

# SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/>

**Joy Xin Yuan Wang**

## **Ghosts as Political Possibilities: A Review of Instantiations of Haunting in Southeast Asia**

*Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3, December 2021, pp. 339-357.

### **How to Cite:**

Wang, Joy Xin Yuan. Ghosts as Political Possibilities: A Review of Instantiations of Haunting in Southeast Asia. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3, December 2021, pp. 339-357.

### **Link to this article:**

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2021/12/vol-10-no-3-joy-xin-yuan-wang/>

### **View the table of contents for this issue:**

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2021/12/vol-10-no-3-of-southeast-asian-studies/>

**Subscriptions:** <https://englishkyoto-seas.org/mailling-list/>

### **For permissions, please send an e-mail to:**

english-editorial[at]cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp



# Ghosts as Political Possibilities: A Review of Instantiations of Haunting in Southeast Asia

Joy Xin Yuan Wang\*

In Southeast Asia, instantiations of haunting often disrupt dominant time in ways that force an encounter with the state. This article considers how ghosts disrupt temporality to make new political possibilities. It explores the ways through which ghosts destabilize the linearity of standard time to inscribe heterogenous planes of time that open up to alternative political visions. Through reexamining case studies of haunting in Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia, it also considers whether the political possibilities embodied by ghosts are capable of sustaining a political project. This article argues that while ghosts can disrupt time to gesture toward political action, a disruption that contains the potential for new political possibilities, they cannot always fulfill those possibilities. That is, the capacity for disruption always contains the possibility for co-optation. This article suggests, however, that the precarity to haunting is also a precarity proper to hope. Ghosts can suggest that the normal might yet be unsettled.

**Keywords:** ghosts, Southeast Asia, temporality, politics, potentiality

## Introduction: Ghosts and Political Action in Southeast Asia

In 2011 the Singapore government announced plans to repurpose Bukit Brown Cemetery (Huang 2014), which, with its hundred thousand graves, was the last cemetery of significant size in the country. The appropriation of land for redevelopment purposes was not new to land-starved Singapore. But this time it seemed to touch a nerve. Partly because a hundred thousand graves also meant a hundred thousand stories (Hio 2017) filled with the legacies of early Singaporeans (Zaccheus 2017) and war victims (Zaccheus 2018). Exhuming their graves would mean excavating history. Another reason was that the embodied experience of haunting is also part of the narrative of activism in Singapore. As Ruth Toulson's (2012, 99) ethnography suggests, her Singaporean interlocutors "wanted to leave the dead in their graves." Her interlocutors blamed the exhumation of

---

\* Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge, Free School Lane, Cambridge, CB2 3RF, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland  
e-mail: xyw22@cam.ac.uk

graves for their nightmares, for their children's lack of performance in school, and for their daily troubles. Immediately, civil society groups called for a moratorium (Huang 2014). Surprisingly, for a quasi-leviathan state where the government maintains a tight hold on power, civil society groups managed to gain traction.

"Singaporeans rallied on social media and showed up in the hundreds for walks in the cemetery," read an article in the *South China Morning Post* (January 3, 2019). "It surged to the forefront of citizenry consciousness and interrogated the fundamentals of governance and national developmental agenda" (Huang 2014, 21). A petition by Dr. Irving Johnson circulated on the Internet and was soon followed by more petitions (J. Lim 2011). The state agreed to delay its plans for land redevelopment but in 2018 continued with its reclamation efforts. The delay was only a temporary stay. Here the threat of haunting appeared to reawaken dormant civic spirit, gesturing toward the link between ghosts and political action. But the state that was once temporarily destabilized by a ghostly intervention ceded ground only to regain it.

How then should we understand the link between haunting and political action in Southeast Asia? There are many possible answers. For some, this speaks to the state's reach, its Hobbesian tentacles ensnaring and encircling any excesses. In this article, I aim to consider yet another dimension to this discussion by exploring the political potential of ghosts through the temporalities they inscribe and make possible. Through a discussion of existing ethnographies in Southeast Asia, my aim thus is to open up the problematic of time in order to begin to understand the ways in which it might articulate new political visions. I argue that ghosts disrupt time to gesture toward alternative political visions, though ghostly intervention cannot always guarantee the fulfillment of the political potential ghosts embody. But while this capacity for disruption contains the possibility for co-optation, I suggest that the precarity of this structure of possibility is also a precarity that is proper to hope. Ghosts can suggest that the normal might yet be unsettled.

### *Ghosts, Time, and Politics*

Ghosts have been viewed in various ways in Southeast Asia. Whether considered a central part of Southeast Asian life—Richard Winsted (2007) saw the endurance of magical beliefs as analogous with the resilience of Malay culture, while for Kirk Endicott (1991) *semangat* or "soul substance" was the primordial point of origin for the existence of Malay life—or as a precolonial leftover, a form of irrationality (Sangren 1991), or a form of resistance—a type of anti-structure (Ong 1988)—the enchanted has often been enmeshed in a structural-functionalist argument that mitigates the agency of ghosts. Ghosts here become "a datum that putatively reveals underlying frictions in social struc-

ture” (Stoller 1995, 17). In Singapore, for example, Jianli Huang (2014) argues that the dead are indices of anxiety over the loss of Singapore’s cultural inheritance and the urgency of heritage preservation. For Joshua Comaroff (2007, 65), haunting through ancestral worship has a deeply spatial dimension, which, when forced into an encounter with the state’s developmentalist discourse, carves out the possibility for a counter-hegemonic provocation. In Comaroff’s work on Singapore, haunting indexes a larger contestation over the use of space (Comaroff 2007, 65). Perhaps in parts of Southeast Asia where civic liberties are often circumscribed, ghosts allow for a disembodied subversion (Wu 2014).

