The savage life of ruins: Resistant rhythms in a Bangkokian contact zone

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Abstract: The present study analyzes the everyday rhythms of a ruin in Bangkok, where middle-class residents are in day-to-day contact with the disenfranchised—mostly migrants from northeast Thailand. I study the connections between ruined space, non-hegemonic mobility, the body, and everyday resistance. I do so by comparing and contrasting the bodily comportment of the disenfranchised with the middle-class gaze over the ruin. The middle-class gaze is informed by Thai/global notions about what it means to be “civilized,” and it contains a primordial fear of “savagery”. The ruin is felt before it is thought. The fear of the ruin is a fear of ruination, in the sense of losing material wealth and sliding into the lower class. Natural, resistant rhythms emerge as a result of the body’s encounter with modernity.

Keywords: Bangkok; (the) body; civilization; everyday resistance; mobility; modernity; middle-class; ruins; rhythms; working class

1. Introduction

My rented studio apartment, on the twenty-first floor of a newly built condominium, overlooks the ruins of old Bangkok. In the distance, glass-walled power-towers compete with each other for attention. I can count at least ten high-rises under construction, including the tallest building in Thailand.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This article explores class conflict in an area of central Bangkok undergoing rapid gentrification. The focus is on the body. The question is how different social groups move in ways that reflect their opinions and feelings towards modernization. A way of sitting down, for instance, connotes a certain ideological disposition. My argument is as follows: the middle-classes have embodied the discourse of civilization, and live in fear of dirt and disorder; the disenfranchised, relatively “uneducated,” thrive in chaotic spaces. One of such spaces is Pathumwan Siang Gong, a neighborhood of shophouses that is being torn down. I spent one year recording the rhythm of everyday life in this neighborhood in ruins. The ruin includes not only rubble and derelict buildings but also stray dogs, foul smells, street vendors, and even ghosts that haunt the imagination of the expanding Thai middle-classes.
If I look down, though, I see a mostly empty rectangular space (Figure 1). It used to contain four blocks of houses. The two perpendicular streets separating them are still visible, and when I moved in, about a year and a half ago, the old buildings were still standing. It took the bulldozers four months to flatten the land, but they could have done the job in a week or two. Following contractor orders, the machines moved in sudden bursts of destructive energy, punctuated by curiously quiet weeks, when lush vegetation covered over the rich tropical soil. Eventually, one of the quadrants was paved and turned into an open-air parking lot for the brand new shopping center built across the road. The other three quadrants remained rubble-free, but positively abandoned, until last week, when a small, red bulldozer started clearing the overgrowth and breaking up the asphalt. The land is owned by Chulalongkorn University, a very affluent real estate developer, whose large, leafy, royally sponsored campus lies immediately to the East of the field. South and West of the field, about a dozen blocks of three-storied shophouses (tuek thaeo) await demolition.

These are the remains of a Chinese neighborhood called Pathumwan Siang Gong, or Siang Gong Suan Luang, most of it vacant and in various states of dereliction. The area has been long known for its many car parts and car repair shops. Its narrow sois (lanes) are littered with metal scrap and the ground is covered in layer upon layer of dense black grease, a rubbery substance that creeps up the sidewalks and merges with the bottom of the walls. Pathumwan, though, is a central district of Bangkok, filled with shopping malls and condominiums, and built around the handsome sprawl of the university campus. The ruin was once a prosperous sino-Thai working class community. In the light of gentrification, it is an industrial dinosaur with no part to play in a sanitized service economy. It is, in Mary Douglas’ words, “matter out of place” (1966, p. 36). Cleaning up and clearing out is the new paradigm. There are a few families living in the partly or totally derelict blocks, but the majority have left. The sois and the field attract the disenfranchised, many of whom are Thai migrants from the countryside—taxi drivers, street vendors, and drifters with no clear occupation. These people, along with the rubble, the soil, the grease, the stray dogs, the discarded plastic bags, and the foul tropical smells are also part of the ruin. From where I’m sitting now, in an air-conditioned, Christmas-decorated, Starbucks-inspired, faux-French coffee place, with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the sun-drenched rubble in the field, the ruin is a powerful reminder of the fragility of civilization.

My original intention was to write an essay on non-hegemonic rhythms (Lefebvre, 1992/2014) in turn-of-the-century Bangkok. As I traveled daily between the university campus and my apartment, and as I gazed down into the ruin from my vantage point, I realized that I was being witness to a momentous shift in the neighborhood’s life. The shophouse is giving way to the mall and the condominium. This is, I thought, as important as the introduction of electricity, automobiles, and indeed
shophouses one hundred years ago. I started taking notes and steering my conversations in the direction of the ruin. I did that for about a year. I became especially interested in the comings and goings of the motorcycle taxi riders, and in the strangely alien atmosphere of the local street restaurants. From the developers’ perspective, the ruin is a transient “space of destruction” (Gordillo, 2014), suspended in a liminal state of commercial meaninglessness. The mall patiently waits for something to fill the void. The parking lot, connecting the all-too-real space of the ruin with the self-contained dream world of the shopping center, is a start. Condominium brochures detail the joys of high-rise living, complete with information about shopping and commuting. But the people offering these services at ground level are nowhere to be seen in the leaflets. They do not count in the calculations made by real estate developers. And yet their unaccountability (a form of invisibility) opens up multiple pathways of resistance. Moreover, the disenfranchised blend with the ruin in ways that obviously represent a threat to the lifestyle dreams of the Bangkokian middle-classes. I realized this zone of contact was filled with tensions that deserved to be critically analyzed.

