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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Joss Sticks and Skyscrapers: Chinese Deity Worship in Urban Bangkok

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Abstract

This study examines how urbanization in Bangkok influences Chinese deity worship and how these religious practices shape the city's urban development. It argues that urban factors such as changing landscapes, the boom and crisis of the economy, the growth of the Thai middle class, and an increase in migrant workers are reshaping worship practices and their significance. Simultaneously, Chinese deity worship contributes to Bangkok's urbanization.

Using a qualitative approach, the study analyzes written works, local media, and online content, including public interviews, to trace changes in Chinese shrines and their activities. Direct observation further explores ritual performances and community interactions within these sacred spaces. By investigating the interplay between urbanization and religious faith, this study contributes to both religious and urban studies. It highlights how urban redevelopment affects Chinese deity worship while illustrating the role of religious practices in shaping everyday urban life. Understanding these dynamics provides insight into the broader impact of urbanization on spiritual traditions in urban Bangkok.

Keywords: Urbanization, Religion, Bangkok, Chinese Shrines, Chinese deity worship

Introduction

Bangkok has undergone rapid urbanization compared to other areas of Thailand since the 1980s. This surge in urban development has significantly transformed the city's landscape. The city has seen substantial growth in built streets, shopping centers, infrastructure, tourist facilities, and large-scale urban residences. During the mid-1980s, Thailand's economic development accelerated and maintained stable growth. As a result, many Thai people have attained higher levels of education than their parents, leading to a considerable middle class that did not exist in the previous decades (Wyatt, 2003, pp. 299-301). In addition to the newly emerged urban middle class, Bangkok's urban space experienced an influx of migrants. The service industry and factories attracted numerous laborers from provinces and neighboring countries, including Chinese migrants.

Initially, early Chinese migrants to Thailand belonged to different speech groups and worshiped various Chinese deities. These deities were regarded as protectors who were believed to bring peace, avert disasters, and resolve difficulties. Living in hardship and unfamiliar environments, these immigrants found spiritual support in their worship, which helped them cope with feelings of uncertainty and isolation. Specific deities like Guan Yin and Guan Wu have been revered across all Chinese groups and emerged as shared symbols of the belief that they help mediate disputes among the different speech groups.

Through these shared beliefs, they established mutual support networks, such as the Guan Wu Shrine at Somdet Chao Phraya, the Tai Hong Kong Shrine at the Poh Teck Tung Foundation, and the Guan Yin Shrine at the Thian Fah Foundation Hospital, which encouraged cooperation in both daily life and economic activities, thereby contributing to the unity of the Chinese diaspora. Thai society and its belief system were integrated with the religious practices of the Chinese diaspora as a cohesive whole. In parallel, Chinese communities in Thailand have embraced

Theravada Buddhist practices, such as making merit and holding funerary rites in Thai Buddhist temples. One notable example is the large golden Buddha image at Wat Kalayanamit in Bangkok, which Chinese devotees identify as Sam Por Kong, believed to be a deified form of the Chinese maritime explorer Zheng He. Standing 15 meters tall, this statue is sculpted in the traditional Thai style and is venerated by both Chinese and Thai worshippers alike.

Furthermore, worshipping Chinese deities was a marker of Thais' ethnic identity, reflecting their connection to and acknowledgment of Chinese cultural heritage. In contrast, the popularity of Hindu deities largely stems from the success of the Erawan Shrine. This success has been widely replicated, with many businesses establishing Hindu deity statues. However, this assimilation is disconnected mainly from ethnic or cultural assimilation in Thailand, unlike the worship of Chinese deities.

William Skinner believed that Chinese immigrants in Bangkok, mainly Teochius, Hakkas, Cantonese, Hokkiens, and Hainanese, are assimilated to become Thais after the third generation (Skinner, 1957, pp. 143-144). However, if this assumption of Skinner is valid, Chinese communities, Chinese deity worship, and Chinese shrines will not survive in Bangkok. Thus, the continued worship of Chinese deities and the celebration of Chinese festivals and rituals related to them may be attributed to the younger generation. Their ritual practices are more closely aligned with everyday urban life, reflecting their incorporation into the framework of Thai prevalent religions.

