BELIEFS AND WORSHIP OF CHINESE DEITIES AMONG THE OVERSEAS CHINESE IN BANGKOK

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ABSTRACT

Abstract—The migration of overseas Chinese to Thailand has contributed to significant cultural and religious interactions, resulting in the incorporation of Chinese beliefs and ritual practices into Thai society. Bangkok has consequently become one of the most important centers of Chinese shrines in Thailand. This study examines the beliefs and worship of Chinese deities among overseas Chinese communities in Bangkok. The findings indicate that such beliefs originate from Chinese religious traditions and cultural heritage, and are reflected in the various types of deities Worshiped in major Chinese shrines across the city. The religious practices found in these shrines demonstrate that they function not only as spiritual centers for overseas Chinese, but also as important elements of cultural heritage that continue to influence contemporary Thai society. These results are consistent with recent scholarship emphasizing the localization, adaptation, and transformation of Chinese religious practices in overseas contexts (Xiao & Li, 2021; Zhang & Zhao, 2022; Li, 2023).

Keywords—Overseas Chinese, beliefs, worship, Chinese deities, Bangkok

INTRODUCTION

Overseas Chinese have long played a significant role in the development of Thai society and economy. Their settlement in Bangkok led to the formation of Chinese communities and the continuation of traditional culture, customs, and religious beliefs. A key cultural component among the Chinese is their belief in deities and ritual worship. Chinese deities are revered through various shrines across Bangkok, serving as important institutions in preserving the cultural identity of overseas Chinese communities.

The term "overseas Chinese" refers to Chinese people living outside of China, separated by the sea. Chinese migration to Thailand began during the Ayutthaya period, when Chinese migrants typically travelled on traditional wooden junks. Most came from southern China, with major port cities along the South China Sea—Thailand included—being key destinations of migration. Historical records show that Chinese migrants had settled in Thailand since Ayutthaya times (Phuwadol Songprasert, 2003, p. 36), when trade and political relations with China were flourishing. The Thai government even allowed the Chinese to establish communities within the capital, such as the "Khlong Nai Kai" district. Although migration

slowed during periods of internal unrest in China, the restoration of trade relations later encouraged a renewed flow of Chinese migrants.

By the late Ayutthaya period, Chinese immigrants held various occupations including traders, craftsmen, opera performers, soldiers, and physicians. During the Thonburi period, the Chinese received strong support because King Taksin the Great himself was of Teochew (Chaozhou) descent. Chinese communities in this era expanded into areas such as Chanthaburi, Ayutthaya, and Bangkok.

In the early Rattanakosin period, the Chinese were relocated outside the city walls to the Sampheng area according to Thai government policy, aiming for better order and easier control, especially due to disturbances caused by secret societies such as the Ang Yi groups involved in illegal activities like opium trafficking. From the reign of King Rama IV to early Rama VI, economic development and trade liberalization—following the Bowring Treaty—turned the Chinese into a crucial labour force for Thailand's economic growth. They played an especially important role in construction and transportation due to their reputation for diligence compared to the Thai labour force of the time. Some Chinese even entered government service.

From the mid–Rama VI to the early Rama VII period, continuous migration persisted due to natural disasters and political instability in China. This eventually prompted the Thai government to impose strict immigration controls (quota system), reducing arrivals from 10,000 people per year to only 100, and later permitting entry only to those who had prior residency or family in Thailand. This effectively ended large-scale migration. Nonetheless, the Chinese population already residing in Thailand remained substantial and continued to become an integral part of Thai society.

Chinese immigrants who settled in Thailand can be categorized into five major groups, based on their place of origin and language. Each group possesses distinct social, cultural, and occupational characteristics that influenced various aspects of Thai life and economy (Wirot Tangwanich, 2006, pp. 25–30):

i. Teochew (潮州)

Originating from Guangdong province—particularly Chaozhou (潮州), Shantou (汕头), and Jieyang (揭阳)—the Teochew are the largest Chinese group in Thailand. They settled heavily in Bangkok and the Central Region. Their expertise in commerce, management, retail, wholesale trade, and various industries—such as the rice trade, food processing, grocery stores, and wholesale businesses in Sampheng, Yaowarat, and Khlong San—made them highly influential.

ii. Hakka (客家)

Originally scattered across southern China, including Fujian (福建), Guangdong (广东), and Sichuan (四川). They typically lived in remote areas and worked as farmers, craftsmen, and laborers. Hakka migration to Thailand increased during the reign of King Rama V, with settlements in Songkhla, Phuket, Ratchaburi, and Kanchanaburi.

iii. Hainanese (海南)

