Preserving Sacred Space: Identity of the Chinese Temples in Thailand

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Abstract

Chinese temples serve as enduring symbols of Chinese identity that have been faithfully passed down through generations of ancestors. In the lives of Chinese diaspora communities, the preservation of their identity is a fundamental element. The Chinese community has been settled in Thailand for more than two centuries. Many studies proposed that the Chinese were assimilated by the Thai, but this work found that there remains a strong identity through Chinese temples in Thailand. To understand the roles of these Chinese temples in preserving identity, the study embraces a qualitative case study methodology which includes document analysis, participant observation, and in-depth interview. This study explores how Chinese shrines sustain their identity through the community engagement in Nakhon Pathom Province, Thailand. The study also identifies the challenges that occur with Chinese temples trying to sustain a Chinese identity. The study found that Chinese temples in Thailand actively engage with the community in various ways, fostering a sense of belonging, cultural preservation, and community support. Chinese temples in Thailand also play a multifaceted role in the lives of the Thai Chinese community. They serve as religious centers, cultural hubs, educational institutions, and support networks, all of which contribute to the cultural vibrancy and cohesion of the community while also enriching the broader Thai cultural landscape. However, Chinese temples or shrines in Thailand face several challenges, some of which are unique to their cultural and religious context in the country.

Keywords: Chinese identity, Chinese shrines, Chinese temples, community engagement, Thailand

The history of Chinese migration to various parts of Southeast Asia has ancient roots, tracing back through the annals of time. It is imperative to underscore that the timing and magnitude of Chinese immigration displayed substantial variation among Southeast Asian countries. Especially noteworthy are the significant influxes of Chinese immigrants during the 19th and early 20th centuries, a period characterized by a surge in Chinese arrivals to Thailand. There are indeed Chinese temples in Thailand that date back earlier than the 19th century, but many of the surviving structures, particularly in urban areas like the Mueang District, Nakhon Pathom, were either established or underwent significant reconstruction during the 19th century when Chinese migration intensified. While some earlier sites do exist, the 19th century marks a notable period of growth in Chinese temple construction due to increased migration and trade activities. This surge was primarily precipitated by the promise of economic opportunities and the backdrop of political turmoil in China.

Chinese temples or Chinese shrines, known as *Saan Jao*, serve as enduring symbols of Chinese identity that have been faithfully passed down through generations of ancestors. In the lives of Chinese diaspora communities, the preservation of their Chinese identity is a fundamental element. This identity finds expression through a rich tapestry of rituals, including those associated with marriages, funerals, ancestral worship, the observance of hungry ghost festivals, and the celebration of feast days dedicated to the regional gods of various dialect groups (Yan et al., 2020). Over time and across diverse geographical locales, a multitude of preservation strategies have emerged. These strategies are aimed at either preserving or redefining what it means to be “Chinese” in the context of changing cultural landscapes and global connections.

Despite the passage of time and the evolution of generations, Chinese temples continue to stand as steadfast indicators of Chinese cultural identity. These sacred places can be found scattered throughout the various port cities of Southeast Asia. Thailand, in particular, boasts a significant presence of these important temples across many of its provinces. Nakhon Pathom province, second only to the capital city of Bangkok, holds the distinction of having the second-highest number of Chinese temples in the country (Thai Department of Registration Administration, 2024).

Understanding the role of Chinese temples in community engagement is crucial for safeguarding Chinese cultural identity. This research seeks to explore the significant functions of Chinese temples in maintaining Chinese identity, while also addressing the challenges these temples face in Thailand. Despite the complex process of Chinese cultural assimilation into Thai society, Chinese shrines have shown remarkable adaptability, embracing these changes and promoting harmonious coexistence. Chinese temples serve as shared spaces where Chinese cultural practices are integrated into the broader Thai cultural landscape, fostering intercultural dialogue and understanding. Rituals and festivals held at these temples are often attended by both Chinese descendants and Thai locals, creating opportunities for cultural exchange and mutual respect.

Literature Review

The preservation of Chinese identity within diasporic contexts, particularly in Southeast Asia, has long been a focal point of scholarly inquiry. Although numerous studies have examined various aspects of Chinese identity in the region (Kesmanee, 2013; Nilsanguandecha, 2018; Song, 2020), there is limited research specifically addressing Chinese identity preservation in Thailand (Skinner, 1957; Thomson, 1993). Much of the literature emphasizes the role of Chinese shrines in sustaining cultural continuity, underscoring their historical, cultural, and social significance. For instance, Nilsanguandecha (2018) analyzed 124 Chinese shrines in Bangkok, illustrating their role in fostering community cohesion, while Pattranupravat (2008, 2009) explored how shrines in Samutsongkhram Province reinforce social bonds through ritual practices.

Recent studies have focused on the adaptation of Chinese shrines to urbanization pressures. Phumpij and Bualek (2023) examined transformations in Bangkok shrines under urban development, while Juntaronanon and Thongsamrit (2018) highlighted the role of sacred spaces in preserving cultural identity in Samut Prakan. Similarly, Krueaphat and Laeheem (2021) and Krueaphat and Jong (2018) explored the preservation of cultural heritage through Mahayana Buddhist shrines in Phuket, while Chanasakun (2017) and Zhengwei and Kaewbucha (2024) discussed shrine architecture's integration into tourism and heritage promotion. Saengthong et al. (2025) documented the revival of Chinese cultural practices in Nakhon Sawan, branding it a "Chinese Culture City."