With Bangkok's rapid urbanization, Thai religions have undergone significant transformations. The city has become a hub for new religious expressions. Followers at the forefront of these movements indicate that traditional religions are losing their relevance, while urban-oriented spiritual practices—referring to religious materiality and rituals aimed at seeking success in careers, wealth, and love within the urban environment of Bangkok—are on the rise. Various urban factors in Bangkok, such as changing landscapes, economic instability, the emergence of the Thai middle class, and an influx of migrants, bring new meanings and practices, including Chinese deity worship. Conversely, these worship practices influence urban dynamics in many ways.

Materials and methods

This qualitative study employs a variety of documents, including written works and articles, regarding Chinese shrines, their activities, and the changes they have undergone over time. It also examines local media and online content, such as public interviews, to assess how the worship of Chinese deities evolved through time. Furthermore, the paper utilizes participant observation and interviews by immersing in the environment of various Chinese shrines in Bangkok, closely examining how worshippers perform rituals and ceremonies and the community dynamics present within these shrines. Through these visits, the research analyzes the physical spaces of the shrines and how urban surroundings influence them.

According to the City Planning Department of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, 124 registered Chinese shrines are in the Bangkok metropolis. These shrines have official addresses and are currently operational and open to the public (The City Planning Department, 2016, p. 302). This research period is approximately eleven months, from 1 September 2023 to 30 July 2024. Five Chinese deities—Guan Yin, Guan Wu, Chao Mae Tup Tim, Chao Pho Suea, and Tai Sui Ye—are the most venerated, by local believers and tourists, and are typically enshrined as principal deities. Of the 124 shrines, 54 do not venerate any of these five deities. From the remaining 70 shrines that feature at least one of these principal deities, I employed a simple random sampling method to select eight shrines as case studies for this research. I adopted this approach to ensure a representative and unbiased distribution across shrine types and geographic locations. The selected shrines include the Guan Wu Shrine in Khlong San District, the Chao Mae Tup Tim Shrine in Samsen, the Chao Pho Suea Shrine in Bang Khae District, the Buan Chun Tua Shrine in Thon Buri District, as well as four Guan Yin shrines located at Wat Bowonniwet, the Romsai Rescue Foundation, Lad Phrao District, and Bang Khun-Thian District.

Data illustrate how urban factors in Bangkok, such as the change of landscape, economic insatiability, the emergence of the Thai middle class, and the influx of workers, intersect and give new meanings and practices

to Chinese deity worship. This study draws on theories exploring the relationship between urbanization and religion by identifying recurring themes, patterns, and insights aligned with the research objectives. As Stephan Lanz notes, "urban religion as a specific element of urbanization and urban everyday life intertwined with urban lifestyles and imaginaries, infrastructure and materialities, cultures, politics and economies, forms of living and working, community formation, festivals and celebrations" (Lanz, 2014, p. 25). Scholars further elaborate this concept as "… a continual process in which the urban and the religious reciprocally interact, mutually interlace, producing, and transforming and defining each other" (Lanz, 2014, p. 26).

Drawing on the premises mentioned above, this paper explores how Bangkok's urbanization impacts the worship of Chinese deities among city residents. It investigates the new meanings and practices arising from urban factors in Bangkok and examines how worship practices shape urban dynamics and contribute to the ongoing urbanization of Bangkok.

This research contributes to the broader discourse in religious and urban studies by analyzing the interplay between Bangkok's urbanization and the worship of Chinese deities. Focusing on Chinese deity worship in Bangkok highlights the interaction between religious faith and urban space and its implications. Throughout history, religions and urban environments have closely intertwined and evolved in parallel. The reciprocity between religion and city life has recently emerged as a significant area of academic inquiry. Urban spaces encompass intersecting cultures, economies, political structures, built environments, and histories, all of which profoundly influence the religions that develop within them. On the other hand, religions also engage with cities across these various dimensions. As Bangkok experiences urbanization, the worship of Chinese deities has been notably affected, and in turn, this worship has shaped numerous aspects of the city's development. Examining the dynamics between urbanization and religion in the context of urban Bangkok and Chinese deity worship helps us understand the urban factors influencing Bangkok. It allows the followers to have a deeper comprehension of their worship practices.

Results and discussion

As Bangkok rapidly urbanizes, the worship of Chinese deities in the city has undergone significant transformations. Urban factors such as changing landscapes, economic instability, the rise of the Thai middle class, and an influx of workers are reshaping these practices and their significance. Meanwhile, these practices of worshiping Chinese deities influence Bangkok's landscape. They contribute to religious consumption in Bangkok. They offer a balanced approach to urbanization and harmonize Buddhism with capitalism to satisfy the aspirations of the urban middle class in Bangkok. They provide a sanctuary for the residents of urban Bangkok, making them an essential part of the city's urban fabric.