Originating from Hainan Island in southern China, they specialized in fishing and shipbuilding. They settled densely in Pak Nam Pho (Nakhon Sawan) and Koh Samui (Surat Thani). Many engaged in fisheries, boat industries, and private businesses such as restaurants, coffee shops, and clothing trade.

iv. Hokkien (福建)

Originating from Fujian province, especially Quanzhou (泉州) and Zhangzhou (漳州), both major Chinese port cities. Migration to Thailand commonly began via Malaysia, Penang, and Singapore before reaching southern Thailand. They settled in Phuket, Trang, Phangnga, and Pattani and were skilled in fishing and maritime trade.

v. Cantonese (广东)

Originating from Guangdong province and parts of Guangxi. Cantonese migration to Thailand dates back to the Ayutthaya period, with some serving as royal shipbuilders. They played a key role in shipbuilding and commerce. Cantonese language and culture were also influenced by Hong Kong and Macau.

To this day, it is undeniable that these waves of migration have helped forge deep connections between Thailand and China, fostering interaction and exchanges in business, tourism, education, and culture. As China is a civilization with thousands of years of history, its diverse and sophisticated cultural traditions reflect various worldviews of the Chinese people in fascinating ways (Kriangkrai Kongseng, 2018, p. 3).

This article presents an overview of beliefs and faith practices that influence the lives of Thai Chinese communities in Bangkok. It examines the migration of overseas Chinese into Thailand, the Chinese ethnic groups in the country, the religions and belief systems they uphold, and the types of deities they worship—along with the roles of Chinese shrines in Bangkok. Special attention is given to beliefs surrounding Tee Joo Yah (Earth God), Bun Thao Kong, Pak Kong, and City God (Chenghuang).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To analyze the beliefs and worship of Chinese deities among overseas Chinese communities in Bangkok and to examine how these beliefs are localized, transformed, and transmitted across generations.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on documentary research and qualitative content analysis. The research process consisted of four main stages.

First, relevant literature was systematically collected, including books, theses, journal articles, archival documents, and ethnographic studies concerning Chinese deity worship, Chinese migration to Thailand, and the religious life of overseas Chinese communities in Bangkok. Particular attention was paid to studies on Chinese shrines, ritual practices, and the localization of Chinese religious traditions in Southeast Asia.

Second, the collected materials were organized and coded in order to identify core conceptual themes, namely migration, religion, identity, localization, and transformation of beliefs. These themes served as analytical categories for interpreting the religious practices of overseas Chinese communities.

Third, a qualitative content analysis was conducted. The beliefs and worship of Chinese deities were interpreted through comparison with recent scholarship on Chinese popular religion and diaspora communities in Southeast Asia. Conceptual and thematic analysis was used rather than statistical analysis, as this study focuses on meanings, symbolic systems, and cultural functions of deity worship.

Finally, the research findings were synthesized and presented in a descriptive–analytical manner. The analysis highlights the relationships between deity worship, community identity, cultural heritage, and social adaptation among overseas Chinese in Bangkok, and provides conclusions and recommendations for further study.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Religion and Beliefs of Overseas Chinese

The religions and beliefs of overseas Chinese are diverse, encompassing Mahayana Buddhism, Hinayana Buddhism, and Taoism, as well as the worship of deities and ancestral spirits. These practices reflect strong emotional bonds between descendants and their forebears, based on the belief that ancestral spirits continue to watch over later generations. Corresponding rituals include the placement of ancestral tablets in family homes and annual offerings at ancestral graves. Chinese beliefs regarding deities predate the arrival of Buddhism and developed from efforts to explain natural phenomena and unseen powers. With the spread of Mahayana Buddhism and Taoism, the pantheon of deities expanded and became increasingly systematized. Many contemporary Chinese deities are closely connected with Taoist traditions and with earlier forms of folk religion centered on spirits, ancestors, and supernatural forces.

Overseas Chinese have long played a significant role in the development of Thai society and economy. Their settlement in Bangkok led to the formation of Chinese communities and the continuation of traditional customs and religious beliefs. A key cultural component within these communities is the belief in deities and ritual worship. Chinese deities are venerated through numerous shrines across Bangkok, which function as important institutions for preserving cultural identity and transmitting religious heritage among overseas Chinese (Chen, 2021; Wang, 2024). Chinese migration to Thailand began during the Ayutthaya period, with most migrants arriving from southern China, and historical records confirm their settlement from that time onward (Songprasert, 2003). Subsequent waves during the Thonburi and early Rattanakosin periods further strengthened these communities. Within these communities, traditional religious beliefs were localized, adapted, and transmitted to later generations, reflecting dynamic processes of cultural inheritance and identity formation among diasporic Chinese (Xiao & Li, 2021; Gao & Liu, 2023; Liu & Zhou, 2025).