Turning away from ghosts as merely representational or symbolic, Patrice Ladwig (2012) tracks the material traces of ghosts through two festivals for spirits in Laos. He suggests that while ghosts might not be fully knowable as empirical objects, through traces or imprints they leave clues about their presence or immanence. Importantly, he concludes that paying attention to ghosts’ materiality or agency is not a rejection of their representational or symbolic efficacy but to allow for the possibility of “the active presence and agency of the object” (Ladwig 2012, 435). In his study, ghosts retain a presence that is not solely indexical but still remains within the social circuits of practice and the contingent nature of social acts (Ladwig 2012, 440).

In short, the supernatural indexes the political and social, but here ghosts are not merely free-floating signifiers, stand-in symbols that act as a proxy for the sociopolitical, but can, in some cases, make possible the sociopolitical. They are thus also Nils Bubandt’s (2017, 1) “intensely political beings,” able to erupt “awkwardly into politics” and call for a reassessment of the meaning of democracy. Or they are Heonik Kwon’s (2008, 2) beings of “concrete, historical identities . . . who continue in present time in an empirical rather than allegorical way” and reshape forms of sociality.

In suggesting that ghosts can make possible the sociopolitical, these authors suggest that the supernatural and the enchanted can pose their own reality. They provide an alternative to a conception of moments of enchantment as temporary fissures that fold back into normalcy; or as purely idioms of distress. Instead, they will us to see them as lasting inversions that could reshape the status quo. Ghosts come to embody political possibilities.

Perhaps one way of looking at instantiations of hauntings is through Walter Benjamin’s (1968) discussion of the *Einstände*, or instant, of history. In his 17th thesis, Benjamin writes of the arrested moment “as blasting a specific life out of the era.” He notes, “The nourishing fruit of the historically understood contains time as a precious but tasteless seed” (Benjamin 1968, 263). Werner Hamacher (2001), writing on Benjamin, suggests that the instant is not merely “in time”: that is, the instant is not just a container carried

along by the circuits of time. Seen in this way, instantiations of haunting are not just attempts at telegraphing time. That is, instantiations of haunting do not just reveal time in a teleological way, but rather time is inside the ghostly instantiations and ghosts are its carriers: “time is in their inside and they are the fruits and carriers of its seeds” (Hamacher 2001, 179). In other words, ghosts perhaps are also agentive beings that carry time within them. Ghosts can flash up at surprising moments and places to carry time toward new directions. Elsewhere, Benjamin (1963), recognizing the forward orientation of ghosts, suggests that ghosts are not located in a vision of pastness but rather reflect horizons of futurity. The idea of ghosts as carriers of time flows also from Jacques Derrida’s formulation of ghosts as both “revenant and arrivant,” existing in both past and present tenses. They involve what was and announce what is to come. It is in this sense that I refer to heterogenous time, which, following Derrida, I take to be a “temporal horizon in which the past, present, future are integrated” (quoted in Lee 2017, 31). That is, in sum, time that resists the unilateral telos of linearity.

More recently, Avery Gordon (2008, 64) has written about the ways the supernatural can “signify a future possibility and ethereal intervention into what might come to be.” The idea that ghosts, through disrupting temporality, give rise to new political possibilities can similarly be seen in Anand Taneja’s (2018) work on spirits in India. Taneja shows through the ethnographic example of Feroz Shah Kotla, an abandoned fort from India’s precolonial past, that the past delinked from history can gesture toward new forms of political imagination. Historically, the site is linked to regimes of oppression and violence, but Taneja shows through the way it is now remembered as a sacred space that history does not matter. Instead, it is the visions conjured up by the practice of depositing letters for the jinn-saints at Feroz Shah Kotla that are important. When a Hindu man who has always dismissed as spiritual nonsense a visionary dream in which a saint appears and directs him to Feroz Shah Kotla finally acts on the dream and sees his fortunes improve, the spirit vision draws him into the spectral space of a Muslim community in post-partition India—a plea, perhaps, to pay greater attention to the prescriptive ethics of ghosts. The resurrection of precolonial practices here is about intervening in the present, an intervention made possible through haunting.

Ghosts in this case can destabilize the linear hold of time, or what Barbara Adam (1990, 75) calls the modern dominance of “clock time,” a temporal plane necessary to the ordering and enactment of capitalist regimes which with their patterned regularity and discipline are undergirded by a narrative of progress. By “forcing the point of non-synchronism” (B. C. Lim 2011, 26), ghosts can disrupt time in ways that might provide succor from the almost tyrannical pressure to see “history as progress in which yesterday is never the same as today” (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2013, 160). Ghosts can thus force

a reckoning with the claims of linear time and its laws of progress by introducing alternative motions of time.

Following this line, I am first concerned with the political potential of heterogeneous temporalities as inscribed by the figure of the ghost. Is there a relationship between the temporal orientation of specters and their political potential? What are the ways in which visions of the otherworldly promote counter-hegemonic visions in Southeast Asia? What are their limits?

The ethnographies of Andrew Johnson (2013a) and Jane Ferguson (2014), both situated in sites of modernity in Thailand, suggest that ghosts embody a distinctly heterogeneous temporality that fractures the claims of linear time. But buried in Johnson's ethnography is also a warning about the limits of ghosts and the inability of haunting to sustain a political project. I hope to suggest through reading Bubandt (2017) and Kwon (2008) that while we need to be sober about the realities of haunting, there is still much to be hopeful about. In the end, I conclude that while ghosts in Southeast Asia can, through the disruption of time, give rise to new political possibilities, they cannot guarantee the fulfillment of those possibilities.

### **The Uncanny Questioning of Modernity in Thailand**

Johnson's (2013a) and Ferguson's (2014) ethnographies revolve around the uncanny questioning of modernity in Thailand. Both are situated in heartlands of modernity—the airport in Ferguson's piece, a suburban district in Johnson's—where time presumably unfolds according to a fixed narrative of progress. Time flows through these heartlands of modernity into larger tropes of development—the airport as a demonstration of international ambition, the suburban community as a marker of individual wealth. What, then, to make of this seeming contradiction—the intensity of haunting in places that should preclude it? I suggest that specters of a seemingly foreclosed past come to haunt the present in ways that disturb linear coefficients of time. And, importantly, the resurfacing of the past in sites of modernity is not simply a re-inscription of the past but rather a particular intrusion that forces a re-mediatization of time itself, a re-mediatizing that opens up to new political vistas.