Early scholars, including Skinner (1957) and Thomson (1993), focused on assimilation trends, suggesting that Chinese identity faded by the third or fourth generation in Thailand. However, more recent scholarship has shifted to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of identity preservation, which is shaped by religious rituals, language, education, technology, and collective memory. For instance, Hamilton (2008) observed that festivals such as Chinese New Year and Qingming help Sino-Thai communities maintain ancestral ties despite assimilation pressures, while Pattranupravat (2012) and Li et al. (2024) documented how generational changes influence youth engagement with cultural and religious traditions.

The tension between cultural preservation and adaptation remains central to the literature. Intermarriage, social integration, and the desire for acceptance among younger generations often lead to the dilution of traditions and linguistic fluency (Kesmanee, 2013; Pattranupravat, 2012). These challenges reflect broader issues faced by diasporic communities striving to preserve cultural distinctiveness in a globalized and assimilative world.

Language has emerged as a particularly vulnerable pillar of cultural continuity. Amrit (2022) highlights language erosion due to the dominance of the host society's language. In response, community and complementary schools play a vital role in transmitting language skills and traditional values, offering spaces for the active negotiation and preservation of cultural identity (Archer et al., 2010). Technological advancements have also transformed cultural preservation strategies. Khun Eng (2008) explored how collective memories are reconstructed

in new contexts, facilitating identity reconstruction among diasporic populations. Cultural projects and remittance practices further demonstrate ongoing connections with the homeland, suggesting that cultural identity is actively curated (Chan & Cheng, 2016).

Given the shifting landscape of Chinese identity, it is necessary to explore the transition from earlier assimilation models to more dynamic frameworks of hybridity and negotiated identities. These evolving conceptualizations of Chinese identity are crucial in understanding how Chinese communities in Thailand preserve and adapt their cultural heritage.

Evolving Concepts of Chinese Identity in Thailand: From Assimilation to Hybridity

The study of Chinese identity in Thailand has evolved alongside broader discussions on diasporic identity across Southeast Asia. Early frameworks, such as Skinner's (1957) assimilation model and Coughlin's (1960) concept of "double identity," emphasized the gradual absorption of Chinese communities into Thai society while allowing for the selective retention of cultural elements. However, subsequent scholars have challenged the notion of inevitable assimilation. Wickberg (1988) and Wang (1991) argued that Chinese identity is not singular but manifests in multiple forms, influenced by generational, geographical, and social factors. Building on these insights, Tan Chee-Beng (2004) emphasized the hybridity and adaptive strategies that characterize diasporic Chinese identities, highlighting how Chinese-Thais fluidly negotiate their cultural affiliations.

In the Thai context, Eaksittipong (2023) offers a contemporary perspective, noting that since the mid-1990s, the "assimilating China into Thailand" paradigm has gained considerable influence. He argues that the Chinese-Thai middle class, in particular, has increasingly sought to assert a Thai identity, often blurring the boundaries between "Thainess" and "Chineseness." This shift reflects a broader trend of integration, especially among the middle class, which has been instrumental in shaping Thailand's capitalist economy since the 1950s. Szanton's (1983) observations on the enduring presence of Chinese religious and economic associations in Bangkok further support the view that cultural distinctiveness can persist despite strong pressures toward integration.

These contemporary analyses align with Hirschman and Edwards' (2007) critique of traditional assimilation models, proposing instead that processes such as segmented assimilation better capture the diverse experiences of Chinese-Thai communities. Finally, Anderson's (1991) notion of "imagined communities", with his research based on the Thai example after all, offers a useful framework for understanding Chinese-Thai identity as a socially constructed and evolving phenomenon shaped by collective memories, rituals, and national narratives.

In summary, while earlier studies emphasized assimilation and the gradual erosion of Chinese identity in Thailand, more recent scholarship highlights a complex, negotiated process of cultural preservation shaped by rituals, language, education, technology, and collective memory. Shrines, schools, and digital spaces have all emerged as crucial arenas for sustaining cultural distinctiveness. Nevertheless, persistent tensions between adaptation and preservation

underscore the fragility of identity maintenance in a globalizing society. These insights point to the need for a deeper exploration of how contemporary Chinese-Thai communities navigate identity formation, particularly in localized cultural spaces such as Chinese temples.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore the role of Chinese temples in preserving Chinese identity in Thailand, particularly in the context of ongoing cultural negotiation and integration. Drawing from insights in previous literature that emphasize the importance of rituals, spatial practices, and social institutions in sustaining diasporic identities (e.g., Skinner, 1957; Pattranupravat, 2008; Eaksittipong, 2023), this research integrates document analysis, field observation, and in-depth interviews to capture multiple dimensions of cultural preservation within temple spaces.

