



## WATCH THIS SPACE

Could a more responsible approach to tourism emerge once the industry recovers? **TRAVEL B10**



## KEEP UP APPEARANCES

Don't let working from home cramp your style. Here are seven loungewear brands **FASHION B11**



The entrance to the So Heng Tai Mansion in Bangkok. It was built in the early 19th century and is the oldest private residence in the Thai capital, according to the Posayachinda family who own it. Photos: Tibor Krausz

# Fading grandeur

The roof leaks, floorboards are loose and it is haunted, but the Hokkien-style house in Bangkok that has been home to one family for 200 years is not for sale at any price

Tibor Krausz  
life@scmp.com

The Posayachinda family will not sell their old house. Not even for a vast sum, although it has fallen into disrepair and they cannot afford to renovate it.

The Sino-Thai family's spacious ancestral home in a quaint riverside neighbourhood of Bangkok is a photogenic edifice in the Hokkien style with Thai elements.

Made of teakwood and brick, the house is called the So Heng Tai Mansion after the family's progenitor, who migrated to the kingdom of Siam from Fujian province two centuries ago. The itinerant merchant struck it rich and built a grand home in Bangkok on the Chao Phraya River in the early 19th century.

Although its exact age is unknown, the family believe their house is the city's oldest private residence. Recently, a Chinese-Thai tycoon offered 2 billion baht (HK\$500million) for it, they say. The windfall from the sale would have made Duangtawan Posayachinda, 76, and her three children envitably wealthy. They turned the offer down.

"It's a lot of money. We could have split it four ways," says Poosak Posayachinda, 55, the oldest son, who is the custodian of the house, where he shares a room with his wife and 12-year-old son. "For 100 million baht we could build a replica of our house someplace else. But selling it would be like selling out," he says. "I am the eighth generation in my family living here. It's my heritage."

His family's inheritance occupies a 17,222 sq ft plot of land set back from the river in the historic district of Talat Noi ("Little Market"). The walled compound opens into an alley via a double-paneled crimson door, like that of a Chinese shrine, flanked by ornamental lanterns.

Adorning the recessed entrance are feng shui mirrors, protective amulets, auspicious symbols and wall paintings with chipped porcelain reliefs of robed deities. Golden Chinese characters proclaim that "Heng Tai persevered in Thailand after arriving from afar".

Inside is an ageing architectural wonder straight out of ancient China. Three elongated, two-storey buildings are arranged in an inverted U-shape around a square courtyard, which is now occupied incongruously by a diving pool.

**Having this house is a big burden on us. But it's also a privilege**

JARIYA POSAYACHINDA

**Clockwise from below: a wall painting with porcelain relief adorns the entrance; a hall on an upper-floor veranda; a diving pool was added in 2004.**

Poosak, a scuba diving instructor, built the pool in 2004 so he could hold classes on the premises. "Without income from this pool I could not have maintained the house," he says.

Members of his family lack the means to restore their time-worn residence to its former glory. Even its upkeep strains their finances. "There's always something that needs repair. A bit here, a bit there," Poosak, a chatty, paunchy man says in idiomatic English.

"Having this house is a big burden on us," says Jariya, 53, his

sister, who works as a fund manager at a brokerage firm. "But it's also a privilege."

Jariya points at the swallowtail roofs. "As children we climbed up there and played hide-and-seek," she recalls. "But the roofs are in a bad way now."

Their original tiles were donated to a Buddhist temple when she was a girl. They were replaced by a contractor with corrugated cement sheets fashioned like tiles. The renovation was botched and the old wooden beams have cracked under the extra weight.

"The roofs leak badly when it rains," Jariya says. "Repairing them would cost many millions of baht. We don't have that much money."

The rest of the house is in similar shape. On the breezy upper-floor verandas with shady overhangs many of the teak floorboards have come loose. Concrete pillars, once fortified with sugar cane juice, are veined by cracks. A brick wall on the south side is at risk of collapse.

Most of the residence's two dozen rooms are in various stages of disrepair, their interiors decaying behind padlocked doors. On the ground floor several rooms have been turned into cluttered storage areas. They bear the

marks of a devastating flood in 2011, which inundated the premises in chest-high water for weeks. "The building got badly damaged," Jariya says. "We lost three rooms in that flood."

She now lives in a house built next door on the riverfront where locals used to dry wet rice and fish in the sun. The third sibling has moved across town. Duangtawan and Poosak have remained in the old house, living in modest quarters of their own.

For all their home's fading grandeur, mother and son don't room much better than their neighbours who occupy breeze block shophouses in a tight-knit community once dominated by smoky smithies and now by greasy car-parts shops. They don't seem to mind.

"This is like a small village in a big city. You know all your neighbours," Duangtawan says as she sits on a bench outside her house, tearing banana leaves into wrappings for her home-made desserts. Passing locals greet the elderly woman warmly. "If you need help, you'll shout and people will come running," she says.

But times are changing. Rich in history, Talat Noi is becoming a hipster hang-out, with old homes repurposed into guest houses, art galleries and cafes. The Posayachindas, too, have opened up their residence to visitors. The price of admission is a drink sightseers are asked to buy before they head



Duangtawan Posayachinda prepares banana leaves for wrapping home-made desserts beside the So Heng Tai Mansion.

upstairs to the airy, unoccupied second floor for a peek.

"Some tourists don't show respect," Jariya says, as a young woman climbing up an elevated side of the pool for a selfie loses her balance and almost knocks over a ceramic vase.

The So Heng Tai Mansion, which has served as a location for several film and television dramas, embodies the predominantly Chinese neighbourhood's old-world aesthetics.

"See that big green building next door?" Poosak says, indicating a barn-like structure that houses a riverside restaurant. "It used to be a warehouse for my family's trading port," he says. "Many immigrants from China came here with a pillow and a mattress. They got their first meal and first job there."

Chinese migrants began settling in Bangkok in the late 18th century and helped turn a sleepy town into a bustling new royal capital. So Heng-tai was among them.

The Fujian trader, family lore has it, won a lucrative royal concession for the export of birds' nests to China. He also ran a long-distance financial service for Chinese migrant workers who wanted to remit their incomes back home. He settled down and married a local woman.

His manorial home was built in an area of town where many Chinese settlers still lived in shacks of wood, bamboo and rattan. "In a room upstairs gold ingots were kept in iron trunks," Duangtawan says. Little bells were hung from the ceiling and they would start ringing if someone got onto the roof to steal the treasure.

Members of the family's early generations were successful landowners, businessmen and tradesmen. They sired several prominent Sino-Thai families, whose members include billionaires, celebrities and politicians.

"They came from this house," Poosak says, proudly.

His own branch of the family has not prospered as much in recent decades. His grandfather was a court photographer for King Chulalongkorn around the turn of the 20th century. His father, Chenglong, was born in 1913 and stayed in the house until his death at age 73.

Old photos of him adorn a family altar in an open-fronted hall on the upper floor of the central building with decorative red wood panels.

"My father loved this house," Poosak says. "I promised him I would look after it. He is here with us in spirit, along with our other ancestors."

He means that literally. The old house has long been haunted, he says, with spooky goings-on at night. It is not the ghosts that bother him, though. Cobras lurk at the back where he keeps kennels for the dozens of beagles he breeds for sale. "They have killed two of my dogs," Poosak adds.

One day, he says, his son Pakanon will have to decide for himself whether to take over the burden of preserving the old house. "I will try to do it because it's our heritage," the boy says. "I think if my ancestors came back to life, they would be very proud of us."