In Ferguson's airport, ghosts are a usual and important part of life. For example, every Saturday a group of workers at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport gather to pray (Ferguson 2014, 52). The purpose of their worship is to pay their respects to the snakes at Suvarnabhumi Airport that cut off the path of Chotisak Aspaririya when he was attending a ceremony to pay homage to Prince Chakrabongse on the occasion of the 30th

anniversary of the founding of the Airports Authority of Thailand. The hope is that paying respects to the snakes will ward off harmful occurrences. When six fatal crashes involving Fokker F-27 Friendships occurred in the late 1980s, Burma Airways—which had a fleet of such aircraft—decided to change its logo to the Patthana symbol (Ferguson 2014, 58). The logo, part of Buddhist symbology, was placed on the tails of airplanes with the hope of preventing crashes (Ferguson 2014, 56). In a sense, thus, Ferguson’s ghosts, echoing the title of her piece, appear almost eternal. They are recursive figures that resurface at various moments within the seemingly modern exterior of an airport. The airport, on the other hand, if I might extrapolate and draw Ferguson’s discussion toward temporality, is a modern architectural entity. It “speaks to a kind of progress, development, rationality” (Ferguson 2014, 47) and inscribes a linear, progressive, unidirectional time frame. The introduction of ghosts to this site complicates its temporal narrative.

Time here is thick with multiplicity, indexing both a recurring past and the linear thrust of modernity. Combined in the figure of the ghost, the two twist their way, like intertwined vines, into the future. This, too, seems to be Ferguson’s conclusion when she argues that haunting in the airport “is not about a return to a premodern authentic past, but actually a push to amalgamate the past with techno-modernity” (Ferguson 2014, 61). Ferguson’s ghosts are a tool to make possible the seemingly modern.

Thus, Ferguson’s ghosts resist the essentialism that Dipesh Chakrabarty (1997) saw at the heart of conceptualizations of contemporary time. In contemporary time, traces of the past are seen as carryovers from a dead world (Chakrabarty 1997, 49–50). If ghosts inhabit the same temporality as contemporaneity spatially, they do not share the same future or destination. Thus, even when certain ways of life and behavioral tendencies inhabit contemporary time, this distinction marks traces of the past as backward. Ghosts, frozen and locked in time, are thus seen as residues of another world; and belief in ghosts is viewed as an indication of backwardness. In Ferguson’s (2014) ethnography, however, specters of the past inhabit contemporaneous spatial time but also share its orientation. The offerings, the rituals, and the painting of logos are ways to ensure the smooth functioning of the airport. The past folds into the present to push it into the future. With this temporal movement, the offerings, etc., demand a reconceptualizing of contemporary time and pull it toward something more heterogenous and plural. Indexed here, thus, is not the extraordinary resilience of the past in the face of changing times but rather a dialectical sense of time, time that extends in multiple directions. Visions of the future emerge out of rituals that appear to recall the past but which, in turn, are reappropriated for the future project of ensuring the airport’s smooth running. This dialectical intertwining is at one with the long-standing occult connections between modernity and magic in Thailand, where “magic and science” share an etymological root

and are seen as “forms of knowledge put into practice” (Johnson 2013b).

Ghosts here are the bearers of time that disturb linear, standard conceptions of time. In doing so, they inscribe heterogenous time. But while Ferguson (2014) opens up the problematic of time by showing how ghosts embody a heterogenous temporality, she leaves open the question of what such a temporal horizon might do for us and, more particularly, what sort of political visions it might give rise to. What sort of political visions do these spirits embody? What sort of provocations do these political questions pose?

To gesture toward this, I turn to Johnson’s 2013 ethnography. The study, which took place from 2006 to 2007, predated the protests of 2007–10 in Thailand. What it shows is that “before many embraced a political solution to Thailand’s woes, they saw these problems as endemic, as spiritual and often as signs of supernatural involvement” (Johnson 2013a, 305). Johnson leaves us to imagine the ways in which endemic spiritual anxieties in supernatural involvement bled into the protests of 2007–10. It is this gap that I hope to consider.

Chim is an entrepreneur who, through her jewelry shop in a fashionable section of Chiang Mai, realized her dream of living in a community made up exclusively of educated, upper-class professionals (Johnson 2013a, 305–307). Soon after she moved into the gated community in the suburb of San Sai, she left, terrified, having suffered sleepless nights during which “she would wake up multiple times, listening for strange noises from downstairs.” Though Chim does not directly reference ghosts, one of her neighbors, Som, confides in the author that she never stays in the house alone. “Ghosts,” she says, “there are so many.” In another part of town, a Farang (or Caucasian) ghost is rumored to stalk the corridors of the top floor of a high-rise condominium building, urging Thais to commit suicide (Johnson 2013a, 309). The presence of the Farang ghost suggests that the qualities it stands for—wealth, growth—are a chimera, a smokescreen for the depravity that lingers underneath the condominium’s gilded veneer. On the streets, ghost stories coagulate around Nimmanahaeminda Road, Chang Mai’s most prosperous part. Johnson’s ghosts haunt areas and people who have realized the aspirations of progress, who appear to be riding the stream of linear time to its logical embankment. The ghosts are bound with the “idea of stasis, they block correct motion such as rebirth or progress” (Johnson 2013a, 308).