My aim is twofold: first, to demonstrate that disenfranchised bodies are sites of infrapolitical agency; and second, to explore middle-class ideas, and fears, about dirt and uncivilized space.¹ I make a simple statement: disenfranchised bodily rhythms are organic in ways that middle-class rhythms are not. To prove this claim, I measure the savage life of the ruin against the civilized gaze of the mall and the condominium. Antonio Gramsci, writing in the early twentieth century, put it thus: “The history of industrialism has always been a continuing struggle (which today takes an even more marked and vigorous form) against the element of ‘animality’ in man” (Gramsci, 1934/1988, p. 286). I see the ruin as a refuge zone where “animality” thrives in the face of “industrialism”. I am referring to non-hegemonic rhythms that stand outside the mainstream economic flows. They contain profound cultural traits—a way of eating rice, for example—and they reveal hidden truths about human nature, simmering beneath the edifice of civilization. The ruin offers literal and metaphorical insights into this affective underworld (see e.g. Hell & Schönle, 2010). In studying the hidden/savage undercurrents of everyday life, I am indebted to Sigmund Freud and Claude Lévi-Strauss, among others. I will rely on Norbert Elias, one of Freud’s disciples, to offer an embodied analysis of “civilization”. Finally, I borrow the term “resistant rhythms” from Tim Edensor (2010, pp. 16–17) who has studied movement, affect, and the body comprehensively. Mary Douglas’ ideas on pollution (i.e. savagery) have been applied to the Thai experience of modernity in earlier studies. These studies focus on national identity, popular religion, Thai cinema, and the recent political history of the country (Bauman, 2015; Brody, 2006; Herzfeld, 2006; Johnson, 2013). Andrew Johnson’s work on wildness (2012) and ruins (2013) in Thailand is particularly relevant. I take a different route, tracing lines between rubble, the body, and everyday resistance. After a discussion on civilization (siwilai) and its limits in the context of Thai historical modernity, I set out to record and analyze daytime and nighttime rhythms in and around the ruin.

2. The limits of siwilai

Tourist guides rightly portray Bangkok as a city of contrasts. Signs of country life may be found outside the trendiest shopping malls, and some sectors of the middle-classes retain a taste for the simple pleasures of street food. The middle-class itself is expanding rapidly and its limits cannot be easily discerned. Smartphones are ubiquitous, car ownership cuts across social classes, and traveling (to beach resorts and increasingly abroad) is a favorite national pastime. Some “traditional” forms of socioeconomic interaction, such as gift giving and the sincere effort many Thais make to never eat alone, are alive and well in all social strata. But let us focus on friction and assume that in Thailand, as everywhere else, the city is experienced as an everyday trauma: a mass of tiny time-space collisions, instant upon instant of sensory contact with decay. These instants are populated with debris—both real and metaphorical, and both organic and inorganic: tangled telephone cables, an elegant condominium in need of its first paint job, and lungs collapsing for a second as they cope with the smell of an invisible carcass. Needless to say, in the Tropics the lived experience of debris can be particularly pungent.

Proud middle-class Bangkokians would rather deal with fewer contrasts in their day-to-day interactions with the city. Spatial hybridity is both persistent and deceptively timeless, and only highlights
the shortcomings of Siamese modernity. If one reads between the lines, it becomes apparent that the economic development (kwamwattana) of Thailand is understood as a process of catching up with the West. A handful of places in Asia are also looked upon with approval. Singapore is thought to be developed because it’s wealthy, orderly, and clean. Bangkok is not quite there yet because it’s none of those things by comparison. On a symbolic level, development and progress are unequivocally equated with wealth, order, and cleanliness. At the level of affect, dealing with dirt is always going to create feelings of discomfort—shame, denial, disgust ...—and a whole range of habits of avoidance. For instance, the bodily technique of noticing but not looking, and therefore not registering and not remembering is first discovered, then honed to perfection. The result is an imagined but untenable frontier between savagery and what Thais refer to as siwilai, or civilization.

Thongchai Winichakul has described siwilai as “a comparative geography of civilization, given that ‘geography’ can mean not only the arrangement of actual space and the knowledge of it, but also the knowledge and discourses whose effects subsequently constitute spatial practices” (Winichakul, 2000, p. 529). Siwilai, used as a noun, adjective, and verb, is about being modern, “keeping up with the times” (Winichakul, 2000, p. 531). It entered Thailand (then called Siam) as Western colonialism expanded in Southeast Asia in the mid-nineteenth century. Even though Thailand was never colonized, many western ideas were enthusiastically adopted by the Siamese elites. Apart from modernity in the sense of newness and fashionability, siwilai also connotes superior status, civility, material wealth, virtue, and refinement. Embracing modernity put Siam in a favorable position in relation to the West, but also reinforced the preexisting cosmological order. Siwilai was a continuation of the cultural space of the pre-modern city (mueang) that Thai elites understood as an antithesis to both the wilderness (pa) and the countryside (ban nok, “outer villages”).