Chinese beliefs can be categorized into four levels:

i. Supreme spirit worship, or Shangdi, considered the creator and highest deity.
ii. Worship of natural spirits, residing in elements such as trees, rivers, mountains, the sun, moon, and stars.
iii. Worship of human spirits, meaning deceased ancestors or historically respected figures, with rituals of offerings and burning of symbolic goods, as the dead are believed to continue living in the afterlife.
iv. Worship of animal spirits such as dragons, snakes, and tigers, many of which later became deified.

These beliefs formed the foundations of major Chinese ideologies and religions: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

Confucianism, based on the teachings of Confucius, emphasizes harmonious social living, honesty, filial piety, and personal duty. Important scriptures include the Five Classics and the Four Books. Confucian practices also involve the creation and worship of symbolic deities, such as Guan Yu, representing loyalty.

Mahayana Buddhism entered China through the monk Zhu Moluo-shen, accompanied by the translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese. It later developed into major sects such as Chan and Tiantai. Mahayana Buddhism includes the concept of the Three Pure Lands—Abhirati, Sukhavati, and Vaidurya—and emphasizes moral conduct, compassion, and societal benefit. The most revered bodhisattva is Avalokitesvara (Guanyin).

Taoism evolved from ancient animistic beliefs involving spirits and supernatural forces. It developed into a formal religion during the Han dynasty, with Laozi regarded as its founder. Later, Zhang Daoling established ritual traditions aimed at expelling demons and healing illnesses through the invocation of supreme Taoist deities, including Yuanshi Tianzun, Lingbao Tianzun, and Taishang Laojun (Laozi). The Jade Emperor eventually became widely recognized as the highest Taoist deity.

Deities Worshiped by the Chinese People

Bangkok is the center of the Chinese overseas community, who migrated and settled there from the Ayutthaya period to the Rattanakosin period. This has resulted in numerous Chinese shrines scattered throughout the city. There are approximately 124 Chinese shrines in Bangkok, particularly in the Samphanthawong district, known as Yaowarat or Thailand's "Chinatown." These shrines are not only places of worship but also centers of spirituality and culture for the Thai-Chinese community (Jesada Nilsonguandecha, 2018, p. 12). Although the Chinese shrines in Bangkok were built by Chinese overseas groups with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, they share a common belief system and religious traditions. Their origins can be categorized into two types based on the religious icons within the shrines: icons derived from Taoism and icons derived from Confucianism (Duangrat Danthainam and Porntip Thamchariyaphan, 2020, p. 100). Examples of important Chinese shrines in Bangkok include:

According to Yuwaphon Pruettichai et al. (2017), Chinese deities can be categorized into several levels based on their roles and origins:

i. Lower Deities

These deities are closest to humans and reside in homes and local areas, protecting the daily lives of the people. They are often invoked for safety, prosperity, and harmony in the community. Examples include:

- Tudi Gong / Tizhu Ya (地主爺): the earth god and household deity responsible for protecting the home, land, and local environment. Worshipers pray for peace, fertile land, and protection from misfortune, similar in function to the Thai jao thi.
- Pun Thao Kong (本头公): local territorial guardian of specific places such as communities or shrines. Believed to maintain order, safeguard residents, and ensure prosperity in the area.
- Chenghuang (城隍): the city deity responsible for justice, moral oversight, and community protection. Oversees law, order, and the welfare of citizens, functioning similarly to the Thai city pillar guardian spirit.

ii. Mythological Deities and Ancestral Emperors

These deities appear in ancient creation myths and represent the origins of the universe, civilization, and human society. They embody cosmic order, moral principles, and cultural identity. Examples include:

- Pangu (盘古): the primordial creator of the world. Symbolizes the beginning of the universe and the harmony between heaven and earth..
- Nüwa (女娲): goddess who created humankind and repaired the sky. Represents creativity, restoration, and protection of humanity.
- Shennong (神农): god of agriculture and medicinal herbs. Known as the Divine Farmer, he symbolizes agriculture, medicine, and human survival, and is revered for teaching humans farming and herbal knowledge.
- Huangdi (黄帝): the Yellow Emperor, regarded as the legendary founder of Chinese civilization. Represents unity, cultural heritage, and moral governance, often honored as the originator of Chinese culture and political institutions.

iii. Deities from Classical Chinese Literature

Some characters from classical Chinese literature later became objects of religious veneration, symbolizing particular virtues or supernatural powers.