By blocking the forward progress of time and teasing the illusory quality of progress, Johnson’s ghosts come to represent an immobilizing force. They suggest that the present, with its delusions of development, is only a mirage. In teasing that the present is deceptive, the haunting described here departs from those of other authors. Haunting in Johnson’s conceptualization is neither a representation of occult beliefs (Comaroff and



Comaroff 1999) nor a manifestation of spirit possession as an act of resistance (Ong 1988). The political potential of haunting in Johnson's work does not flow from the way it is used as a strategy by those on the socioeconomic margins like Ong Aihwa's (1988) female Malaysian factory workers or as a protest enacted by those excluded from the fruits of capitalism like Jean and John Comaroff's (1999) interlocutors. Rather, in Johnson's (2013a) ethnography, haunting comes from within. It is the monstrous double of progress, an internal paradox that threatens modernity's dissolution. In both Johnson's and Ferguson's work, the uncanny is caught between slips in translation, the fissures between state- or capitalist-sanctioned ideas of modernity and people's lived dramas. It is in those spaces that the uncanny resurfaces with a heady resurgence. Neither Johnson's nor Ferguson's ghosts bear a stable relationship with the past. But in the ways they reimagine the past in order to gesture toward an alternative future, there are subtle differences. In Johnson's articulation, ghosts block progress or reveal the cracks in progress, seemingly seeking its reversal. This perhaps constitutes a slight departure from Ferguson's ghosts. In Ferguson's airport, the suspicion of modernity is mediated through haunting. Ghosts are moderators that reconcile the workers with the excesses of modernity. They make the excesses bearable. In short, they disrupt the present by invoking the past in order to push it into the future and in the process make the future palpable. Johnson's ghosts, too, disrupt the present but in ways that are slightly less benign. Rather, they suggest entropy—not that everything remains the same but that things rot. What follows logically is that if things are left the way they are, the future would be foreclosed. The message of Johnson's ghosts seems to be that the moment needs to be saved in order to rescue the future. This sense of progress seeping away is a fundamental destabilization that forces something to be done. Rotting demands a recuperation of the present in order to anticipate a possible future; and the only possible future, in the face of a decaying present, is an alternative one.

Thus, while Johnson's ghosts encode what is undesirable—what they do not want and what is lacking—behind the anxiety and the caution there is also something prospective. There is perhaps a certain vision or a political model that these ghosts carry within them. This uneasy sense that progress has a pathological interior, the search for an inner truth undisturbed by superficial markers of progress, points to a longing for virtuous rule that bears a formal similarity with the idea of dharma. What is evacuated and imagined by Johnson's ghosts is a sacred notion of virtuous politics that is a direct rebuke to the existing political order. To explain this, I provide a brief outline of Thai politics below.

In 2001 the businessman-turned-politician Thaksin Shinawatra became the prime minister of Thailand. Thaksin's ascension came on the heels of the economic distress of the Asian financial crisis. With his tremendous personal wealth acting as his capitalist

credentials, he brought with him the promise of financial growth (Ferrara 2010, 31). This, coupled with “populist policies like universal health care, debt relief for farmers and lavish government spending on rural poor gave him broad based support” (*Straits Times*, March 22, 2019). But as Thailand made economic headway through a series of economic reforms known as Thaksinomics, which coalesced around the consolidation of the automobile industry and export promotion, Thaksin was plagued by accusations of conflict of interest (Ferrara 2013). These included corruption allegations over procurement contracts for the new international airport and the 2005 attempt to sideline the attorney general’s anti-corruption campaign. Coupled with Thaksin’s insensitive handling of the Muslim South, there was also deep unhappiness with his economic policies. These policies included the privatization of state enterprises, decentralizing plans by the Thai Rak Thai party, and the US-Thailand free trade agreement (Lewis 2008, 130).

By favoring economics and a more capitalist, neoliberal order, Thaksin, it was said, ignored dharma “and in his ignorance of this truth that grounds the law and order of the universe fell short of protecting the nation from environmental degradation, sickness and social discord” (Funahashi 2017). While the accumulation of capital itself was not an issue, the means of the accumulation and the ends it secured were. In Theravada Buddhism, wealth gains legitimacy only if it is used for virtuous activities and if the individual holder of wealth “is not overly attached to it” (Ünaldi 2014, 386). To be transformed into something worth pursuing, economic capital requires the symbolic capital of the monarchy and should be used in service of a greater public good, and one nominally defined as being in service of the monarchy. Without the blessing of the monarchy’s sacred charisma, accumulation of capital is deemed illegitimate. When, in 2006, a man smashed an idol of the Hindu deity Brahma, the act was interpreted as an omen related to the ongoing political crisis. It was, for Thai people, a clear suggestion that Thaksin, for all his attempts to pacify the gods through offerings and shrine visits, had “lost the mandate of the spirits and the stars” (Keyes 2006, 23). Protesters called for the restoration of a righteous ruler, someone who would embody dharma.

If the protesters sought a spiritual justification, this logic was first apparent in Johnson’s (2013a) interlocutors. In Johnson’s ethnography, there is too a disquieting doubt among an affluent populace about the legitimacy of the means through which wealth has been accumulated, and a sense that the perceived illegitimacy of the means makes the ends hollow. This similarity, and consistency in moral rhetoric, implies the ways in which the supernatural capacitates the political. Ghosts are not just urban high-rise apparitions that appear out of nowhere; they might also have religious antecedents and religious models behind them. They represent another model of politics, a vision that inheres in notions of dharma and has a long history in Buddhist-majority Thailand.

On the surface, thus, Johnson's ghosts embody stasis and are the very antithesis of progress. But beneath their smooth surface, they point not backward toward a reversal of the present but toward new iterations of the present. The conceptual implications are twofold. By forcing the point of non-synchronism, Johnson's ghosts disturb the narrative of progress that a linear thrust undergirds. They fracture the claim of linear time that undergirds a narrative of economic progress, the very narrative that Thaksin's continued rule was dependent on and which underpinned his attempts at market reforms. (Perhaps this suggests, too, that it is not quite accurate to see the linearity of economic progress as a kind of horizontal time. Rather, linearity is a deep time that often requires a legitimizing anchorage lodged in other temporal orientations, religious time being one particular option.) But this temporal break is not just a circle that retraces itself or a continuous feedback loop that wants to reverse progress. It also gestures toward another type of politics, one that seems to draw on pre-Thaksin models. The visions ghosts generate are thus a throwback to pre-Thaksin models of politics—of the rule of virtuous man, a pre-democratic Thailand—but here they are reconstituted for new political purposes (dharmic politics) and through new (contemporary media) technologies. This longing for dharmic politics is not simply an attempt to turn back time. Rather, ghosts are re-mediatized through contemporary media—"mechanically reproduced images" (Morris 1998, 344), "mass media especially photographs and television" (Jackson 2010)—media that have in fact "led to the proliferation of magico-religious belief in Thailand" (Johnson 2013b). The yearning for a different kind of politics is not just evidence of a recurring past the way a traumatic instant might be, but rather one reformulated in the light of the future. This yearning flares up in the present as a reminder of both what was and what could be, and serves as a threshold of time where past, present, and future meet.

