

# Father Red & Uncle Boonmee or A Thai Ghost Story

## A Thai Ghost Story

The little narration I'm going to tell you now is based on a ghost story that my Dad used to tell me. It's about his encounter with a ghost called Father Red (Phô: Daeng, Thai: พ่อแดง). In the 1950s when my father was a young boy, he lived with his family in Bangkok. In the evening he and some other children often went to see a neighbour, a stout lady, who cooked delicious Thai meals but had a kind of uncanny aura around her. However, the children liked her because she always had dainties for them.

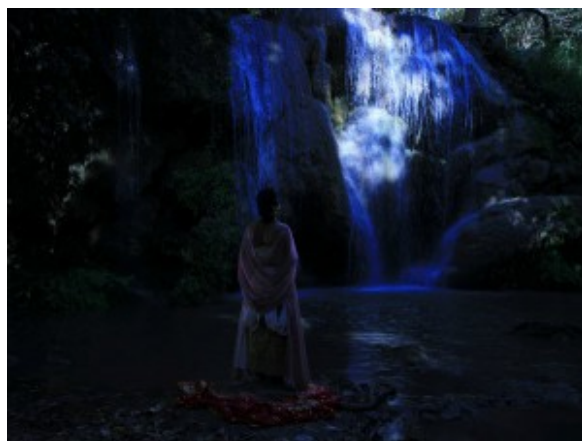
This Thai lady very much enjoyed telling various Thai ghost stories. What is more, she claimed that she could prove that spirits were actually around. Hence, every evening at sunset the lady would light a cigarette for a ghost she called Father Red. She put the cigarette on her front porch and Father Red would come to visit her house... Phô: Daeng would take some pulls on the cigarette. My Dad said that this was really creepy because it always looked in fact as if someone was pulling on the cigarette but of course no one was there. These were strange incidences indeed. Maybe it was only the wind that gave the impression of someone pulling on the cigarette and since my Dad was small at that time, he thought it was a ghost. Nevertheless, it might have been something completely different that is hard to grasp with common sense...

In fact, we will never know...but Father Red became my Dad's own Thai **ghost story** that he has loved to tell me repeatedly.



A scene from Palme D'Or winner 'Uncle Boonme Who Can Recall His Past Lives'. Directed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul (photo credit: macleans.ca)

As a matter of fact, the belief in ghosts and the supernatural is very enduring and popular in Thailand. What is more, in the history of Thai Buddhists, popular beliefs intermingled with myths and legends about spirits and ghosts of local folktales. Thai spirits or ghosts are referred to as as *Phi* (ผี) and mostly they are nocturnal like Father Red, for instance. In Thai culture ghosts and spirits are believed to dwell in trees, burial grounds near Buddhist temples and certain houses in particular those which have been abandoned for a long time.



Ghost story, a scene from the film "Uncle Boonmee Who

## Can Recall His Past Lives”

(photo credit: allmovie.com)

There are different kinds of ghosts in Thai culture: the mountain and forest ghosts are referred to as Phi Khao (ผีเข่า) and Phi Pa (ผีป่า). There are also ghosts named according to ancient spirits that are believed to live in special locations and places. For example, there is the Phi Pan Nam Range (เข่าผีปันน้ำ), “the mountain range that the spirits use to divide the waters”, and Phae Mueang Phi (ผีเมืองฟ้า) are the ghosts which are supposed to dwell there. There are also ghosts who house in trees and they are mostly female spirits referred to as ‘Lady of the Tree’ (ผีต้นไม้). In Thai they are known as Nang Ta-khian and Nang Tani.

On the whole, we can say that the supernatural has had a great tradition in Thai culture. I think it was very uncanny for my Dad to see the invisible Father Red taking his pulls on the cigarette. In fact, we might imagine it as creepy as this scene from the 2010 art drama Thai film ‘Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives’ (Lung Bunmi Raluek Chat, in Thai: ลุงบุญมีระลึกชาติ) when Boonsong comes for supper. Well, let me tell you here in short what this movie is about: Uncle Boonmee is a dying elderly man who returns to his farm to spend his last days there. Thus, he encounters the ghost of his wife, who passed away many years ago, and his son, who has transformed into a monkey spirit (Boonsong). Finally, uncle Boonmee wanders into the nocturnal jungle in their company and lies down in a cave and dies. We may say that uncle Boonmee goes back to nature, i.e. the jungle, where the transition from life to death takes place.

In addition, we may say that not only ghost stories are popular and enduring in Thailand but also the genre of the [ghost and horror movie](#). These films are most often based on old Thai beliefs and folk tales. They all have in common that they conjure up spirits and truly unsettling atmospheres. What

do you generally think about the Thai ghost story and what kind of stories do you know?

Yours, Sirinya

P.S to close this article, a funny Thai ad concerning the 'variety of ghosts' in Thailand ☐