The making of modern Bangkok may be seen as a process of mueang-nization (Turton, 2000, p. 11) whereby cultural spaces were forcibly imposed over natural ones. Between ca. 1860 and 1930, coinciding with Baron Haussmann’s making of modern Paris and Meiji Japan, the malaria-ridden swamps of old Bangkok were transformed into canals, roads, parks, gridiron streets, Western-style buildings, electric street lighting, and, as a contemporary observer wrote, “a magnificent water supply installed by the Siamese government” (Wood, 2003, pp. 14–15). This was a period in which “dirt” was thoroughly redefined. While an increasing number of Bangkokians learned about the meaning and necessity of civilization, the more marginal sectors of society reacted to siwilai in a visceral manner. The protest against siwilai took the form of resistant rhythms, namely drifting in and out of the utilitarian networks of the capitalist city. They knew, one guesses, what their role at the banquet would be: servants, otherwise ghostly, blending with a natural horizon that was now undistinguishable from poverty and disease. It comes at no surprise that the populace turned themselves away from the perceived panopticism of clean space:

Many lepers in Siam do not care to go into the excellent asylums which the charity of some of their own people, and some foreigners, has provided for them. They do not like the few restrictions under which they are necessarily placed in an institution, and prefer to wander about begging. (Wood, 2003, p. 18)

Modern Bangkok took shape under the guidance of three cosmopolitan and pragmatic rulers—King Mongkut, King Chulalongkorn, and King Vajiravudh. They all understood siwilai as an all-pervading process involving the reconstruction of the capital’s architecture (Povatong, 2011), the reimagining of the national geo-body (Winichakul, 1994), and the sartorial representation of self (Peleggi, 2007). Mongkut (1851–1868) signed a free trade agreement with Britain and had his photograph taken sitting on a chair, next to an English round occasional table, wearing a French-tailored military uniform (see Figure 2). Chulalongkorn (1868–1910) traveled extensively in Europe, demonstrated notable political skills, and is now revered as the Great Beloved King. Vajiravudh (1910–1925) built railways, inaugurated Thailand’s first university—which he named after his father—and translated Shakespeare into Thai. By the 1920s, as Norbert Elias theorized in The Civilizing Process (1939/2000), siwilai manners had “trickled down” from the court to the urban middle-classes. Row after row of
shophouses were built in this period, generating modern economic flows and planting the seeds of the Thai bourgeoisie. The middle classes would eventually challenge royal absolutism by demanding (and obtaining) political participation to match their growing economic power. In the 1930s the absolute monarchy was overthrown and the fascist-styled Marshal Phibun continued promoting siwilai, banning the tooth-blackening custom of chewing betel in 1940 and stipulating the use of shoes and hats “in accordance with civilization” in 1941 (Peleggi, 2007, pp. 150–151). After 1945, the economy of Thailand took off in spectacular fashion around Bangkok, and immigrants from the countryside flocked in their millions towards the expanding capital city. While these khon ban nok (“people from the outer villages”) enjoyed the benefits of economic development, they remained at the bottom of the social ladder and circulated in the spatial margins of the city.

Thus began a complicated dialog between urbanity and rurality (Taylor, 2008, pp. 8–9). In the pre-modern mueang there existed a clear-cut physical and cosmological divide between culture and nature, humanity and savagery. In the modern city, the segregated “geography of civilization” (Winichakul, 2000, p. 529) exists only as a utopia, in the form of malls, parks, and gated communities. But nature filters through the cracks of modernity: a homeless man dozing against the wall, folk songs spilling out of kitchen radios, the grease-stained t-shirt of a dark-skinned street vendor. Middle-class fears reveal a primal conflict between civilization and savagery that has not become in any way resolved in modern or indeed postmodern times. Fear, as I will explain, goes hand in hand with embarrassment—that is, the fear of losing face and status. Dominant ideologies are constantly challenged by the proximity of otherness, poverty, and material decay, all of which are sources of shame. The near total destruction of the forest cover in Thailand in the second half of the twentieth century coincided with the mass migration of rural peoples into Bangkok. In the absence of “proper” nature—except in the distant mountains of the north, where the symbolic threat of the hill tribes was to be neutralized through a process of tourist commodification—rurality came to signify wildness. The bulk of the migrants hailed from the Northeast (Isan), a vast region of ethnic Lao population that, in the
urban cosmology, quickly became synonymous with poverty, dirt, and all the mannerisms of the uncivilized body. Taxi drivers and street vendors of various types are invariably assumed to come from Isan. And many of them still do, despite Isan’s rapid development in recent years.

In the immigrant’s mind, the city represents a path for the fulfillment of capitalist dreams, but it is also a stage for the performance of non-conformity. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Mark Askew observed the persistence of small, family-owned businesses, next to luxury condominiums, which refused to sell their properties “despite tempting offers made by developing companies” (Askew, 2002, p. 247). Economic incentives alone cannot explain how modern space is produced. The ruin, a wasteland devoid of capitalist meaning, overflows with life. Below I pursue this idea, emphasizing the powerful symbolism of rubble and the embodied aspects of ruination. As several scholars and my own fieldwork show, a desire for independence (khawamidsara or idsara)—from external supervision and from scheduled time—is the main reason behind non-conformity. The search for idsara is based on the belief or feeling that modern bodies are essentially unnatural. Resistant rhythms, biocultural in nature, emerge as a result of the body’s encounter with modernity.