Chinese deity worship and the changing landscape of Bangkok

Since the 1980s, the Bangkok Metropolitan Area has undergone rapid urbanization, outpacing other regions of the kingdom regions. For instance, between 1958 and 1980, the commercial area in Bangkok grew by an astonishing 514 percent (Saksri, 1991, p. 366). As a result, Bangkok's physical environment has transformed significantly in- built streets, shopping centers, infrastructure, tourist facilities, large- scale urban residences, and factories in the outskirts. This change brings benefits and challenges to the everyday lives of its residents.

The practices surrounding the worship of Chinese deities reflect the transformations in the landscape of Bangkok. A prominent example is the Guan Wu Shrine, located at 251 Somdet Chao Phraya Road in the Somdet Chao Phraya Sub- district of the Khlong San District. Guan Wu, originally a character from the *Sam Kok* (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*), is deeply revered by the Chinese as a deity symbolizing bravery and integrity. In the context of Mahayana Buddhism, he is recognized as Qie Lan (Samgharama), serving as a protector of Buddhist temples.

From the outset, secret societies linked the worship of Guan Wu to their original goal of overthrowing the Qing Dynasty and restoring the Ming. Over time, however, most secret societies in Siam abandoned their political ambitions and focused on protecting the safety and interests of their members. Their primary function shifted to monopolizing

occupations already dominated by specific speech groups. Eventually, joining a secret society became a prerequisite for Chinese immigrants seeking employment. By 1902, nearly all Chinese in Siam belonged to one of several secret societies (McCarthy, 1902, p. 3).

Members were bound by blood brotherhood through elaborate rituals, with Guan Wu as the central deity. During the Blood Oath ceremony, members sacrificed a rooster before his image in Chinese shrines, drank its blood, and recited the oath. Each speech group maintained its society but followed similar rites, with Guan Wu's image playing a vital role. As the Thai government implemented strict assimilation policies, many Chinese engaged in legitimate business gradually withdrew from these societies, leading to their decline and eventual dissolution. In parallel, Guan Wu's role underwent a profound transformation. Once revered as a symbol of loyalty, righteousness, and martial virtue—and even worshipped as a bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism—he gradually became a deity of commerce and trade. In contemporary Bangkok, his divine authority extends to various economic activities, including land transactions.

Residents within communities are highly attuned to the land and its pricing issues, largely due to a persistent imbalance between urban and rural areas and the failure of the state and the market to provide affordable housing for low-income populations (Askew, 2002, p. 141). Following 1991, land prices surged, while the availability of affordable housing diminished in the wake of financial shifts and changes in government policies. Beginning in the mid-1980s, well-capitalized banks entered the housing finance sector, motivated by the Bank of Thailand's decision to lift restrictions on bank credit expansion. This increased competition with the restructured Government Housing Bank (Askew, 2002, p. 76).

The housing estate industry has flourished, yet it has not benefited the overcrowded communities. Most residents in these areas are renters, and land sales occur frequently. While some resettlements are grounded in urban planning, residents are powerless against the capitalists and corporations controlling the land. As a result, the worshippers began to attach copies of their title deeds, rental contracts, and other land documents to Guan Wu statues, symbolizing their prayers and struggle to secure reasonable prices for renting, buying, or selling land and condominiums, as well as to prevent the demolition of these communities by worshippers (see Fig. 1).

Another case is the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine at 6 Rachawithi Road in the Wachira Phayaban Sub-district of Dusit District, Bangkok. The Hainanese established this shrine during the early Rattanakosin period. An interesting legend was discovered regarding the worship of Chao Mae Tub Tim and the associated shrine. According to accounts, people found an image of Chao Mae Tub Tim was found floating downstream in the Chao Phraya River near the Krung Thon Bridge. The residents of Samsen then discovered and housed this image, venerating it ever since (The City Planning Department, 2016, pp. 74-75).