Table 1

Research Design and Data Collection Process

Step	Method	Description
Phase 1	Inventory and Sampling	Compiled registered temples; selected 10 based on using official registration records from the Department of Provincial Administration under the Ministry of Interior
Phase 2	In-depth Interviews	In-depth interviews with temple stakeholders
Phase 2	Observation	Non-participant observation of ceremonies and daily activities
Phase 2	Document Analysis	Review of temple records, publications, and online content
Analysis	Content & Thematic Analysis	Coding and thematic interpretation of data

Data collection was conducted in two phases. In the first phase, an inventory of Chinese shrines in Mueang District, Nakhon Pathom Province was compiled using official registration records from the Department of Provincial Administration under the Ministry of Interior. The selection of Mueang District, Nakhon Pathom Province, as the study area was informed by several key considerations. The Mueang District serves as a central location that historically attracted significant Chinese migration, resulting in a concentration of Chinese temples and shrines. It ranks as the second highest location of registered Chinese temples in Thailand, after Bangkok, reflecting its prominence in Chinese religious and cultural life. Additionally, the urban character of the district ensures dynamic community engagement, making it an ideal site to examine the role of Chinese temples in preserving cultural identity within an urban setting. A purposive sampling method was employed to select ten registered Chinese temples based on criteria such as historical significance, active community engagement, and ritual practices. Data collection was conducted from 2022 to 2023, a period that allowed for year-round observation and documentation of Chinese-related festivals and ritual practices, thus providing a comprehensive understanding of the ongoing cultural transmission within these temple communities.

Table 2

Selected Registered Chinese Temples in Mueang District, Nakhon Pathom Province

No.	Name of Shrine	Subdistrict	Selection Criteria
1	Bho Nguan Tung Shrine	Phra Pathom Chedi	Historical significance, ritual practices
2	Pun Thao Kong Shrine	Phra Pathom Chedi	Active community engagement, rituals
3	Sam Oung Ia Shrine	Phra Pathom Chedi	Historical significance, community rituals
4	Pao Geng Teng Shrine	Phra Pathom Chedi	Community engagement, cultural events
5	Pun Thao Ma Shrine	Huai Chorakhe	Ritual practices, community involvement
6	Ta Pae Shrine	Huai Chorakhe	Historical role, ritual activities
7	Chit Sie Ma Shrine	Huai Chorakhe	Community-based rituals, cultural continuity
8	Ko Be Shrine	Bo Phlap	Active engagement, heritage preservation
9	A Niao Shrine	Wang Taku	Ritual practices, cultural relevance
10	Chao Mae Thap Thim Shrine	Phra Prathon	Historical significance, ritual celebrations

In the second phase, in-depth interviews were conducted with 18 key informants, including temple caretakers, community leaders, ritual specialists, and regular temple participants, aged between 42 and 79 years old. These interviews sought to elicit perspectives on the role of temples in cultural transmission, changes in ritual practices, the involvement of younger generations, and the interaction between tradition and modern influences. The interviews were conducted during 2022-2023, with participants revisiting and participating in temple activities throughout the year in Muaeng, Nakhon Pathom Province. Non-participant observations were carried out during temple events, religious ceremonies, and routine activities to document embodied practices, spatial usage, and intergenerational interactions. Complementary document analysis included the review of temple histories, event programs, newsletters, and online communications to trace narratives of cultural continuity and adaptation.

The data were analyzed through content analysis. Interview transcripts, field notes, and documents were systematically coded by the primary researcher, beginning with open coding to generate primary and secondary codes, followed by thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and emergent themes related to identity preservation, hybridity, and negotiation processes. This methodological design ensures a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic and multifaceted role Chinese temples play in the contemporary cultural landscape of Thailand.

Overseas Chinese in Thailand and the Establishment of Temples

The migration of Chinese people to various countries in Southeast Asia occurred continuously during the early Rattanakosin period, up until the reign of King Rama V. The primary reasons for Chinese migration to new lands were famine and the suffering caused by wars. Chinese communities thus emerged in Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The Chinese who migrated to Thailand came from various groups, including the Teochew, Hokkien, Hakka, Hainanese, and Cantonese, among others. Regardless of their group or language, these Chinese migrants often brought with them their traditional culture, especially ancestor worship and temple rituals. Consequently, as they settled in Thailand, Chinese people began establishing temples as religious centers, providing spiritual support to the overseas Chinese who had left their homeland behind.

Since the early Rattanakosin period, the Thai government supported Chinese migration because it needed Chinese laborers. At that time, the Thai people were still tied to the feudal corvée labor system, preventing them from easily working as hired laborers. The influx of Chinese workers significantly benefited Thailand's growing economy and trade, particularly after the signing of the Bowring Treaty with Britain in 1855. However, during the nationalist economic policies of Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram's government, Chinese and other foreigners were prohibited from engaging in certain professions, such as barbers.

The Chinese migrants played a crucial role in Thailand's economic development. They were involved in various economic activities, including agriculture, manufacturing, and especially trade. Although the Chinese tried to maintain their cultural identity, over time, they gradually assimilated through intermarriage and, whether willingly or under pressure, lost parts of their Chinese identity. Skinner (1975) noted that Thai people of Chinese descent born in Thailand for two or more generations tend to experience higher levels of assimilation and acceptance in Thai society.

The majority of Thai-Chinese ancestors were migrants from southern and southeastern China. Their beliefs and way of life were deeply influenced by Taoism, Confucianism, and Mahayana Buddhism. These spiritual traditions were woven into their daily rituals, helping to solidify and maintain the strong bonds within the Chinese community in Thailand. As the Chinese population grew and formed distinct communities, they began constructing temples to practice their religious activities, replicating the customs they had followed in China. Consequently, Chinese temples became an integral part of these emerging Chinese enclaves. According to Nilsanguandecha (2018), overseas Chinese established temples for several key reasons: to provide spiritual and communal support, to preserve their cultural traditions, and to uphold the religious faith and devotion of their people.