There is no question that the disenfranchised in Bangkok seek to increase their participation in the world of conspicuous consumption. Claudio Sopranzetti (2012, 2013) has looked into the ways in which motorcycle-taxi drivers from Isan articulate their desire for capitalist commodities while engaging in practices of everyday and open resistance. I offer a different perspective, by connecting everyday resistance to the resistant rhythms of the body (instead of collective political action) and by suggesting that bodily comportment betrays a universal suspicion of modernity operating alongside the outward expression of capitalist desires. Furthermore, resistance is a spatial practice—as the body moves in subversive ways, a subversive space is produced. Like the lepers of the early twentieth century, the disenfranchised of contemporary Bangkok will often drift towards “dirty” corners. In the ruin, the body is closer to home and free to move in natural ways. In his study of samlor (rickshaw) drivers in the 1950s, Robert Textor explained how this duality was framed in everyday speech:

The Northeasterner draws a basic distinction between Bangkok and the Northeast: Bangkok is sanug [sanuk—fun, amusement] and the Northeast is sabaaj [sabai—happiness, comfort, contentment]. Bangkok gives amusement; the Northeast gives contentment. Bangkok is sanug because of its objects and activities of immense novelty and re-creational interest. Among these are the numerous and improbably fantastic temples, the flashy new automobiles driven by well-dressed people down expensive boulevards, the top-notch boxing matches, the marvelous movies and the gay girls. The Northeast lacks all this flash and glamour, but possesses instead the sabaaj basic sources of a man’s psychological security: his family, home, land, friends & temple. The sanug, immediately gratifying aspect of Bangkok provides a change from the placid routine of home. (Textor, Prabhu, & Husain, Deshmukh, 1956, p. 21)

Siwilai has not been embraced uncritically. The 1970s saw the emergence of a number of Marxist historians who problematized the bourgeois monopoly of modernity while celebrating life in the countryside. The thought that being siwilai may mean becoming wealthy and entering the upper middle-class (High Society or hi-so, as it is known in Thai parlance) sits uncomfortably within a culture that still believes in the Buddhist principles of restraint and love of nature. In a study of contemporary Buddhism, James Taylor has written that following the 1997 economic crisis, which shattered previous dreams of uncompromising modernization, “middle-class urban Thais” developed a sense of “nostalgia for an imaginary rurality” (Taylor, 2008, p. 10). The much-loved King Bhumibol (1950–2016) was well known for his Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy, introduced in the 1970s and reiterated in 1997, as a “middle path” between tradition and modernity that combines “moderation” and “reasonableness” with “self-immunity” from external economic shocks. Nonetheless, siwilai remains entrenched in the Thai psyche (and body) as an aspirational urban lifestyle based on consumption and external appearance. Historians have argued that, because Thailand was never formally colonized, there never was a need to oppose modernity on strong ideological grounds (Peleggi, 2007, p. 150). Thus in Thailand all obstacles to civilization (savagery in its broadest sense) are violently brushed aside, perhaps with more
sheer determination than in other countries of the Global South. I explore these contradictions below, using thick description as a method of enquiry into the everyday life of the ruin.

3. Daytime rubble

Siwilai is under scrutiny from the early hours. The day starts before dawn, as vehicles begin to move up and down the main soi, separating the ruin from the university campus. At five or six in the morning one sees mainly bright-colored taxis, some of which have been parked around the edge of the field during the night. The field and the derelict soi allow for a degree of informality in personal and professional behavior that would not be tolerated elsewhere. The taxi drivers use the field to cool their cars, take a rest, and relieve themselves. In the ruin there is a moral economy (Thompson, 1971) of sorts. Cars are left with the doors wide open and unattended, as the driver finds a hidden spot to urinate. Violent crime is rare in the area—a mugging caused great commotion last year, and a security guard was given the job to distribute warning pamphlets outside the mall. The mugger, the security guard in my own building said pointing in the direction of the ruin, came “from there”. As Elias explained (1939/2000), “civilization” starts at the threshold between interpersonal violence and emotional restraint. This rings even truer in Thailand, where siwilai is infused with widely held Buddhist ideas about community harmony (Parnwell & Seeger, 2008). The Thai understanding of community harmony is similar to Thomson’s moral economy—a localist celebration of pre-modern sociability—but in urban settings the limits of harmony simply coincide with middle-class standards of behavior. Speaking too loudly and gesticulating too passionately belong to the same semantic field as mugging or urinating in public. It is violent bodily action, a sensuous frontier, and a dissonant rhythm.

As dawn breaks in the background, a rooster sometimes crows at the southern end of the field. Farm animals provide visual and in this case noise pollution to the modern streetscape. Like stray dogs and vagrant elephants—pachyderms were banned from the streets of Bangkok a decade ago—farm animals in the city are a source of day-to-day, perhaps unconscious embarrassment. Elias (1939/2000) also noted that shame was the precise mechanism behind the “civilizing process”. Again, this observation is particularly poignant in Thailand, where the fear of losing face is the most effective form of social control. While “face” is a ground rule across all social classes, in contemporary Thailand there is a definite link between face and money, and they both can be estimated on the basis of external appearance (Parsons, 2008). A rooster crowing in central Bangkok makes Thailand sound like a poor country. In more general terms, it could be argued that modern space is utopian in principle. Like the shiny walls of the shopping mall, the ideal modern surface is spotless clean. Arjun Appadurai (2006, p. 9) has written about the “anxiety of incompleteness” typical of all modern nations, that invariably strive towards cultural and racial purity. The same expression may be applied to the spatial projects of modernity. In the high-rise, a container of seamless sophistication, the rooster is a harbinger of chaos. The animal, an anti-pet, is kept outside a makeshift dwelling, the only construction in the field, occupied by at least three men, one of whom drives a pink taxi. The policemen who patrol the area in their motorbikes turn a blind eye on this and other irregularities.