The Krung Thon Bridge spans the Chao Phraya River, linking the Dusit and Bang Phlat districts (see Fig. 2). Engineers commenced construction of the bridge in 1954 and opened to traffic in 1957. According to the original construction plans, the bridge was supposed to occupy the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine Samsen site. The shrine caretaker recounted that the construction manager dreamed of Chao Mae Tub Tim before building the bridge. In the dream, Chao Mae Tub Tim asked him why he intended to demolish the shrine, expressing concern that people would no longer have a space for worship. Following this dream, the manager modified the plans and directed the construction of the bridge to pass through and occupy an adjacent temple, Wat Rajabhat Ti Karum, thereby preserving the shrine's location.

The narrative surrounding Chao Mae Tub Tim in the construction manager's dreams implies spiritual intervention. It indicates that the Samsen residents were against the shrine's demolition, which serves as a vital source of spiritual sustenance for the community. The Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine remains the most significant site for worship, festival celebrations, and ceremonial events for the worshippers. Despite the challenges posed by infrastructure construction and urban development in Bangkok, the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine in Samsen has remained resilient.

The cases of the Guan Wu and Chao Mae Tub Tim shrines illustrate the complex relationship between religion and urbanization. As Stephen Lanz mentions, the relationship between the interaction between the

urban environment and religious practices is reciprocal. They are engaged in a "continual process" of mutual influence, production, transformation, and definition (Lanz, 2014, p. 26). This continual process is evident in the cases of the Guan Wu and Chao Mae Tub Tim shrines. The Guan Wu Shrine exemplifies how alterations in Bangkok's landscape can affect the worship practices of Chinese deities, while the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine shows how the spiritual influence of these deities impacts the community amidst urban changes.

Figure 1 A Guan Wu Image with the Title Deeds
Source: Author (2023)

Chinese deity worship and economic instability

In the 1980s, Thailand experienced a notable economic boom. Jean Comaroff observed the interplay between economic and symbolic production during this period, noting that Thailand is a society "where the dynamism of capitalist production is rivaled only by the drive of diverse forms of ritual creativity, both within and outside Buddhism" (Comaroff, 1994, p. 301). This theoretical lens helps illuminate how economic prosperity in Thailand fueled religious innovation. Therefore, religious communities constructed numerous large-scale temples to provide spaces for increasingly elaborate religious rituals. Devotees, benefiting from the economic upturn, were more willing to make substantial offerings to the monastic community, culminating in grand almsgiving ceremonies attended by thousands. Rituals became more complex, as evidenced by the opulent decoration of ritual spaces, the diversity and

abundance of offerings, extended durations, and heightened lay participation.

Following the Thammasat University massacre in 1976, the military regime sought to re- establish its legitimacy by invoking Buddhist authority to reinforce national identity and counter the threat of communism. Disillusioned with traditional forms of Buddhism, many urban residents began to explore alternative modes of religious expression. Wat Dhammakaya was established in 1970 and is located near urban Bangkok, giving it geographical advantages. This temple initially encouraged lay Buddhists to adhere to strict precepts and embrace anti- materialism. Monastic authorities expected educated middle-class individuals and students from Bangkok who came to meditate to maintain discipline and wear white robes. The temple displayed the sins of materialism to its followers by showing related videos.

Figure 2 Krung Thon Bridge and Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine Samsen
Source: PPTV HD 36 (2023)

In the early 1980s, a surge of foreign investment flowed into Thailand, prompting urban devotees, particularly those from the business class, to donate to Buddhist temples. Wat Dhammakaya has garnered support from military dignitaries and government officials (Paisal & Buruma, 1987, p. 54). The Dhammakaya Movement attracted a substantial following eager to participate in its meditation and merit-making activities, expanding its physical footprint and involvement in financial investments and fundraising efforts. The temple constructed grand and impressive pagodas and grew its land holdings through a notably capitalist approach. However, Wat Dhammakaya has faced significant criticism. Since 1998, the military government has closely scrutinized the Dhammakaya Movement (Laohavanich, 2012, p. 484) . This underscores that the popularity of the Dhammakaya Movement among the middle class coincided with the political and economic transformations within Bangkok's urban landscape. Moreover, scrutinizing the Dhammakaya Movement reflects its growing influence and the inextricable link between religious movements and politics in urban areas.

Similar to the Dhammakaya Movement, the popularity of Chinese deity worship has paralleled Bangkok's economic development and played a significant role in expanding religious practices. The shrines dedicated to Chinese deities reflects cultural continuity and the economic dimensions of religious growth. Chinese deity worship is widely associated with wealth and commercial success, making them particularly appealing during periods of economic boom. As Bangkok residents increasingly sought financial success, Chinese deity worship became a means through which economic aspirations were religiously expressed and ritualized. Consequently, this form of worship contributed to Bangkok's commodification and diversification of the religious economy in Bangkok.