But while ghosts can generate a vision for the future and in part drag the vision into the future, they cannot guarantee its fulfillment. As I write this, not much has changed in Thailand. In 2010 tens of thousands of Thaksin supporters marched in protest, only to be stopped by force. In July 2011, political winds would carry the pro-Thaksin party to power and Thaksin's sister to the position of PM. In 2014, the military returned to power through another coup. The 2019 elections saw the military tighten its grip on power.

The danger of co-optation is latent in Johnson's (2013a) ethnography. Johnson's interlocutors hail from all parts of Thailand, but the forms of haunting the author describes—ghosts stalking a condominium, a prosperous road, a gated community in Chang Mai—share a certain socioeconomic location. The anti-Thaksin resistance, led by monarchists and elites and supported by the middle class, maps onto Johnson's more

affluent demographic. Perhaps what this narrative leaves out is that these groups were not the only ones with grievances. In fact, the deadliest protests Thailand faced were the pro-Thaksin Red Shirt protests in 2009 and 2010.

Part of the reason why the primary haunting of Johnson's interlocutors became so successful was that the army and the monarchists, finding in the notion of dharma a spiritual justification for a return to anti-democratic rule, took up the haunting of Johnson's interlocutors. Dharma is a vision of "natural absolute good" that is distinct from man-made laws. A ruler's charisma or prestige derives from his or her ability to reconcile the divide between man-made laws and dharma under the unifying umbrella of "righteous rule" (Funahashi 2017). It is believed that greatness or superhuman power is required to embody this promise. Once, dharma was seen as justifying the rule of divine kings. In contemporary Thailand, that role has been captured by the military—the overthrowing of Thaksin, the military claimed, was a necessary evil to restore dharma. If the army and the religious elite took up the haunting of Johnson's interlocutors for their purposes, they were only actualizing, or rather co-opting, the political wishes of an elite section of society.

If the Yellow Shirts, the anti-Thaksin protesters, were supported by the upper middle class, the Red Shirts tended to draw their ranks from the poor: villagers who resided in the provinces; and farmers in Northeast Thailand, in the Isan region, who had lived through the failure of successive governments to address their economic realities. Yet, as Serhat Ünaldi (2016) suggests, while Thaksin's redistributive wealth policies which empowered these particular communities could be viewed as a meritorious use of wealth, they also, in part, led to his undoing. Depicting "this worldly strength" (Ünaldi 2014, 381) as charismatic might have legitimized Thaksin's capitalistic policies, but it also turned him into a competing source of *barami* (merit that comes from being close to power, or the king) that threatened royal charisma. The Red Shirts' valiant defense of Thaksin was not necessarily a repudiation of dharmic politics but a competing community of *barami* that presented a challenge to sacred royal charisma and therefore had to be suppressed. In the end, though they managed to immobilize Bangkok for nine months without the support of the old elitist tripartite of military, monarchy, and the wealthy, the Red Shirts were forcefully and fatally crushed. In violent clashes, some 80 civilians were killed and a few thousand injured.

This throws up important questions. Can the disruption of time which gives way to new political possibilities survive into the future? Can haunting sustain a political project? Can ghosts bear the effects of political realities? What does it say about haunting made possible by temporal disruption if it slips against the bulwark of power and structure? Perhaps it is here that it becomes necessary to look closer at the question of possibility.

In Benjamin's (1968, 254) account of a non-linear time, redemption is "a hidden index that is carried by the past." Evocatively, he says that it is the breeze of the air that was not there earlier, the echo of those now silent in the voices of those whom we lend an ear to and the sisters of women we have never met. This is, for him, the secret pact between past and present generations.

This is important because Benjamin's account of redemption, which is also an account of the temporal structure of possibility (Hamacher 2001, 163), offers another way of understanding instantiations of haunting that appear to threaten political regimes but ultimately become co-opted and flattened. One that accommodates the reality of haunting's transience without ceding too much ground to the cynicism of its fragility. For Benjamin (1968), historical time is made up of missed opportunities of the past, so possibilities (even when they are unfulfilled, or precisely because they are unfulfilled) survive into the present as things that could yet be fulfilled (Hamacher 2001). The future, for him, is the progeny of the past, but at the same time it is not just the progeny that has survived the original copy. That is, it is not just a replication of the original intention. What follows is that every possibility contains the possibility for its own negation and thus to a degree is always transient (Hamacher 2001, 167). If the past survives into the present, there is always the chance that it could be realized. That something missed or not fulfilled could still be realized in another time, could yet be redeemed but without the teleological promise of fulfillment.

The very nature of possibility thus rests on this unpredictability. Hamacher calls this a hunchbacked time because it cuts against the reductionism of linearity (Hamacher 2001, 164). It is proleptic (there is still movement) but not proscriptive (no idea where movement will carry us to). To explain the dynamic between past and present, the force that pushes one into the next, Benjamin (1968) coined the idea of a weak messianic force. This is the force that connects generations: it is the demands past opportunities make on us, the way the past survives in our present. It speaks to our sense of obligation and reciprocity, but it is weak because it cannot necessarily compel a response; it cannot force us to act on the obligations it imposes on us (Hamacher 2001, 165). And since the messianic force cannot compel a response, the possibility it inscribes could always yet be missed. If we understand ghosts and the political potential they inscribe through this lens, then we might have a possible explanation for the fragility of spectral alliances. One that holds out the chance that ghosts can inscribe counter possibilities, but which at the same time does not guarantee the fulfillment of the visions it inscribes. This would mean that while haunting can open up space for imagination, and while it can pose a political provocation, it can still go unanswered. Or it might remain, in the face of monumental structures, as in the case of Thailand, simply unanswerable. We see this duality play out

clearly when we look at Bubandt's (2017) Indonesia and Kwon's (2008) Vietnam.