During the day, the sun is sizzling hot, and mobility in the open is reduced to a minimum. In the field, only the shades of the remaining trees provide some living space. Idle couples sit on mats and eat with their hands—not something middle-class Thais would do in polite company. Unsuspecting tourists crumble in shock and mostly immobilized Bangkokians drive across the city in sealed, smoke-windowed, air-conditioned cars. There is a machine-like stiffness in driving techniques, as the driver’s body is caged and strapped, and his or her limbs accommodate to the mechanistic demands of the automobile (Urry, 2004). For over a century, driving has been a sign of distinction. Around 1905 King Chulalongkorn became the foundational hero of Thai driving culture when he made the court parade in automobiles along the newly built boulevards of Bangkok (Askew, 2002, p. 35). Drawing on phenomenology, David Seamon (1979) referred to the unrehearsed coordination of urban bodily movements as body-ballets. There are bourgeois body-ballets specific of car drivers, including of course taxi drivers. A typical taxi driver in Bangkok, however, might drum his fingers on the wheel to the sound of country music, and he might reach periodically for a little plastic bag containing...
glutinous rice—vestiges of rural life. Taxi drivers in this area may also move out of the civilized flow and into the quasi-barbaric space of the ruin, should they need a nap or a bathroom break.

Between seven and eight in the morning traffic becomes dense and four-wheeled taxis struggle to find speed. Tuk-tuks (three-wheeled bikes) and above all motorcycle-taxis make their appearance at this point, de facto dominating transportation services in the soi until midmorning, when the rush hour comes to an end, and again after four or five in the afternoon. Motorcycle taxi riders, construction workers, and gardeners work outdoors, while the bulk of the city’s population take refuge from the intense tropical heat in air-conditioned capsules of white-collar labor and leisure. Only the working-class body is visibly mobile under the sun.

At the intersection between the gates of the University campus, the shopping mall’s main entrance and the derelict field, but confined to the corner of the field, there is a motorbike taxi service (see Figure 3). Three or four large trees, reminders of a built environment that no longer exists, provide shade in the hot hours of the day. At any given time, it is possible to find a handful of young male riders on stand-by. In the past week, the little red bulldozer has worked its way through the sidewalk, so their office space has been compromised. As mentioned above, the bulldozers are unpredictable, and no one knows when the process of ruination will be completed. The leaseholder of a nearby land, on the opposite end of the main street, failed to pay the rent to Chulalongkorn University and—rumor has it—is now in jail. For about a year the place functioned as a self-styled Night Bazaar, but it was mostly vacant. Now there are three open-air restaurants along the edge that operate informally, thanks to rumbling electric generators. Otherwise, the land has been fenced. People on this end of the street are unaware of what exactly is under construction. The office space of the motorcycle-taxi service is a menagerie of objects that, compared to the branded newness of the shopping mall, seem eternal and transient at the same time. Even the old trees are strangely out of context. There is a small, white stone bench, of the kind sometimes found in provincial road restaurants, under a large Domino’s Pizza umbrella. There is an empty telephone box too. Plastic bags and food containers hang from the lower tree limbs. The men park their bikes on the last portions of even ground and wait.

It is not difficult to see them squatting in the shade, a highly symbolic posture that brings them closer to nature, poverty, and the countryside. Many of the taxi and motorcycle-taxi riders in Bangkok come from the rural Northeast. Tim Ingold has explained that the squatting position, not only in Asia but also in western societies, “is reserved for those on the very lowest rung of the social ladder” (2004, p. 39). This is the case of modern Thailand, where squatting represents an affront to siwilai.
The middle classes do not squat, not in public anyway. Sitting down on chairs, as King Mongkut did to showcase siwilai, is one of the postural rules of the modern, globalized body. A “fourth of mankind,” Gordon Hewes wrote in 1955, “squats in a fashion very similar to the squatting position of the chimpanzee, and the rest of us might squat this way too if we were not trained to use other postures beyond infancy” (Hewes, 1955, p. 231). Genital exposure and the fact that it is a position of defecation also explain the polluting overtones of squatting and its symbolic distance from the bourgeois dominant ideology. The riders are well aware of the connotations of their posture, and by choosing to rest in the deep squatting position they both assume and challenge the embodied rules of siwilai. Squatting, in short, signifies animality and filth. It is a proud gesture and a marker of habitus of the “peasant in the city”.

Everyone seems to know someone who has been involved in a terrible accident while riding on the back of a motorcycle-taxi. Riders are said to be young and reckless and sometimes inebriated. This is a cliché but, like all clichés, it contains an element of truth. Motorcycle-taxis are licensed, however, and even if they are not mentioned in the massive billboards that advertise the swanky condominium lifestyle, they move many of their residents in and out of the soi (Askew, 2002, p. 248; Sopranzetti, 2013). They take customers to the subway and the SkyTrain, and into the campus. Their body ballet is more aggressive and arrhythmic than that of the car drivers, as the motorcycles move swiftly between traffic. The gestures of the riders are, to follow up the metaphor, closer to Thai boxing than they are to ballet. Most of the riders wear a helmet, which seems to be a ubiquitous practice in Bangkok (customers almost never are offered one). But they will challenge all other road regulations, providing they can get away with it. Sixty baht ($1.5), or approximately the value of two local rides, is the going rate when stopped by the police. There exists a balance between bribes and leniency, which is also integral to the moral economy of the soi. Widespread corruption, another incarnation of dirt, is acknowledged by the Thai middle-classes with gestures of shame (such as lowering their eyes). Riders will joke about corruption in front of the inquisitive foreigner, and they will continue using the sidewalk and every conceivable shortcut, often moving against traffic, riding as fast as they possibly can. There are individual differences between them, though, and one gets to learn which riders are more likely to crash.