In addition, the perception emerges that the Chinese are inherently entrepreneurial, particularly about the resurgence of Sino-Thai business networks. Aspects of capitalism naturally intertwine with the worship of Chinese deities. Bangkok's Chinatown, the first settlement of Chinese immigrants in Thailand, features a wide array of goods and closely constructed shophouses that honor these deities. Following the establishment of warehouses and piers by Westerners, Chinese merchants began importing both Chinese and Western products. The Chinese dominate most retail sectors in Bangkok, controlling all segments of the economy, from retail to import-export businesses (Sirisrisak, 2015, p. 176). The deities worshipped by the Chinese symbolize wealth, suggesting that those who venerate these deities are more likely to achieve financial success.

In early Bangkok, Chinese communities predominantly adopted the shophouse model, using the ground floor for commercial activities and the upper floors as residential spaces. This architectural and social pattern extended to provincial towns. However, the urbanization process in Bangkok gradually disrupted this integrated live-work arrangement. Consequently, the worship of Chinese deities has transformed. While traditional practices emphasized invoking divine protection for business prosperity and household safety, contemporary urban worship has expanded to address a broader range of everyday concerns. Thus, Chinese deity worship is not entirely continuous with earlier forms but has adapted to changing spatial, economic, and social conditions.

On July 1, 1975, China and Thailand formally established diplomatic relations, laying the foundation for increasingly close economic exchanges between the two nations. Since the 1980s, the influence of Sino-Thai business groups has grown significantly, contributing to economic development and to the revival of a Sino-Thai identity. This economic empowerment fostered a renewed sense of cultural pride and confidence within the Sino-Thai community. One visible expression of this cultural resurgence is the growing popularity of Chinese deity worship, which reflects their affirmation of Chinese tradition and the diminished need to de-emphasize their Chineseness. Chinese shrines emerged as shared religious spaces where Sino-Thai communities congregated, forming a multifaceted religious environment centered on the veneration of Mahayana bodhisattvas and deities, such as Guan Yin and Guan Wu. The shared religious foundations embedded within the Mahayana and Theravada Buddhist traditions further facilitated a sense of spiritual affinity between the Thais and Chinese.

The Chinese community also leveraged its economic influence to promote the worship of Chinese deities and construct additional Chinese shrines in Bangkok. For instance, in the latter half of the 1990s, a wealthy Sino-Thai benefactor donated a meter-high bronze statue of Guan Yin (see Fig. 3) to Wat Bowomniwet, a Theravada Buddhist temple supported by the state and royalty. Wat Bowomniwet emphasized this statue and distributed leaflets to encourage the sale of replicas. Today, the Supreme Patriarch produces Guan Yin amulets (Jackson, 1999, pp. 269-270).

This example illustrates how the commodification of religion, coupled with the competitive economic landscape in Bangkok, has contributed to the proliferation of Chinese deity worship. This phenomenon resembles a liberalized market where urban residents can choose their religious beliefs and acquire religious items like any other consumer goods. In this context, religious monasteries actively compete for followers within this marketplace (Stark & Roger, 2000, p. 111). As a result, the worship of Chinese deities in Thailand has become an integral part of Thai capitalism, producing more religious items and reviving

rituals that focus on wealth and health rather than salvation.

In Chinese shrines, the combination of ritual participation and the purchase of religious items significantly generates revenue. Many shrines provide various products, such as amulets of Chinese deities, yantras, and auspicious items. Notably, worshippers of Tai Sui Ye follow six distinct procedures, and they closely link the Kae Pi Chong Ritual to the consumption of ritual products and the act of making donations (see Fig. 4).

The challenging economy resulting from the 1997 Asian Economic Crisis and fragmented political structures led to significant changes in Bangkok. This crisis caused the disintegration of various facets of the developmental social contract. The negative social consequences were profound, including declines in output and income, increased unemployment, a rise in school dropouts, the collapse of local businesses, and soaring prices for essential goods. These impacts severely affected the lives of citizens, particularly people experiencing poverty, who experienced considerable distress during this crisis (Paitoonpong, 2001, p. 13). The urban landscape of Bangkok reflects this economic and political instability. Before accepting solutions for Thailand's situation, many city residents interpreted these issues as spiritual, attributing them to supernatural forces and belief systems.