## Indonesia

Built into the ghostly sightings of Bubandt's (2017) work on "democracy, corruption and the politics of spirits in contemporary Indonesia" is a structure of negation. Collectively, Bubandt's spirits are multiple and heterogenous, disruptive and often destructive. They can be progressive the way Kyai Muzakkin's anti-corruption spirits are (Bubandt 2017, 37). Or they can be conservative phantoms. They might be sentinels of law and order in the form of spiritual indictments and ancestral restitution (Bubandt 2017, 86). Or they might be bringers of chaos, as in the case of the slain Pak Muhammad (Bubandt 2017, 68). More often than not, Bubandt's spirits capture the disappointment of democracy. Democracy, beyond the coevalness he ascribes to spirit and democracy, is an arrangement in which politics occur, a political praxis that intertwined with the otherworldly calls into question the nature of democracy itself. Bubandt describes his spirits as he finds them: flawed, chaotic, performing the negative labor of a problematic democracy.

Bubandt's account is not about how ghosts perhaps work through a dream, keep a progressive dream alive, and make it possible. It is not about how ghosts can lead to new political articulations that are more benign, compassionate, or ethical. Rather, it is about reconfiguring democracy or smashing the dream machine to fit reality. It is about heavy disappointment that requires an entire overhaul of the existing political system.

It would seem almost as if the ghosts he writes about exceed the reality before us and force us to think about what might lie beyond. Bubandt's account suggests, too, that perhaps we cannot demand too much of ghosts because his ghosts are almost ethically apathetic. Each time they appear in his account they disrupt the normal, but they do so in ways that are difficult to fit into a pattern. Perhaps his account pins down the unpredictability of ghosts, the way we can never quite fix ghosts in a telos, which goes back to the idea that ghosts do not telegraph time. They are not just moved along in a continuum of time, but rather they carry time. Ghosts can bend time in different directions and can explode and exceed history in multiple ways but always while eluding fixity. They are difficult, capricious, hopeful—many things at once, and nothing quite at all.

## Vietnam

The seesaw between promise and its falsity, this sense of ghosts being capable of betray-

ing us, runs also through Kwon's (2008) ethnography. There is in Kwon's ethnography a real sense of bleakness, bleakness beyond the perversions of democracy (Bubandt 2017) or modernity (Johnson 2013a; Ferguson 2014). Rather, there is a physical absence. Yet against these structural barriers, in the midst of this absence, imagination leaks on all sides. Poignantly, a mother imagines that adopting a surrogate son might please ancestral specters and oblige them to keep her son alive.

Hanoi's war plan during the Vietnam War "depended extensively on popular support which in turn relied on the success of the strategy, 'children of people' or 'combat mother'" (Kwon 2008, 92). Each southern rural village was to adopt a unit of young freedom fighters from the North, and surrogate mothers from the village would feed and protect these adopted children. These mothers, however, were often part of a revolutionary network of *co so cach mang*, literally men and women who formed the infrastructure of the revolution (Kwon 2008, 69).

Surrogate mothers were thus often activists and members of an underground movement that attempted to undermine the work of the soldiers they were supposed to adopt. Yet Kwon (2008, 94) finds in practices of ancestral worship seeds of a different sociality, one in which enemy mothers and soldiers coexisted. Sometimes local *co so* mother activists who worked in underground revolutionary networks attempted to play on the homesickness of Saigon soldiers to inspire them to desert and helped smuggle them across enemy lines. More often, however, *co so* mothers and mother activists projected their own sense of hope for reunification with their birth children onto their adopted children. One of the popular ways of expressing such feelings of affection and displacement was through ancestral worship:

The *co so* mothers prayed to their ancestors for the safe return of their birth children and went to the animist temples mentioned above, and sometimes to the Buddhist pagoda further away, to pray for the safety of all their children, including their adopted ones. As a result, the old record book kept in the Tiger Temple of Cam Re, which lists donations and the names for whom the donations were made, shows the names of young people killed on both sides of the war as well as the names of those who people remember were from distant places. (Kwon 2008, 95)

The mothers prayed in the hope of seeing their children again, in the hope that their love for the adopted soldiers "would somehow keep their own children loved and protected by unknown mothers in an unknown battlefield" (Kwon 2008, 96). This belief in distant reciprocal actions expressed through worship and ancestral specters was powerful enough that it circumvented "political violence and surveillance."

This depiction of hope, of a mother pleading with a higher authority, encapsulates Vincent Crapanzano's (2003) formulation, which is that hope when agency has not yet

been found. In Kwon's (2008) ethnography, I find both a critique and an elaboration of Crapanzano (2003). Perhaps hope is passive, but in attempting to achieve the possibility of reunification, Kwon's *co so* mother activists actively protect and adopt enemy soldiers. Similarly, when these enemy soldiers find out about their adoptive mothers' underground activism, they rarely choose to betray them. The hope for reunification acts as a form of ethical compulsion that creates a world in which enemies pray for each other. This is not unlike Taneja's (2018) dream of post-partition Delhi or Bliss Lim's (2011) pan-class Philippines, where Aswang narratives led to trans-class alliances. In order, thus, to achieve their ultimate goal, Kwon's surrogate mothers participate in projects of hope, rearranging their lives in ways that might allow them to achieve their hope of reunification. And in those projects are seeds for a radically different body politic, a form of politics in which enemies might learn to live together.