Their bodies are exposed and so are the bodies of their customers. Since virtually all motorcycle-taxi riders are male, female passengers find themselves in a vulnerable position (Sopranzetti, 2013, pp. 75–77). In a culture were bodily contact between men and women in public is frowned upon, traveling on the back of a motorbike carries some stigma. Most female passengers are young, clerks and students who, it is assumed, cannot afford the comfort of a four-wheeled taxi. Some (by no means all) Chulalongkorn University students, however, will choose the motorcycle taxi over the free-but-sluggish shuttle bus when they are running late for class. It goes without saying that female passengers are a topic of conversation among riders in private moments of conviviality. The bodily exposure of riders and customers, the brisk physicality of their movements, and the proxemics involved in carrying passengers also contribute to the “wild” (or not quite modern) halo of the motorcycle-taxis. From the riders’ perspective, speed and unstructured mobility are synonyms with liberty. Khwamidsara pen sing thi sam khan thi sud—“Independence is the most important thing”—is something I have heard, phrased in different ways, on several occasions. These men could have other jobs in the service and construction industries, but they have chosen to live dangerously because, as Claudio Sopranzetti’s fieldwork confirms, freedom from schedules “and from bosses who look down… on them” is a central part of their urban identity (Sopranzetti, 2013, p. 15).

4. Nighttime rubble

Night falls around six-thirty, when the streets of Bangkok are filled with pedestrians, flashing mega-screens, and ineffable traffic jams. I sometimes eat dinner at a restaurant that lies on the southern end of the field, facing the shopping mall and right across the street from the shaft where the rooster crows in the morning. It is one of the last establishments of its kind in this area. One by one, the buildings have been boarded up with large metal plates, placed strategically along the outer edge of the sidewalk. The message is clear: not even pedestrians are welcome any more. The former
residents, who worked at the various garages on the ground floor and who lived with their families upstairs, have been dispersed all over the city. It appears that many have moved to the suburbs south of the river, although evidently some residents will occupy the derelict buildings up until the day when the bulldozers come knocking on the door. Lit windows here and there give them away in the nighttime. Walking along the pitch-black streets, the ground feels rubbery with grease, and one can easily discover savage rhythms that occur beyond the civilized frontier of electric lighting: men sleeping on car bonnets and sitting in silence in the dark, and occasional cooking fires on the pavement.

This particular corner has not yet been boarded up (see Figure 4). There is a constellation of three or four lit windows at the crossroads, and an outdoor restaurant on the sidewalk. Months ago I was told by one of the waiters that they were planning to close down for good in December. They are still in business as I write these words at the year’s end. There is a large, new indoor market a couple of blocks away, where some of the street sellers from Pathumwan Siang Gong, and many more from other parts of the city, have been relocated. But higher rents, regulated schedules, tighter hygienic standards, and a general loss of ̈dsara ̈ are sacrifices not everyone is willing to make. Not many vendors moved to the doomed Night Bazaar on the opposite end of the street either. While the indoor market retains at least some of the “aura” of the street restaurant—it is an inexpensive canteen for university students—the Night Bazaar was a textbook case of urban rebranding and gentrification (Smith, 1996). Michael Herzfeld has made an interesting comparison between the contemporary death of the Greek agora (an archetypal public space) and the disappearance of the traditional Thai market place (talad), a process of ruination of both architecture and local communities that Herzfeld refers to as “spatial cleansing” (Herzfeld, 2006). The expression conveys the violence of ethnic cleansing and also highlights the symbolic and literal importance of cleanliness in the making of modern space.

This restaurant would not pass a health inspection. It is run by an extended family of ten or eleven migrants from Isan. Everything here—from the lack of “customer service” to the taste of fish sauce to the occasional whiff of rotten water—is a frontal challenge to the siwilai values of cosmopolitan Bangkok. Flavors, smells, and sounds grow in intensity as the sense of sight dwindles after dark. In the distance, the lights of the mall and the high-rise shine dully behind the deep, black void of the field (see Figure 5). The tropical ruin comes to life here as a “wildly sensual” and almost synesthetic experience (Edensor, 2007, p. 5). The music in the old stereo is a mix of unfashionable Thai rock songs and Northeastern morlam (country-Lao) tunes that stands in sharp contrast with the numbing Christmas muzak at the shopping mall. Electric power is taken from the grid—there is no generator—and in all likelihood the restaurant has no license to operate (see Yasmeen & Nirathron, 2014). More importantly, the intangible atmosphere of this place, that functions at the heart of a dead zone, is in itself an “art of resistance” (Scott, 1992) against the blandscapes lurking across the field. The restaurant is popular with students (although many of my own students admit never indulging
in street food—their status is at stake) and groups of young men who drink beer and bad whisky for hours on end. When the last customers wobble away, well after midnight, the restaurant shuts down. During the Thai New Year, in April, the family heads back to their province (jangwad) in Isan.

