although without the tinge of melancholy implicit in "haunt" (e.g., "a haunting tune"). But the most common term used to describe the actions of ghosts in my interlocutors' stories was *lok:* to trick, fool, cheat, cruelly deceive.

Criminals can also *lok,* especially when they appear to do something innocuous but end up doing something harmful. In this way, criminals who appear "normal" but then turn out to spread violence, ghosts who emerge suddenly in an empty street, and communities that seem modern but are not, all have inner essences that differ from the way they look. In a sense, they are deceits.[16] This deceit, combining surface progressiveness with inner ruin, becomes important when analyzing Thai ideas of progress in the idiom of *khwam charoen.*

PROGRESS, DEVELOPMENT, AND GHOSTS

The association between gated communities, social isolation, and fear is not unique to Thailand. Indeed, it seems at first glance to be a peculiarly American phenomenon. Setha Low (2003) points to the connection between inhabitants of gated communities and fear in the American context, arguing that, contrary to a statistical decrease in crime, stories of criminals and fear of crime actually increased among those living in such places. In American narratives, the gated community is considered a refuge from a sea of danger, a culturally and ethnically homogeneous island in a country perceived to be overrun by danger and diversity. But in Thailand, rather than as a retreat where the homogeneous few can take refuge from a worsening city, gated communities are thought of in aspirational terms as places where the wealthy congregate (as Chim says, "there's only doctors"), and where one can live like and among wealthy foreigners. The fears, when they appear, are not of the urban hordes howling at the gates, but rather are fears that these aspirations

have in fact become hollow, that the foreigners and "doctors" (as in Maew's story and the film *Laddaland*) are in reality petty and violent, that the utopian community will turn out not to be a community at all (as in Chim's story)—in short, that the empty spaces next door will be filled with danger and contagion (as in Bon or Maew's story). Chiang Mai's ghosts emerge at a particular point in time, when hopes about increasing prosperity and future progress fall into doubt. For those who fear them, when one finally achieves the desired state of modernity (i.e., perhaps when one moves into a gated community), suddenly one becomes afflicted by ghosts.

How are we to interpret these fears? How might Chiang Mai's ghosts help us better understand the notion of the uncanny and questions of progress? How do such ghosts play into and question the idea of the city as a font of prosperity and merit, and as a place that actualizes and mobilizes *khwam charoen?*

In the context of northeastern Thailand, Mary Beth Mills (1995) suggests that fears of "modern" ghosts are a critique of modernity. In her account, cases of "Sudden Unexplained Nocturnal Death Syndrome" (SUNDS), a condition wherein a seemingly healthy young man died in his sleep among Thai factory workers in Singapore, was interpreted in rural northeastern Thailand as a problem of "widow ghosts"—sexually attractive and stylishly dressed spirits assaulting young men. These ghosts, Mills argues, reflected an ambiguity surrounding figures of modern femininity in Thailand, where the increasing presence of migrant female workers and the decreasing importance of male labor led to an unspoken concern about the effects of such an economy.

For Mills, haunting has an oddly carnival air. The village gathers in the evening to dole out protective measures. Old women dress young men up as women in order to mislead the spirits, and every household hangs up a large wooden penis to "distract" the ghost—all amid an atmosphere of "much joking and laughter" (1995, 254). Those who fear widow ghosts turn to traditional spirit beliefs for defense against a modern plague and do so in the confidence that they have found the solution to the epidemic. But, although the subjects of these two studies might seem similar (modernity, ghosts, Thailand), from my study I learned that haunting was seen as a profoundly isolated and isolating experience. *Phi tai hong* haunted isolated individuals, and there was no community response to the problem of ghosts: the only precaution taken against them was avoidance.[17] While Mills' interlocutors in northeastern Thailand were still aspiring to the lifestyle promised by gated communities, mine were people who imagined themselves as having already successfully achieved this quality of "modernity." In short, whereas Mills' villagers placed the threat of ghosts as coming from outside and thus able to be

resisted through community solidarity, my interlocutors felt that their own communities were the sites and source of haunting. It is for this reason that I have invoked Freud's concept of the uncanny (*unheimlich*) in order to understand the haunting of gated communities: there, the home has become an unfamiliar place, and one's idea of oneself as modern and advanced (as well as one's desire to be so) is likewise estranged. Unlike a public menace, which can be combatted by collective action, Chiang Mai's fears encroached upon the most intimate and individual spaces of the home.