But Crapanzano (2003) is right that the realizations of the praying mothers' ultimate hopes and dreams rest elsewhere, in circumstances that are not in their control. The hopes indexed by ancestral specters thus have the potential to be something, but they are not yet something. The hopes can press for "something to be done" (Gordon 2008) and can even articulate a vision of "something to be done" as in the case of Thailand (Johnson 2013a), but that does not mean they can necessarily bridge the gap between potential and actualization. What happens in that space, in that gap, can lead, as Bubandt (2017) shows us, to radically different outcomes. In the case of the *co so* mothers, their hope of reunification with their soldier sons more often than not turned out to be false. The realities of war would claim the lives of 882,000 Vietnamese men and women. Of those, 655,000 were adult males. Against those statistics there was nothing much that ghosts or any other spectral authority could do.

## Conclusion

It seems right to end with Kwon (2008) because it is in his work perhaps that we capture something of what it is like to live between hope and its absence. It is this that brings me back to Benjamin (1968) and his idea of possibility. In Vietnam, ghosts constitute a field of possibility—the possibility of different kinds of sociality. In fact, it is precisely the emptiness of a son's absence that leads to the generation of new modes of life—a son's absence capacitates imaginary kinship networks that lead a mother to turn to a surrogate son. Ghosts here are generative of multiple possibilities, but they alone cannot guarantee the fulfillment of those possibilities. Often they slip in the face of reality. But if we follow Benjamin (1968), this transience is part of the structure of possibility, and



therein lies some narrow sliver of hope that events may yet turn. After all, if ghostly intrusions are the whispers that Benjamin writes about, there is a chance that even when missed, the possibilities ghostly intrusions encode might still be rescued, or even when these possibilities are deserted they might still survive to be redeemed.

This precarity—that something could always be missed—is perhaps also the precarity of non-linear time. If linear time is a projection, a movement toward a desired future, a projection based on accumulated knowledge, non-linear time invites the impossible and in so doing becomes unpredictable. In all the examples I outline here, ghosts offer the promise of rebirth, the beginning or the hope for a new world. But in all the cases—the capriciousness of Bubandt’s (2017) ghosts, the fragile hope of Kwon’s (2008), the unevenness of Johnson’s (2013a)—the ends are uncertain.

This precarity is a precarity proper to hope because it suggests that the failure of haunting in that particular moment is not a permanent failure. Rather, to imply thus, as this paper has, that haunting can be co-opted and neutralized is not to diminish or invalidate the profoundly important role it plays. After all, ghosts are thresholds of time that, to return to Derrida’s heterogenous temporality, mark the past but also announce the future. In this gesturing toward the future, they, as in the case of Kwon’s (2008) example, share the orientation of hope. Ernst Bloch (1986, 74–75) characterized hope as an expectant emotion, which implies “a real future; in fact of the Not-Yet, of what has objectively not been there” (quoted in McManus 2015, 175). Ghosts might not be able to single-handedly fulfill the future, but by imagining and conjuring visions of alternative futures—of what has not been there—they resist the essentialism of stasis and point toward an ever-extending, open horizon. They open up multiple lines of flight. They can interrogate and unsettle the present. And perhaps the ends are also potential moments of natality or rebirth, little miracles of accidents that stake out the possibility for a much more permanent dislocation.

**Accepted: October 13, 2020**

### **Acknowledgments**

This article emerged out of work done at the London School of Economics in 2018–19. My thanks to Professor Mathijs Pelkmans and Associate Professor Nicholas Long at the LSE. In preparing this piece for publication, I am very grateful to the editors of *Southeast Asian Studies* for their support and the peer reviewers whose insightful and rigorous comments were essential to helping this piece find its final shape. My thanks also to Dr. Chow Pei-Sze, Dr. Ivan Kwek, and Rebecca Zhou.

## References

- Adam, Barbara. 1990. *Time and Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1968. Theses on the Philosophy of History. In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt and translated by Harry Zohn, pp.253–264. New York: Schocken Books.
- . 1963. *Origins of the German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne. New York: Verso.
- Bloch, Ernst. 1986. *The Principle of Hope*, Vols. 1–3. Translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Bubandt, Nils. 2017. *Democracy, Corruption and the Politics of Spirits in Contemporary Indonesia*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 1997. The Time of History and the Times of Gods. In *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, edited by Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd, pp.35–60. Durham: Duke University Press. doi: 10.1215/9780822382317-003.
- Comaroff, Jean; and Comaroff, John L. 1999. Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony. *American Ethnologist* 26(2): 279–303. doi: 10.1525/ae.1999.26.2.279.
- Comaroff, Joshua. 2007. Ghostly Topographies: Landscape and Biopower in Modern Singapore. *Cultural Geographies* 14(1): 56–73. doi: 10.1177/1474474007072819.
- Crapanzano, Vincent. 2003. Reflections on Hope as a Category of Social and Psychological Analysis. *Cultural Anthropology* 18(1): 3–32. doi: 10.1525/can.2003.18.1.3.
- Endicott, Kirk M. 1991. *An Analysis of Malay Magic*. Singapore and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ferguson, Jane M. 2014. Terminally Haunted: Aviation Ghosts, Hybrid Buddhist Practices, and Disaster Aversion Strategies amongst Airport Workers in Myanmar and Thailand. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 15(1): 47–64. doi: 10.1080/14442213.2013.872698.
- Ferrara, Federico. 2013. The Resistible Rise of Thaksin Shinawatra: Crisis, Change and the Collapse of Thailand’s Democracy. In *Conjectures and Continuities in Southeast Asian Politics*, edited by Narayanan Ganesan, pp.151–184. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- . 2010. *Thailand Unhinged: Unraveling the Myth of a Thai-Style Democracy*. Jakarta: Equinox.
- Funahashi, Daena. 2017. In the Name of the People: Magic and the Enigma of Health Governance in Thailand. *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia* 22. <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-22/magic-enigma-health-governance-thailand/>, accessed May 30, 2020.
- Gordon, Avery F. 2008. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hamacher, Werner. 2001. “Now”: Walter Benjamin on Historical Time. In *The Moment: Time and Rupture in Modern Thought*, edited by Heidrun Friese, pp.161–196. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. doi: 10.5949/liverpool/9780853239567.003.0009.
- Hio, Lester. 2017. Follow New Trail to Bukit Brown Landmarks. *Straits Times*. November 19. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/follow-new-trail-to-bukit-brown-landmarks>, accessed May 30, 2020.
- Huang, Jianli. 2014. Resurgent Spirits of Civil Society Activism: Rediscovering the Bukit Brown Cemetery in Singapore. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 87(2): 21–45. doi: 10.1353/ras.2014.0016.
- Jackson, Peter A. 2010. Virtual Divinity: A 21st-Century Discourse of Thai Royal Influence. In *Saying the Unsayable: Monarchy and Democracy in Thailand*, edited by Søren Ivarsson and Lotte Isager, pp.29–60. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Johnson, Andrew Alan. 2013a. Progress and Its Ruins: Ghosts, Migrants, and the Uncanny in Thailand. *Cultural Anthropology* 28(2): 299–319. doi: 10.1111/cuan.12005.
- . 2013b. Moral Knowledge and Its Enemies: Conspiracy and Kingship in Thailand. *Anthropo-*