Much of the ruin disappears at night and yet its presence becomes manifest in more visceral and threatening ways. The overgrowth in the field (now limited to the southwestern corner) is almost invisible but its dark, quiet presence is felt with intense reality by those who walk along the edge. My Thai dinner companions at the Isan restaurant, both male and female, have several times laughed nervously when mentioning the ghost (phi) that hides in the bushes. This is not a park, it is nature itself, the creeping wilderness (pa) taking over the city (mueang). They also claim that a ghost inhabits the derelict building that stands at the corner of the main soi. When I asked why the ghost lived in that particular building, they pointed at the signs of human occupation—an old green sofa against the metal plate, graffiti that reads “raw rice” followed by a telephone number, and litter on the ground (see Figure 6). On a different night, coming back from dinner, we saw a firelight flickering inside the building. My female companion lowered her head and increased her pace, moving away as she walked, as she would do in the presence of a monk. Thais often situate ghost sightings in places where something violently tragic, such as murders and suicides, has happened in the past.4 I wonder
if the fear of the ruin (and the ghosts inhabiting it) grew bigger and stronger following last year’s mugging. After all, as the security guard in my condominium said, the mugger came “from there”. Not all Thais believe in ghosts, but most do, including highly educated portions of society. The animist component of Thai Buddhism is, again, acknowledged with embarrassment in the context of *siwilai*. The ghosts of the ruin speak of a primordial fear of the primitive embedded in the bourgeois mind—what Sigmund Freud referred to as the uncanny—that, beyond the specificities of Thai culture, is typical of all modern societies (see Johnson, 2013). Ghosts also shows the subversive potential of derelict space. The ruin is meant to be a nothing space, and yet there is something moving in the dark.

The magic power of the ruin in the nighttime is comparable to that of the university campus. The turmoil created by last year’s mugging was due to the proximity of the holy campus, and warning posters were also circulated in all the faculties. Chulalongkorn University has a special status among all the Thai public institutions of higher education. It was founded in 1917 as one of the architectural projects of *siwilai* and it bears the name of the Great Beloved King. Formal education in Thailand dates back to the days of the “children of the monastery” (*dek wat*) who traditionally learned how to read and write while working as servants to the monk. Many contemporary schools are attached to temples where children learn religious rituals, ways of showing respect to the monks, and general standards of delicacy, such as the polite way of sitting on a chair (Terwiel, 2012, p. 58). The temple provides ethical and spiritual training, embedding in the mind and body of the child the tenets of *siwilai*. The university is an extension of the temple/school, and retains some of its religious qualities. For instance, the teacher (*ajarn*) is a fatherly figure who should represent all the virtues expected from a monk (also called *ajarn*). On top of the Thai education system rests triumphantly Chulalongkorn University—“The Pillar of the Kingdom,” “the most prestigious university in Thailand,” and also the most sacred, face-laden, culture-making space. As they exit the gates of the carefully manicured campus in the evening, the uniformed students carry with them the magic of Chulalongkorn University; the ruin that looms across the road—the filth breathing in the darkness—is all the more ominous because of this.

Students walk out of the sacred campus and into the shopping center, a modern temple of leisure and consumption (see Figure 7). This is the franchise frontier, home of Starbucks, Domino’s Pizza, and countless Japanese chain restaurants. It is, in Marc Augé’s words, a non-place, where all we can expect is the experience of “solitary contractuality” (Augé, 1995, p. 94). In theory, the shopping center is a sealed and safe middle-class playground. In practice, the place is constantly invaded by dirt. Alison Brody’s fieldwork (2006) showed how the cleaners at the mall, mostly women from Isan, are instructed to be invisible, machine-like representatives of a cleaning company, but they still manage to create subversive flows that replicate the spirit of the countryside. There is no risk here of

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*Figure 7. The main entrance to the mall, seen from the university walls. The field and motorcycle-taxi service are on the left. The Tesco Lotus shop, out of frame, is downstairs to the right.*
romanticizing resistance, as Lila Abu-Lughod warned (1990). All one needs is a certain ethics of analysis to be able to separate vulgar acts of discrimination (the shopper’s reluctance to buy every product advertised, for instance) from those that level the field between the haves and the have-nots. Take the minimum-wage, overworked clerks at the 24 h Tesco Lotus Express convenience store, located in the basement of the mall. They cross a boundary when they let a stray dog sleep inside, and they upset the order of things (see Figure 8).

It is now 10 pm and the cars have left the parking lot. As I stand in line at the Tesco Lotus Express, I see the last of the working motorcycle-taxi riders (their schedule is entirely up to them) buy energy drinks. Each pay 10 baht ($0.3) for a 150 ml bottle of M-150, a brand also popular with truck drivers and construction workers. They must be in their early twenties. They have slight, dark physiques and their dirty feet protrude out of thin-soled, worn-out sandals. There is a quiet and reserved air about them, as if here they were indeed “matter out of place”. Next in line, a cluster of tall, robust, white-shirt-wearing students speak lively, buy abundant snacks, and occupy the place with ease.