It's also worth noting that many Sino-Thai individuals frequented both Thai *wats* (Buddhist temples) and Chinese *saan* (shrines or temples), reflecting a blend of cultural practices. Chinese migrants and their descendants became known for their strong work ethic and entrepreneurial

spirit. Many prominent business families in Thailand have Chinese roots, and they have played a significant role in shaping the nation's economic development.

The Migration of Chinese People to Nakhon Pathom

Chinese migrants have been settling in Thailand for a long time, establishing themselves in various provinces, especially in the capital city of Bangkok, as well as in other regions such as Nakhon Pathom and Nakhon Sawan Province. The Chinese community in Nakhon Pathom is diverse, consisting of various Chinese groups, such as Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka, Hainan, and Cantonese. However, the largest Chinese group in Nakhon Pathom is the Teochew. The Chinese immigrants in Nakhon Pathom participated in various economic activities, including running businesses such as restaurants, shops, markets, and small enterprises. Like other parts of Thailand, some Chinese people in Nakhon Pathom engaged in agriculture due to the favorable geographical conditions.

Chinese settlers began arriving in Nakhon Pathom during the early Rattanakosin period, starting as laborers in sugarcane plantations and sugar mills in Nakhon Chaisi city (Jindamaneerojana, 2002). According to the study by Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (2003), Chinese immigrants began cultivating sugarcane for sugar production in two key areas: Nakhon Chaisi and Chonburi, since the 19th century. There is evidence of sugar mills being established in Nakhon Chaisi during the reign of King Rama III when the sugar industry flourished. According to Pallegoix (1854) Nakhon Chaisi city, before 1855, had as many as 30 sugar mills, each employing around 200–300 Chinese laborers. This growth followed the end of the sugar trade monopoly between 1826-1842 due to the Burney Treaty in 1826. During the reign of King Rama IV, the sugar industry along the Tha Chin River expanded, leading to an increasing number of Chinese immigrants working as hired laborers.

As more Chinese migrants from various regions settled in Thailand, particularly during the 19th century, the formation of secret Chinese societies—such as the "Ang Yi" brotherhoods—became significant (Jindamaneerojana, 2002). These societies often arose as a means of mutual aid and protection for Chinese immigrants who faced both economic hardship and social marginalization. However, they also carried political implications, and the Thai state viewed them with suspicion, fearing potential insurrection or challenges to royal authority. The relationship between Thai rulers and the Chinese community was therefore complex, oscillating between pragmatic cooperation in trade and governance and wary suppression of potential unrest. Some of these secret societies were linked to Chinese temples in Nakhon Pathom. By 1898, only 21 sugar mills remained in operation, with many closings due to the lower prices of Javanese sugar, which was cheaper because of forced labor used by the indigenous population (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2003). Sugarcane laborers and sugar mill workers shifted to other agricultural sectors. After the Bowring Treaty in 1855, the Chedi Bucha Canal was dug in 1858, followed by the Maha Sawat Canal in 1860. These canals played a crucial role in expanding sugarcane cultivation along the Nakhon Chaisi River, eventually

extending to areas such as Wang Taku (now Wang Taku Subdistrict, Mueang district, Nakhon Pathom Province).

Since the Chinese immigrants had no land or other assets to start with, their initial occupation was working as hired laborers, commonly referred to as "coolies (Kulī in Thai)." Over time, as they lived and worked in the area, they built relationships with locals and accumulated some capital. Some Chinese immigrants were then able to purchase land and transition into agriculture, such as vegetable farming or pig raising. Meanwhile, another group of Chinese started small trading businesses. As they gradually amassed more capital, they became middlemen in rice trading, tax farmers, owners of opium dens, mill owners, and shopkeepers, often setting up their businesses near Phra Pathom Chedi. Those involved in agriculture tended to live further from the city, in areas like Lam Phaya Subdistrict.

Figure 1

Map of Nakhon Pathom Province

Patamajaroen (2001) found that, "When the early Chinese immigrants arrived, some worked as hired laborers wherever they could find work, while others raised pigs or grew vegetables and worked on farms". Eventually, after saving enough capital, they transitioned from being hired laborers who raised pigs to becoming independent pig farmers and ultimately expanded their operations into full-scale pig farms.

As the Chinese diaspora in Nakhon Pathom settled and worked their way from laborers to business owners, the Chinese immigrants and their descendants, the Thai-Chinese, could be broadly divided into two major groups based on their occupations. The first group is Chinese merchants (*Chin Talad*) who resided near the center of the city or near the market. This Chinese group usually lived in the building in the market. They earned their income as middlemen. usually living near the town center or close to Nakhon Pathom market (now the Treasury

Department market, located on Sai Phra Road). This group of Chinese often established associations to provide consultation and mutual assistance, such as the Tang Si Association and the Wang Si Association. Some of these associations still exist today, though not all of them are still active. However, others, like the Tang Si Association, continue to hold meetings and conduct activities.

The second group comprised Chinese who engaged in agriculture, referred to as "Chinese farmers (*Chin Suanpak*)." This group lived about 5-10 kilometers away from the city center, as they needed space for farming, particularly for growing vegetables. However, they could not live too far from the city, as it would create difficulties in transporting their goods to the market. Despite the distinction between these two groups, they maintained close contact and intermarried regularly in the past as well as the present. Family businesses shared between siblings, close relatives or people who speak the same language have the propensity to become larger business units, possibly with investors who are not just relatives. The emergence of investors who were not direct relatives suggests a level of openness and integration with broader Thai society and economic networks. This dynamic indicates that Chinese businesses did not always remain isolated within the Chinese community, but rather adapted to include external investment sources to facilitate business expansion. Furthermore, the sale of these businesses did not only bolster the owners' savings, but also allowed them to borrow from various sources to expand investment. This pattern aligns with the broader context in Southeast Asia, where Chinese trust-based networks, while traditionally family-centered, have demonstrated the capacity to extend beyond immediate kinship ties. These networks can incorporate non-relatives and individuals from other ethnic groups when it is mutually beneficial, fostering broader partnerships and facilitating business growth within multicultural settings.