I now return to Choke's statement, "[Chiang Mai has] *phatthana, tae yang mai charoen*"—"it has developed, but not yet progressed." The humor in this expression hinges upon the similarity between the terms *phatthana* and *charoen*. These words are occasionally used interchangeably to refer to things that are modern, high-tech, or advanced.[18] They place the referent in a hierarchy of development, as when my interlocutors would refer to a country such as Japan or the United States as *charoen laeo* or *phatthana laeo*,[19] meaning that it was already a "developed" place. At first glance, the idea that something could be *phatthana* but not *charoen* seemed paradoxical, but the example of Chiang Mai's new construction is one that nonetheless is one and not the other—hence the joke. The chief distinction between these two terms is that *charoen* refers to the hidden, unseen qualities of an object, while *phatthana* refers to its more superficial qualities. It is this reference to the unseen qualities of development that forms connections between a lack of *charoen* and the figure of the ghost.

Recall that, in its original Khmer meaning, *charoen* pointed toward Buddhist enlightenment, although in present-day Thai it is also used to refer to advancement in the secular world, but advancement of a more substantial and meaningful sort. *Khwam charoen* is that quality which inheres in something and renders it wise, advanced, or progressive in actuality rather than simply in appearance. For Choke, while the communities appear "developed," they lack something insubstantial, something that causes the structure's potential to fail and the buildings to fall into ruin. *Khwam charoen*, in this idiom, is what renders potentially prosperous things actually prosperous. This power contrasts with the idea that something is haunted (e.g., innocuous on the surface but actually dangerous). Thus, to say that the city has "*phatthana* but not yet *charoen*" is to describe a place where the surface only appears to be developed, whereas beneath the surface still lies that which was thought to have been overcome and left behind.

Charoen/phatthana shares with the idea of haunting a concern with invisible essences, essences that are unknowable but nonetheless powerful. One does not know if a place has *charoen* (and will therefore give prosperity and

become prosperous) or just has *phatthana*. Thus, the seemingly progressive and prosperous veneer never lies comfortably, as doubts always arise with regard to these essences. Hanks, too, notes how prosperity is always laced with uncertainty, as one does not know whether one's wealth has come to one based on the results of past karma or if it is the action of amoral "power" (*amnat*), and therefore fleeting (1962, 1254).

When these doubts emerge, they emerge as stories of hiding migrants and haunting ghosts. Migrants and ghosts have their roots in mobility: one group flees a drug-fueled civil war and the other emerges from bloody deaths on the sides of highways. But when they emerge they are signs of stasis. They all show failed moments of potential and introduce foreign elements into the everyday. Like the fictional ghost in *Laddaland,* they question the inevitability of progress and its ability to change lives for the better.

But more than this, it is my argument here that Northern Thai urbanites find Chiang Mai's high-rise structures and gated communities particularly haunting because they introduce unwelcome associations that question the assumed-to-be inevitable and morally informed notion of progress expressed by the term *charoen*. Even at the moment when modernity is seemingly under way, possessing (*sing*) ghosts or concealed (*faeng*) migrants are believed to have the power and the will to render such spaces hollow, infertile, and meaningless. This was doubly the case during the political turmoil and subsequent economic crisis of 2006 when, for many, promises of change and Chiang Mai's reinvention were rendered hollow. *Charoen* promises forward motion; but for my interlocutors, the fantasy of incipient prosperity is haunted by the specter of decline, the idea that such progressiveness has not been truly achieved, a fear that manifests itself in the images of dangerous, lurking others.

To return to the image of *khwam charoen* as a ladder, Chim, Maew, and Som believe that they have reached a new rung upon it. They have a certain fantasy about what life on that next rung will look like, a fantasy the gated community feeds into, often quite explicitly (recall the ad that everyone is "on your level," or Chim's idea that "there are only doctors"). But when they arrive, they discover beings from the bottom of the ladder (ghosts or criminals) already there. This discovery throws their conception of the forward march of *khwam charoen* into doubt. What they assumed to be progressive is tainted by something ruinous—it becomes unhomely. This is why exclusion here is so much more than the excluding of others (e.g., "A community where everyone is on your level") or exclusion from one's own domestic space; here it is an exclusion from the very idea of progress.

Yet this fear of the failure of progress to materialize, and the emergence of ghosts/migrants as emblematic of this fear, is not new to the post-2006 crisis period. Indeed, it has occurred repeatedly at various points of political and social crisis in Northern Thai history. Just as the successful city is one that enables *khwam charoen,* the failed city is one where *khwam charoen* has ceased to happen.