5. Conclusions
Who is resisting is as important a question as what exactly is resistance. Whether or not a taxi driver reaching for a bag of glutinous rice in his pocket qualifies as “resistance” is of course a matter of interpretation. My own interpretation is that it does. His is a gesture that, combined with other gestures, forms a resistant rhythm: “alternative modes of spending time, different pacings and pulses which critique normative, disciplinary rhythms and offer unconventional, sometimes utopian visions of different temporalities” (Edensor, 2010, p. 16). I have described the atmosphere at the Isan
restaurant as an “art of resistance”. It is an “art” because it is creative in ways that formal businesses cannot be. And it is resistance because it reflects the restaurant’s resilience in the face of total destruction. They have not been physically removed, but they have certainly received the invitation. And they have chosen to look the other way, just like the policemen do as they patrol the streets in their motorbikes. The chaos of the ruin and the general decay of Pathumwan Siang Gong trigger survival strategies and important forms of collective solidarity. There are more obvious examples of everyday resistance. The motorcycle-taxi rider is “owner of the map” (Sopranzetti, 2013) and master of the rush hour. When he rests in the squatting position at the intersection, he is assuming his social rank, but he is also sending a signal that travels in space, to everyone in sight, and time, to the 1860s. King Mongkut’s photograph (Figure 2) had didactic intent. The poor learned to respect the modern version of the monarchy (and eventually the nation too) but remained skeptical about the small print of siwilai. John Thomson, the photographer, left a written account of the occasion:

His dress was of a spotless white, which reached right down to his feet: his head was bare. I was admiring the simplicity and purity of this attire, when his majesty beckoned me to approach him, and informed me that he wished to have his portrait taken as he knelt in an attitude of prayer … All was prepared beneath a space in the court, which had been canopied and carpeted for this special purpose; when, just as I was about to take the photograph, his majesty changed his mind, and without a word to anyone passed suddenly out of sight … at length the King reappeared, dressed this time in a sort of French field marshal’s uniform. (quoted in Veal, 2013 [electronic source])

Elias would argue that this is the exact moment when Thailand became siwilai—when the King, not without doubts but decidedly, rose from the ground and sat on a chair. The canopied and carpeted space brings to mind the shopping mall, a canopied and carpeted space in its own right, removed from natural light, cultural context, and the soil. The ruin offers glimpses into the bare bedrock of siwilai, an anomaly in the cityscape, and tangible proof of the inevitability of decay. The ruin is felt before it is thought. The fear of the ruin is a fear of ruination, in the sense of losing material wealth and sliding into the lower class. Walter Benjamin famously put it thus: “With the destabilizing of the market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 13). The shophouses of Pathumwan Siang Gong had once, to be sure, been the centerstone of a wave of gentrification that violently wiped out the timber homes of the unproductive poor. But this—shophouse development at the turn of the twentieth century—was the first of such waves, that is, the earliest example of land being “used as a commodity for sale and rental” (Askew, 2002, p. 31). The process is violent because it is as swift and shocking as only modernity can be—the trees that shaded the motorcycle riders are suddenly gone this afternoon—but also because ruination is a rite of passage. “Ruins,” John-Beasley Murray writes, “incarnate the persistence of the past as much as its obsolescence and the possibility that the past may catch up with the present, returning us to some new stone age or reinvigorated barbarism” (Beasley-Murray, 2010, p. 214). The thin veneer of civilization seems even thinner in developing countries. In Bangkok, nature has more to do with poverty than it has to do with beauty, hence the awesome power of the ruin. The ghosts inhabiting the ruin are a reminder of the fragility of life, culture, and status.

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Notes
1. I do not intend to provide a definition of the Bangkokiian middle-classes. Obviously its limits are unclear. Chulalongkorn University students are assumed to belong to the upper echelons of the middle classes. The elite, in my view, is “the 1%,” some of whom also study at CU.
2. Interestingly enough, the Thai phrase for “informal economy” is sethakit theuan, which literally translates as “wild economy” (Johnson, 2012).
3. On chairs, Simon de la Loubère, leader of the French diplomatic mission to Siam in 1687, wrote: “They have no chairs or seat but bulrush mats: no carpets, but what the King bestows on them. The rich, indeed, have cushions; but they are used only to lean on, never to sit on” (in Richardson, 1759, pp. 230–231).
4. The indie film *Tropical Malady* (Sadpralat—“Monster”—in Thai; Aipatchong Weerasetthakul, 2004) is a surreal love story set in a provincial town, that explores the ghost tradition in modern Thailand (see Creed, 2011). The movie opens with a fitting line from the Japanese novelist, Ton Nakajima: “All of us are by nature wild beasts. Our duty as human beings is to become like trainers who keep their animals in check and even teach them to perform tasks alien to their bestiality”. *Tropical Malady* is packed with allegories of capitalist hubris—from landscapes of unemployment and boredom, to tales of greed and ruination—at the crux between the city (mueang), the country (ban nok), and the forest (pa).

5. A good example is the luk thep, or “child angels,” that made headlines in early 2016. Luk thep are dolls that their owners treat as if they were children, in the hope that these otherwise inanimate objects will bring them good luck. Many Thais (even if they themselves believe in ghosts) condemn this behavior, clearly because it deviates from their aspirational standards of civility. The dolls become an embarrassment when the international media started reporting on them. Most scandalous was the public engagement of some middle-class Thais with luk thep animism, for instance by bringing airplane tickets and buying restaurant meals for the dolls. Speaking to the BBC, anthropologist Asama Mungkornchai noted the “current sense of insecurity among the Thai middle class, especially when it comes to the economy” (BBC, 2016, www.bbc.com). The Thai government stepped in, looking to save face, with warnings against the waste of money and sanity in what was labeled an industry of fraudulent charlatanerie.

6. There is no room here to discuss at length the barbaric source of pollution.

References


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