Chinese Temples in Nakhon Pathom

Chinese immigrants have long migrated to Southeast Asia. These communities brought with them their traditional culture from their homeland to the destination countries. When the Chinese settled in Thailand, they established Chinese temples to serve as religious centers and spiritual anchors for the Chinese diaspora who had left their homeland for Thailand.

According to the most recent data available from the Department of Provincial Administration's temple registry in 2000, there were 657 registered temples across 58 provinces in Thailand. The central region had the highest concentration, with 347 temples, followed by the eastern region with 132 temples, and the southern region with 119 temples. In contrast, the northern and northeastern regions had fewer temples, with 36 and 23 temples respectively. Additionally, there were 18 provinces where Chinese temples were not under governmental supervision. This typically means that these temples function as private or community-run religious spaces without formal registration or state recognition. While not necessarily illegal, they fall outside the official registry and oversight system. This data highlights that the central region has a higher number of Chinese temples compared to other regions. Skinner (1957), who studied Chinese society in Thailand, attributed this to the dense

settlement of Chinese immigrants in the central region, facilitated by modern transportation systems like cars and trains, making it conducive for business operations. During both World Wars, the number of Chinese immigrants in the central region tripled, contributing to the high number of temples.

When looking at individual provinces with more than 20 temples, 10 provinces stand out, with central provinces dominating the list. Bangkok ranks first with 78 Chinese temples, followed by Nakhon Pathom, which has 48 temples (Department of Registration Administration, 2024). The earliest Chinese temples in Thailand can be traced back to the Ayutthaya period (1351-1767), when Chinese merchants and settlers began to establish permanent communities in the kingdom. One of the most significant early examples is the Leng Buai Ia Shrine in Bangkok's Chinatown, believed to have been founded in the mid-17th century (circa 1658), during the reign of King Narai (Chaiyapotpanit, 2014). It is widely considered the oldest Chinese shrine in Thailand, reflecting the early presence of Chinese communities and their religious practices.

Following the fall of Ayutthaya and the rise of the Rattanakosin Kingdom in the late 18th century, Chinese migration increased significantly. This led to the construction of more Chinese temples and shrines, such as Wat Mangkon Kamalawat (or Wat Leng Noei Yi), built in 1871 in the heart of Bangkok's Chinatown. These early temples served not only as religious centers but also as community hubs, fostering Chinese identity and social cohesion.

The many Chinese temples in Nakhon Pathom vary greatly in terms of history and age. Some temples, like Pho Nguan Teung Temple, have been in existence for over a century. This temple was established in the 1900s, shortly after the construction of Leng Noei Yi Temple or Mangkon Kamalawat Temple in China Town, Bankok. Others, such as the Black Horse Temple or Sam Oung Ia Temple, were built after World War II in the 1950s, starting as small shrines but later expanded. More recent temples, like Tieng Si Niao Temple, built in 2002 due to the devotion of followers to Master Ouypiew, are newer constructions.

However, many temples have deteriorated, and some have even been abandoned, whether they are ancient or recently built. One significant reason for the decline of many old temples is the changing lifestyle of the community. Original residents have relocated, and new people have moved in. Over the past 20 years, many suburban areas of Nakhon Pathom have seen the development of residential villages. These villages emerged because local residents sold their land and moved away, altering the communal lifestyle that once connected people closely to the temples. In areas that were once far from urban centers and had low land prices, roads and transportation routes have caused land values to rise, leading locals to sell their land and relocate. As a result, small community temples, once venerated by local residents, have been neglected. Meanwhile, new temples often arise from the faith that followers have in individuals, usually Chinese spiritual masters or mediums who practice healing while acting as intermediaries for deities. When these masters, who are the focal points of their followers' faith, pass away, their temples often fall into decline as their descendants are unable to maintain the same level of devotion.

Community Engagement: Religious vs Public Space

Chinese temples have long served as vital pillars of the Thai-Chinese community, offering far more than religious spaces for worship. Embedded in both rural settlements and urban centers, these temples function as hubs for cultural preservation, social organization, and community support. Through religious ceremonies, educational initiatives, charitable activities, and public events, temples actively sustain Chinese traditions while fostering a strong sense of identity and belonging. Their continued presence highlights the dynamic role of religion and heritage in shaping the social fabric of Thailand's multicultural society.

Religious Space

Chinese shrines serve as religious spaces primarily for the worship of Chinese deities and ancestral spirits. These shrines play a significant role in Chinese folk religion and are a common sight not only in China but also in other countries with Chinese communities, including Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore.

Religious Space, Worship, and Ritual Practices

Chinese shrines form the heart of Chinese folk religious practice both in Thailand and across other diaspora communities. Within these shrines, altars are dedicated to revered figures such as *Guan Yu* (the God of War), *Mazu* (the Goddess of the Sea), and *Caishen* (the God of Wealth), among others. Worshippers bring offerings – such as incense, fruit, and flowers—to honor these deities and to express devotion to their ancestors, seeking blessings, protection, and guidance.