- logical Quarterly* 86(4): 1059–1086.
- Keyes, Charles. 2006. The Destruction of a Shrine to Brahma in Bangkok and the Fall of Thaksin Shinawatra: The Occult and the Thai Coup in Thailand of September 2006. Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series No. 80. [https://ari.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/wps06\\_080.pdf](https://ari.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/wps06_080.pdf), accessed May 30, 2020. doi: 10.2139/ssrn.1317155.
- Kwon, Heonik. 2008. *Ghosts of War in Vietnam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi: 10.1017/CBO9780511807596.
- Ladwig, Patrice. 2012. Ontology, Materiality and Spectral Traces: Methodological Thoughts on Studying Lao Buddhist Festivals for Ghosts and Ancestral Spirits. *Anthropological Theory* 12(4): 427–447. doi: 10.1177/1463499612471933.
- Lee Chia-Sui. 2017. Ghosts Here and There: Spectral Resistance and the Ethics of Ghosts in Post-colonial Literature. PhD dissertation, Leiden University.
- Lewis, Glen. 2008. Thai Media and “Thaksin Ork pai” (Get Out!). In *Political Regimes and the Media in Asia*, edited by Krishna Sen and Terence Lee, pp. 122–139. New York: Routledge.
- Lim, Bliss Cua. 2011. *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique*. Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Lim, Jessica. 2011. An Uphill Struggle Saving Bukit Brown. *Sunday Times*, June 19.
- McManus, Susan. 2015. *Fictive Theories: Towards a Deconstructive and Utopian Political Imagination*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Morris, Rosalind C. 1998. Surviving Pleasure at the Periphery: Chiang Mai and the Photographies of Political Trauma in Thailand, 1976–1992. *Public Culture* 10(2): 341–370. doi: 10.1215/08992363-10-2-341.
- Ong Aihwa. 1988. The Production of Possession: Spirits and the Multinational Corporation in Malaysia. *American Ethnologist* 15(1): 28–42. doi: 10.1525/ae.1988.15.1.02a00030.
- Sangren, Steven. 1991. Dialectics of Alienation: Individuals and Collectivities in Chinese Religion. *Man* 26(1): 67–86. doi: 10.2307/2803475.
- South China Morning Post*. 2019. Singapore Digs up Graves to Build New Motorways, including Bukit Brown Cemetery Where Early Chinese Immigrants Rest. January 3. <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/2180501/singapore-digs-graves-build-new-motorways-including-bukit>, accessed July 5, 2019.
- Stoller, Paul. 1995. *Embodying Colonial Memories: Spirit Possession, Power, and the Hauka in West Africa*. London: Routledge.
- Straits Times*. 2019. Coups, Protests, Prime Ministers: Timeline of Thailand’s Turbulent Politics over Two Decades. March 22. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/timeline-of-thailands-turbulent-politics-over-two-decades>, accessed July 5, 2019.
- Taneja, Anand Vivek. 2018. *Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Toulson, Ruth E. 2012. The Anthropology of a Necessary Mistake: The Unsettled Dead and the Imagined State in Contemporary Singapore. In *Southeast Asian Perspectives on Power*, edited by Liana Chua, Joanna Cook, Nicholas Long, and Lee Wilson, pp. 93–106. London: Routledge.
- Ünaldi, Serhat. 2016. *Working towards the Monarchy: The Politics of Space in Downtown Bangkok*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.
- . 2014. Working towards the Monarchy and Its Discontents: Anti-royal Graffiti in Downtown Bangkok. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 44(3): 377–403. doi: 10.1080/00472336.2013.842260.
- Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, Susanne. 2013. The Campaign to Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius (批林批孔) and the Problem of “Restoration” in Chinese Marxist Historiography. In *The Challenge of Linear Time: Nationhood and the Politics of History in East Asia*, edited by Viren Murthy and Axel Schneider,

- pp. 155–177. Leiden: Brill. doi: 10.1163/9789004260146\_008.
- Winsted, Richard. 2007. *Shaman, Saiva, Sufi: A Study of the Evolution of Malay Magic*. Charleston: BiblioBazaar.
- Wu, Yenna. 2014. *Li Ang's Visionary Challenges to Gender, Sex, and Politics*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Zaccheus, Melody. 2018. More War Graves beneath Grounds of Bukit Brown? *Straits Times*, May 2. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/more-war-graves-beneath-grounds-of-bukit-brown>, accessed May 30, 2020.
- . 2017. Forest at Greater Bukit Brown Holds Graves of Early Singaporeans. *Straits Times*, May 3. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/environment/forest-holds-graves-of-early-sporeans>, accessed May 30, 2020.