- Sun Wukong (孙悟空) from Journey to the West: symbol of intelligence and rebellion. Sun Wukong represents intelligence, courage, and perseverance. His rebellion against heaven symbolizes the struggle against injustice and constraints, while his eventual discipline under Buddhist guidance reflects self-cultivation and moral transformation. Devotees believe he can ward off evil, protect travelers, and bring success, especially for those valuing cleverness and strategy.

- Nezha (哪吒) from Investiture of the Gods: a warrior deity believed to protect against misfortune. Nezha embodies bravery, loyalty, and protection against misfortune. His story of self-sacrifice and rebirth symbolizes overcoming adversity and moral righteousness. Worshippers see him as a protector of children, a guardian against danger, and a remover of obstacles, popular among families and merchants.

iv. Deified Human Figures

People of virtue who were later elevated to deity status. Examples:

- Guan Yu (关羽): wealth gods, general from Romance of the Three Kingdoms, symbolizing loyalty and righteousness.
- Mazu (妈祖): originally seafarers Lin Moniang, a fisherman's daughter who saved sailors; now goddess of the sea.

v. Supreme Deities

Primarily Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in Mahayana Buddhism, Worshiped in large temple complexes. Examples:

- Shakyamuni Buddha (释迦牟尼佛), the historical Buddha, founder of Buddhism. Represents enlightenment, wisdom, and the cessation of suffering. Devotees seek his guidance for moral conduct, meditation, and liberation from worldly attachments.
- Amitabha Buddha (阿弥陀佛), the Buddha of Infinite Light, central to Pure Land Buddhism. Embodies compassion and salvation, promising rebirth in the Western Pure Land for those who recite his name with devotion. Worshippers hope for peace, spiritual protection, and a favorable afterlife.
- Guanyin Bodhisattva (观音菩萨), the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Symbolizes mercy, kindness, and protection for the suffering. Devotees pray to Guanyin for healing, safety, guidance, and relief from difficulties, especially in family and daily life matters.
- Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva (地藏菩萨), the Bodhisattva of the Earth and the afterlife. Known for vows to rescue souls from suffering, especially in hell realms. Devotees invoke Kṣitigarbha for ancestral protection, guidance for deceased relatives, and alleviation of karmic hardships.

Belief Systems Among Overseas Chinese Communities

Chinese communities prioritize deities aligned with their way of life.

- Agricultural societies honor earth-related deities such as Tudi Gong.
- Seafaring and trading communities revere Mazu for safe travel.
- Merchants may worship Guan Yu for integrity and business stability or wealth gods for prosperity.

Different dialect groups in Southeast Asia also have unique patron deities:

- Teochew: Green Dragon God (青龙神 / Zhae Leng Ia)
- Hokkien: Cheng Chooi Chor Soo Kong (清水祖師公)

- Hainanese: Jui Boe Neo / Shui Wei Sheng Niang (水尾聖娘)

Belief in deities varies by personal faith and changing social contexts.

Belief in Pun Thao Kong

Chinese communities believe every place requires a protective local deity. Pun Thao Kong appears predominantly in Southeast Asia (Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia), reflecting regional adaptation.

Pun Thao Kong is similar to Tudi Gong (土地公) or Fude Zhengshen (福德征神), widely Worshiped in China and beyond. Shrines vary from small red altars in homes to larger community temples.

Legends link Fude Zhengshen to a loyal Zhou dynasty official named Zhang Fude, who was honest and helped the people. After his death, locals built a shrine for him. Another story speaks of Hok Tek Lao Ye, who sacrificed his life to save a nobleman's daughter and was later appointed as an earth deity.

In Thai society, the belief in household spirits evolved into the phra phum jao thi. Pun Thao Kong is especially revered among Teochew and Hokkien communities in Bangkok.

Belief in Pae Kong (Taipo Gong)

Pae Kong, or Da Bo Gong (大伯公), is widely worshiped among overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia—especially in Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand, serve as symbols of localized Chinese deity worship. Represented as an elderly man with a staff or auspicious objects, his role is similar to Tudi Gong and Fude Zhengshen.

"Pae Kong" derives from the Hakka term Bo Gong (伯公), referring to an elder. Early Hakka miners in Southeast Asia Worshiped local land spirits and called them Pae Kong.

Legends describe Pae Kong as:

i. A water deity.
ii. A guardian of cemeteries, perhaps linked to the deity Hou Tu.
iii. An ancestral figure, believed to be the first Chinese settler in Penang.
iv. A protector of sailors, possibly linked to Zheng He or a member of his fleet.