In addition to daily acts of worship, shrines are vibrant centers for ritual activities, especially during major cultural and religious festivals. Events such as Chinese New Year, the Ghost Festival, and the Qingming Festival (Tomb-Sweeping Day) draw large gatherings of the community for elaborate ceremonies, collective prayers, and traditional performances. These occasions not only reinforce religious faith but also revitalize communal bonds and sustain cultural traditions across generations.

Moreover, shrines provide an important source of emotional and spiritual support during times of uncertainty. As one shrine caretaker, aged 75, explained,

> *"People come to the shrine for the mental result, especially when they feel unlucky. They follow the tradition to visit and pray to the gods, seeking reassurance and comfort."* (Chinese Shrine Caretaker, personal interview, 2025.)

Many worshippers believe that even a simple act of prayer can restore a sense of hope and balance in their lives, helping them cope with personal difficulties or bad fortune. In this way, shrines function not only as religious centers but also as spaces for psychological healing and community resilience.

Healing and Blessings

Chinese shrines are often sought out by individuals seeking spiritual healing, blessings, and protection during times of illness, hardship, or uncertainty. Certain shrines, such as Pho Nguan Tueng and Tieng Si Niao, have long been associated with practitioners who offer services like divination, fortune-telling, and healing rituals. In earlier times, worshippers would pray to the gods and cast lots to receive divine prescriptions for their ailments. At Tieng Si Niao Shrine, for example, a medium traditionally communicated with the deity to diagnose illnesses and prescribe treatments.

Visitors typically bring offerings—such as incense, food, or flowers—and recite specific prayers or mantras, seeking divine intervention to alleviate their suffering. The shrine provides both spiritual guidance and emotional reassurance, offering people a sense of control and comfort over their well-being. Some shrines also suggest or provide traditional herbal remedies, rooted in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), such as herbal teas, poultices, or medicinal concoctions believed to possess healing properties.

A female caretaker (aged 65) reflected on these practices during an interview:

> Many Chinese descent people come to ask for blessings. When a woman is about to deliver a child, they come to pray. Some even come to pray for their mother to recover from cancer. Actually, it helps people feel secure – it gives a mental result. (Chinese Shrine Caretaker, personal interview, 2023.)

Similarly, another elderly caretaker explained:

> If you are sick, you can ask the gods to drive away your illness and receive medicine through casting lots. If the sickness persists, you must return, cast lots again, and receive a new prescription. (Chinese Shrine Caretaker, personal interview, 2023)

These testimonies highlight the important role that Chinese shrines play not only as religious institutions but also as centers of emotional and psychological support within Thai-Chinese communities. The blend of faith, ritual, and traditional healing practices continues to offer comfort and hope across generations.

Chinese temples in Thailand serve as important centers for religious worship. They offer spaces for prayer, rituals, and festivals that strengthen cultural identity and connect people to their heritage. Beyond religious functions, these temples provide emotional comfort and spiritual healing, helping individuals cope with illness, misfortune, and life’s uncertainties. Despite facing challenges from urbanization and changing social dynamics, Chinese temples continue to play a vital role in maintaining traditions and supporting the well-being of Thai-Chinese communities.

Public Space

Chinese temples in Thailand have transformed from purely religious sites into dynamic public spaces that support cultural preservation, social services, and community engagement. Serving as hubs for cultural education and charitable work, these temples play an essential role in maintaining Chinese heritage and fostering strong communal ties within the Thai-Chinese population, while also contributing to Thailand's broader multicultural society.

Cultural Education and Preservation

Chinese temples in Thailand play a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage and fostering cross-cultural understanding. Many temples offer programs that teach traditional arts such as Chinese calligraphy and Chinese language. These activities are often open to individuals of all backgrounds, helping to strengthen ties between the Chinese diaspora and the broader Thai society. Through these efforts, Chinese temples not only sustain Chinese cultural practices but also contribute significantly to Thailand's multicultural fabric.

One prominent example is the Pho Nguan Tueng Shrine, which actively promotes cultural education through Chinese language courses. These classes are offered to both primary school students and older community members who wish to learn Chinese. As a caretaker of the shrine (aged 72) explained:

> At Pho Nguan Tueng Chinese Temple, we provide Chinese classes for primary school students and for older people who would like to learn Chinese. It is a free course provided with the support of Silpakorn University. When the students come to the temple, they pray to the gods, learn the names of the deities worshipped here, and participate in cultural activities held at the shrine. (Chinese Temple Caretaker, personal interview, 2023)

By integrating religious practices with educational activities, the temple not only teaches language skills but also instills cultural pride and spiritual connection among the younger generation. This approach ensures that Chinese traditions are actively transmitted to future generations while strengthening the role of the temple as both a religious and cultural center within the community

Community Engagement, Charitable Activities, and Networking Functions

Chinese temples in Thailand fulfill critical roles beyond religious practice, acting as cultural, charitable, and social centers within their communities. Regularly organized events—such as food fairs, cultural exhibitions, and traditional performances—not only celebrate Chinese heritage but also serve as important fundraising mechanisms for temple maintenance and charitable initiatives. Ceremonies such as the "Feeding the Hungry Ghosts" or Sigo Festival, which combine ritual prayer, Chinese opera performances, and charitable donations to the

underprivileged, exemplify the temples' dual function as sites of religious devotion and community welfare.

