

**From Civilizing Mission to Rationalizing Gaze:
A Genealogy of Urban Spirit-medium Cults
in Contemporary Thailand¹**

Pattana Kitiarsa

Abstract

What is the genealogy of urban spirit-medium cults in contemporary Thailand? How and why have the cults become “remnants of irrationality” and “subjects of control” in Thai official and rationalist discourses? These questions will be addressed in this essay. Drawing on two controversial cases against spirit mediumship in two different periods of the modern Thai history (mid 19th and late 20th centuries, I argue that urban spirit-medium cults had survived the civilizing campaigns in the early Siamese modernization era and have eluded the bourgeois, rationalizing gazes of the media-saturated world. Official authorities, the Buddhist Sangha, and the rising middle class (as represented by scholars and mass media) have used their technologies of power to shape and reshape popular religious beliefs and practices, but their efforts and rationalizing gazes are far from absolute and complete. People, especially members of urban working class and rural villagers, are still very much in control of their religious world. This paper illustrates popular voices concerning religious freedom and individual choices in contemporary Thailand.