Their functions include:protecting communities; blessing business prosperity; maintaining moral order; linking ancestral memory and territorial belonging. Their continued relevance demonstrates the dynamic religious identity of Bangkok's Chinese communities (Wang, 2024; Gao & Liu, 2023). In Thailand, Pae Kong shrines—called Saen Pae Kong or Tua Pae Kong—are commonly found. Names such as Da Bo Gong, Fude Zhengshen, and Tudi Gong are often used interchangeably, suggesting they may refer to the same deity or share similar protective functions.

RESULTS

The findings of this study reveal that the beliefs and worship of Chinese deities among the overseas Chinese communities in Bangkok are deeply rooted in Chinese religious traditions while simultaneously shaped through processes of localization within Thai society. First, Chinese migration history demonstrates that different waves of immigrants—from the Ayutthaya, Thonburi, and Rattanakosin periods—brought diverse religious practices, which later became institutionalized through the establishment of Chinese shrines across Bangkok. These shrines act as focal points for ritual worship, community gatherings, and cultural transmission.

Second, the study finds that overseas Chinese communities in Bangkok practice a pluralistic religious system, incorporating Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism, folk religion, and ancestral worship. Beliefs are structured across multiple levels, including supreme deities, nature spirits, ancestral spirits, mythological deities, literary figures, and deified historical persons. These systems of belief collectively shape moral values, identity formation, and perceptions of supernatural protection.

Third, the research demonstrates that the selection of deities worshiped is strongly related to social and economic livelihoods. Agricultural communities tend to venerate earth-related deities such as Tudi Gong; maritime and trading communities place special emphasis on Mazu; business groups commonly worship Guan Yu and other wealth-associated deities. Furthermore, different dialect groups—Teochew, Hokkien, Hakka, Hainanese, and Cantonese—maintain distinctive patron deities reflecting collective identity and regional origin.

Fourth, localized deities such as Pun Thao Kong and Pae Kong (Da Bo Gong) illustrate processes of religious adaptation in Southeast Asia. These deities function as territorial guardians, protectors of communities, bringers of prosperity, and mediators of moral order. Their worship demonstrates the integration of Chinese religious concepts with local Thai spiritual traditions, particularly the household guardian spirit (jao thi).

Finally, the study reveals that Chinese shrines in Bangkok today function not only as religious sites but also as living cultural heritage spaces. Rituals, festivals, and communal practices performed in shrines represent ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity, and between Chinese and Thai cultural elements. These institutions continue to transmit cultural identity across generations and facilitate cohesion among overseas Chinese communities in contemporary urban Bangkok.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the beliefs and worship of Chinese deities among overseas Chinese communities in Bangkok constitute a dynamic and enduring religious tradition that plays a significant role in the construction of cultural identity, social cohesion, and interethnic interaction in Thai society. The continued presence of Chinese shrines across Bangkok reflects the long historical process of migration and settlement, through which Chinese religious beliefs were localized, transformed, and embedded within Thailand’s multicultural context.

Chinese deity worship among Bangkok's overseas Chinese is characterized by diversity and adaptability. It encompasses Mahayana Buddhist beliefs, Taoist cosmology, folk religious practices, and ancestral veneration, while at the same time responding to the economic activities and social structures of the communities involved. Deities such as Tudi Gong, Pun Thao Kong, Pae Kong, Chenghuang, Guan Yu, Mazu, and Guanyin are revered not only as supernatural guardians but also as symbolic representations of moral values, prosperity, and communal protection.

The findings further indicate that Chinese shrines in Bangkok—such as Pun Thao Kong shrines, Guan Yu shrines, and Monkey God shrines—serve as more than ritual centers. They operate as cultural heritage institutions, community networks, and platforms for intergenerational transmission of traditions. These shrines foster shared identity among Thai people of Chinese descent while simultaneously opening spaces for intercultural participation by non-Chinese devotees.

In contemporary Bangkok, Chinese religious practices continue to evolve. Digital ritual participation, hybrid Chinese–Thai ceremonial forms, modern fundraising strategies, and inclusive community events demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of Chinese deity worship under conditions of urbanization and globalization. Rather than remaining as static relics, these practices are continuously reinterpreted in response to changing social realities.

In conclusion, the beliefs and worship of Chinese deities among overseas Chinese communities in Bangkok represent a living, adaptive, and influential religious system. They preserve cultural continuity, support emotional and social well-being, and contribute to religious pluralism in Thai society. Future research may further examine generational differences, transnational networks, and digital transformations of these religious practices to deepen understanding of Chinese religiosity in Southeast Asia.

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