In addition to cultural preservation, many temples actively engage in direct charitable work. This includes the distribution of food, clothing, and financial assistance to disadvantaged populations, as well as participation in disaster relief efforts. Through such activities, temples reaffirm their importance as both spiritual and humanitarian institutions within the Thai-Chinese community.

Temples also function as key venues for community meetings and networking. Long-established shrines often host gatherings of local organizations and serve as important hubs for political and business connections. Temples such as Pho Nguan Tueng, Sam Oung Ia, and Tieng Si Niao have received substantial support from local business leaders, reflecting the sustained interconnection between religious, economic, and civic spheres.

As noted by the President of a Chinese shrine during an interview:

> During important yearly events like the Sigo Festival, many businessmen come to join the event. They meet local leaders and business owners of Chinese descent here. Moreover, they donate money, and the list of donors is displayed on a board that everyone visiting the shrine during the festival can see. It's like a weapon – they can demonstrate their power and wealth. (President of Chinese Shrine, personal interview, 2023)

This testimony highlights how religious festivals not only strengthen communal and cultural ties but also act as platforms for reinforcing social status, economic influence, and political visibility within the community. Serving both as sacred sites and public spaces, they strengthen community ties, support social welfare, and contribute to the richness of Thailand's multicultural society.

Challenges of Preserving Identity through Chinese Temples

Chinese temples have historically served as religious, cultural, and social hubs for Thai-Chinese communities. However, rapid urbanization, generational shifts, and broader socio-economic changes have placed considerable pressure on these institutions. Through field surveys and interviews conducted in Nakhon Pathom Province during 2022-2023, this study identified key challenges threatening the survival and cultural significance of Chinese temples. These challenges include changing social contexts leading to land sales and migration, a shortage of temple personnel, the loss of historical knowledge, and insufficient funding for temple operations. Each of these factors contributes to the vulnerability of Chinese temples as spaces of identity preservation in contemporary Thai society.

Changing Social Contexts Leading to Land Sales and Migration

Nakhon Pathom is a rapidly growing city due to urban expansion driven by the development of highway and motorway projects, with the city serving as a transit point to Bangkok and Kanchanaburi. Additionally, new rail transit routes (double-track railway) are being constructed, further improving travel convenience. The expansion of Silpakorn University and Nakhon Pathom Rajabhat University has attracted students from other areas, leading to the growth of businesses such as dormitories and restaurants.

According to data from the Real Estate Information Center ([REIC], 2024) of the Government Housing Bank, in the second quarter of 2024, Nakhon Pathom's land prices had the highest year-on-year increase, with a growth rate of 82.1%. This increase has been ongoing for over a decade, causing many residents to sell their land and relocate. A clear example is Lam Phaya Subdistrict, about 5km from the city center, where land that once hosted vegetable gardens and pig farms is now used for housing developments, hotels, and dormitories. The new residents in these developments are mostly outsiders, unfamiliar with the local Chinese temples. Meanwhile, the original community members who once supported the temples have gradually sold their land and moved away, leaving the temples increasingly abandoned.

In the central area of Nakhon Pathom, while there is less land selling and migration, the changing social context has led to cultural assimilation. Younger generations, especially those born in Thailand to Chinese descendants, have distanced themselves from traditional customs. As Skinner (1975) noted, second-generation Thai-Chinese tend to assimilate into Thai society, whereas those aged 50 and older still maintain traditions such as ancestor worship during Chinese New Year or Tomb Sweeping Festival (Qingming). However, these rituals are more likely to be conducted at home rather than in the temples. People under 25 years of age often do not participate in these ceremonies as they are mostly occupied with work or studies in Bangkok.

Lack of Personnel for Temple Operations

The shortage of personnel in temple operations stems from broader social changes affecting the Thai-Chinese community. In the past, temple workers were typically volunteers with strong religious devotion, often serving without pay. Many were either deeply faithful or financially secure enough to contribute their time and resources. Today, as religious devotion among the younger generation declines and economic pressures grow, temples are finding it increasingly difficult to attract new volunteers and leaders.

Several temple committees reported persistent difficulties in recruiting new presidents, a role that demands not only financial capability and social standing but also a significant time commitment. A study by Pattranupravat (2008) on Chinese temples in Samut Songkhram noted that presidents and committee members now tend to serve longer terms due to the lack of new candidates. Similarly, Wutthichai Arakphochong's (2016) research emphasized that temple leaders must command both community respect and financial resources to maintain temple

operations and religious activities. At Pho Nguan Tueng Temple in Nakhon Pathom, for instance, the current president, Mr Sumet Chatchavalakitkul, is now serving his third term because no suitable successor has been found. Field observations reveal that most committee members across various temples are over 60 years old, with some nearing 90, highlighting the pressing issue of leadership aging and the absence of younger replacements.

Interviews conducted with temple caretakers and committee members consistently echoed these concerns. One caretaker lamented:

> I am getting old and will soon be unable to look after the Chinese temple. What worries me most is the loss of knowledge. No one seems interested in preserving cultural heritage or understanding the true history of Chinese traditions. The younger generation visits the temple very little. (Chinese Temple Caretaker, personal interview, 2023)

These testimonies illustrate how demographic changes, declining faith, and generational shifts are putting the future of temple operations and cultural preservation at significant risk.