Within urban communities, individuals reported experiences of encountering ghosts or criminals, suggesting an atmosphere of urban anxiety (Johnson, 2013, p. 305). In this context, people renewed the significance of popular religion, which is deeply intertwined with supernatural phenomena such as ghosts and deities. The worship of Chinese deities became closely linked to other localized cultic practices and became a salient form of coping during economic duress. The groups most severely affected by the crisis were small business owners, white-collar workers, factory laborers, middle-class families, and recent graduates. Many people turned to these religious practices to seek divine blessings and reclaim security and hope amid economic uncertainty.

Urban precariousness intricately links to accidents, illness, death, and misfortune (Johnson, 2012, p. 767). These themes are often anthropomorphized and associated with specific Chinese deities, such as Chao Pho Suea. A legend links Chao Pho Suea to a woman named Phong from a village. A tiger tragically killed her son when he went hunting in the forest. In search of vengeance, the villagers prayed for a successful tiger hunt at a Thai Buddhist temple. Shortly thereafter, while exploring the forest, they encountered an injured tiger. The villagers inquired whether this tiger had killed Phong's son, to which the tiger confessed. When they asked if it had pleaded guilty, the tiger accepted responsibility. Just as the villagers are about to kill the tiger, Phong, the compassionate mother, feels sympathy for it and chooses to adopt the creature instead. Seven years later, Phong passed away. During her cremation ceremony, the tiger leaped into the fire and perished alongside her.

The transformation of the tiger—from a fearsome killer to a creature willingly embracing death—holds deep symbolic meaning for the devotees of Chao Pho Suea. It encapsulates the possibility of moral redemption and the channeling of dangerous forces into protective ones. The tiger represents real-life political and economic crises in urban residents' everyday struggles. Although the narrative of violence and loss originates the legend, people have reimagined it as a source of spiritual strength and moral guidance. Phong's act of mercy and the tiger's ultimate sacrifice reflect the redemptive potential of divine power when guided by human compassion. For believers, Chao Pho Suea thus functions as a guardian and a source of empowerment in confronting the precarity of urban life in Bangkok.

Figure 3 The Bronze Guan Yin Image in Wat Bowomniwet
Source: Author (2023)

Figure 4 Religious item consumption in Kae Pi Chong Ritual
Source: Wat Mangkorn Kamalawat (2023)

Figure 5 The Largest Chao Pho Suea Image
Source: Thanakhan Perm Bun (2024)

The official name of the shrine is Thanakhan Perm Bun, Ih which translates to "Merit Accumulation Bank." Recently, the shrine has facilitated the repatriation of bodies from Bangkok to their hometowns. The presence of spiritual mediums, the donation of coffins, and the observance of the Vegetarian Festival all emphasize the concept of *bun* (merit). In Thai belief, merit serves as a counterbalance to sins. Many Thais tend to interpret uncontrollable events as consequences of sins accumulated in their past lives. With the influence of capitalism, adherents often seek to amass merit through financial contributions. The worldview of Wat Dhammakaya posits that individuals can be reborn into different levels of heaven based on the number of donations they make to the temple during their lifetime.

In contrast to Buddhism, Chinese deity worship places less emphasis on merit accumulation. People believe that generous offerings to ancestor bring tangible benefits to future generations. Such giving, common in Chinese religious practice, symbolically expresses gratitude, strengthens familial prosperity, and supports business success. However, some individuals in Bangkok sometimes misinterpret this practice through a Buddhist lens, tying merit to spiritual advancement achieved through disciplined practice.

Given the location of the Chao Pho Suea Shrine was observed at a car turning point on 39/ 1 Suwinthawong Road in the Min Buri Sub- district of Bangkok (see Fig. 6). This shrine is part of the Romsai Rescue Foundation, which primarily aids individuals involved in car accidents and those affected by natural disasters in the city. A Sino- Thai couple generously donated the land and established the foundation. They chose to build the shrine to honor Guan Yin Bodhisattva. An inscription on a stone tablet was observed to explain the motivation behind their actions: "I have believed in Guan Yin since I was a child, so I want to build a Guan Yin shrine, and everyone can come and worship." The Guan Yin Shrine was completed in 2017, featuring a stunning image of Guan Yin standing in a lotus pot atop the back of a dragon. This impressive statue stands 3.6 meters tall, and the bodhisattva gazes down upon all living beings with compassion, aiding them in times of danger and distress while bestowing blessings and