Loss of Knowledge about Temple History and Deities

Many Chinese shrines in Thailand are increasingly facing challenges in preserving their historical narratives and cultural heritage, largely due to the loss of knowledgeable individuals from older generations. Traditionally, temple histories and the identities of deities were passed down orally. However, as elders pass away or become less active, valuable historical knowledge is at risk of being distorted, fragmented, or entirely lost.

For example, while Pho Nguan Tueng Temple was established in 1899—as indicated by a tablet placed before its main deities—much of its detailed history has been obscured. The original tablet was replaced during a renovation in 2015, and critical historical evidence may have been lost in the process. This issue is not isolated; many Chinese temples across Thailand face similar struggles in maintaining accurate historical records, particularly those relying solely on oral traditions without written documentation.

Language barriers further complicate efforts to preserve temple history. Many inscriptions, scriptures, and rituals are conducted in Chinese, yet younger generations, who primarily speak Thai, often lack the proficiency to understand or continue these traditions. Even in temples like Pho Nguan Ting Shrine, where Chinese-speaking personnel remain active, transmission is limited by the scarcity of comprehensive written records and conflicting oral accounts.

Moreover, the preservation of architectural and cultural heritage depends not only on the availability of historical knowledge but also on sufficient financial resources. Shrines of significant historical value often face difficulties securing the funds needed for proper maintenance and restoration, placing their continued existence at risk.

Interviews with temple caretakers and committee members highlighted growing concerns over these challenges. One committee member noted the alarming decline in worshippers:

> The number of worshippers has decreased so much that we could not hold certain ceremonies this year. Next year might be even harder. (Chinese Temple Committee Member, personal interview, 2023)

This decline in participation not only threatens the temples' religious functions but also accelerates the erosion of historical memory, further endangering the continuity of Chinese cultural traditions within Thailand's multicultural society.

Insufficient Funding for Temple Operations

Financial instability remains a major obstacle to the sustainability of Chinese temples. Running a temple entails significant costs, including land ownership, ritual activities, maintenance, and staffing. Shrines often rely solely on voluntary donations, which have declined sharply in recent years.

Comparative experiences from Singapore illustrate the severity of financial pressures. As Song (2020) notes, there city planning regulations and land scarcity force many smaller shrines to operate informally in residential buildings due to their inability to secure permanent locations. In Thailand, the financial pressures are similarly acute. The decline in donations can be attributed to two key factors: the passing of founding patrons, leading to a reduced donor base, and the declining religious engagement among younger generations. Unlike larger religious institutions, most Chinese temples lack alternative revenue streams, leaving them vulnerable to economic downturns. Without sufficient funding, temples face the threat of neglect, compromising not only physical structures but also the religious and cultural practices they support.

The preservation of Chinese identity through temples in Thailand faces mounting challenges stemming from urban expansion, demographic shifts, generational change, and financial constraints. Changing social contexts have weakened traditional community ties, while the shortage of personnel, loss of historical knowledge, and insufficient funding have placed significant stress on temple operations. Without targeted interventions—such as promoting cultural education among younger generations, strengthening documentation efforts, and developing sustainable financial strategies—the role of Chinese temples as centers of religious and cultural life may continue to diminish. Addressing these challenges is crucial not only for safeguarding Chinese heritage but also for maintaining the rich multicultural fabric of Thai society.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the critical role Chinese temples in Thailand play in preserving the cultural identity of the Thai-Chinese community. Beyond their religious functions, these

temples serve as important centers for cultural transmission, education, social interaction, and community support. Through their activities, Chinese temples foster a strong sense of belonging and continuity of heritage while contributing to the broader multicultural landscape of Thai society. At the same time, the study identified major challenges that threaten the sustainability of Chinese temples, including urban development pressures, demographic shifts leading to the outmigration of traditional supporters, declining interest among younger generations, financial instability, and the gradual loss of historical knowledge. Without strategic interventions, these challenges risk diminishing the temples' ability to act as vibrant cultural institutions.

Based on the findings, two key recommendations are proposed for the sustainable adaptation of Chinese shrines in Nakhon Pathom. First, Chinese temples should enhance their accessibility as public spaces. Traditionally, shrines have been closed to the public except during specific religious ceremonies. Expanding their use to include community activities and educational programs – such as Chinese language classes for both youth and elders, as successfully piloted during this research – could revitalize community engagement and attract broader participation. Second, shrines should diversify their sources of income. While some temples have initiated activities such as astrological deposit services and collective ancestral rites (Gong Teck) during major festivals, the research proposes a broader strategy of "cultural capital transformation" to convert cultural assets into sustainable economic resources.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. First, it focuses on a case study within a specific geographic area – Mueang District, Nakhon Pathom – which may not fully represent the experiences of Chinese temples elsewhere in Thailand. Additionally, the research largely relies on qualitative data, and while in-depth interviews and observations provided rich insights, the absence of broader quantitative data limits the generalizability of the findings.

Future research should explore comparative studies across different provinces to capture regional variations in the challenges and adaptations of Chinese temples. Longitudinal studies could also provide valuable insights into how temple roles evolve over time as demographic and socio-economic conditions continue to change. Further examination into how younger generations perceive and reinterpret Chinese identity within temple spaces would also deepen understanding of the possibilities for cultural continuity.

Declaration of the Use of AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The manuscript submitted contains original work by the authors. AI tools, specifically ChatGPT, were used to assist in improving the clarity and fluency of the English language. These tools were not used to generate content, ideas, or interpretations. The authors take full responsibility for the content, analysis, and conclusions presented in the article.

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