alleviating suffering. Guan Yin is revered as an omnipresent guardian figure within the faith centered on compassion. Beyond her role in relieving suffering and responding to cries for help, she inspires adherents to embody compassion and ethical conduct in everyday life through her different incarnations. Devotees gather to worship and donate to the Romsai Rescue Foundation near the shrine during festivals. Charitable institutions, many of which enshrine Guan Yin as their central deity, closely link to the development of Chinese religion in Bangkok. The subsequent evolution of Chinese religious practices has thus extended from this foundation of compassion~~,~~ while integrating characteristics shaped by Bangkok's urban context.

Figure 6 The Guan Yin Image in the Romsai Rescue Foundation
Source: Author (2023)

The Chao Pho Suea and Guan Yin Shrines cases exemplify how these Chinese deities' worship practices highlight the intricate relationship between religion and urbanization. Drawing on Stephen Lanz's theories concerning urban and religious dynamics, the urban environment of Bangkok significantly influences the economic activities and perspectives of Chinese deity worshippers~~,~~ and vice versa. The popularity of Chinese deity worship has evolved in tandem with Bangkok's economic development. This form of worship, along with its associated shrines, reflects the aspirations of Bangkok residents for wealth and success, contributing to the fabric of Thai prevalent religions. Additionally, these Chinese shrines illustrate the spiritual influence of these deities on the extensive construction of shrines throughout urban Bangkok, making them an integral component of the city's urban landscape.

Chinese deity worship and the Thai middle-class

In the 1990s, the well-educated middle class of Bangkok emerged as the primary drivers of urban modernity. Popular religion, a prevalent belief among Thais, involves the veneration of sacred entities and the conviction that supernatural forces can fulfill their desires, particularly ~~about~~ financial prosperity. At first, the middle class appears to have little engagement with popular religions because urban intellectuals and

professionals tend to reject irrational supernaturalism, overt commercialism, and the kitschy expressions of popular religion. However, the prosperity of popular religions, rooted in Thai Buddhist inclusivism, does not exclude the middle class (Jackson, 1999, p. 261).

In market-oriented Bangkok, money has become a distinctive religion (Satha-anand, 1994, p. 17). The middle class closely links its aspirations for wealth and success to the worship of Chinese deities. The rise of a substantial middle class has coincided with and fueled the flourishing of spiritual worship. Spiritual traditions have become intertwined with consumerism, and the emphasis on individualism fosters popular religious practices. The urban middle class—an emerging group following the economic boom—has perspectives on Chinese religions that align with the trends of Thai capitalism, prioritizing the accumulation of wealth and the reinforcement of social hierarchies.

The 108-meter UFO-inspired Memorial Hall of Phramongkolthepmuni at Wat Dhammakaya evokes another notable landmark: the Guan Yin Shrine located at 4/37 Chok Chai 4 Road in the Lad Phrao Sub-district of Bangkok (see Fig. 7). Builders constructed the shrine in 1988, designing it according to the principles of Chinese Feng Shui, which involves the harmonious arrangement of spaces within a structure or plot of land. This striking and majestic pagoda is set in a spacious garden with hundreds of white marble statues representing the Lord Buddha, Guan Yin, and various Chinese deities. The most prominent figure is Guan Yin, depicted in 108 different postures.

Artists adorn each tier of the pagoda with intricate Chinese-style murals that, vividly depict the legendary tales of Lord Buddha and Guan Yin. Visitors step inside and find four imposing statues of Guan Yin, each soaring to a height of 8.3 meters and positioned on all four sides. These remarkable sculptures, masterfully carved from premium Chinese sandalwood and embellished with genuine gold, feature 20 faces, and 1,000 hands, embodying divine grace and compassion. Encircling them are 108 wooden barrels, each meticulously inscribed with sacred mantras, enhancing the spiritual ambiance of the pagoda (Tunsuttiwong, 2011).

The observations made regarding the shrine and the postings within suggest that the faithful contributed the funds for its maintenance and construction. It is also apparent that a committee was established alongside the foundation, consisting of government officials, military leaders, business elites, and influential community figures. This arrangement indicates that the worship of Guan Yin at the shrine symbolizes wealth and social status.

To better understand the shrine's social significance, it is essential to consider the historical and sociocultural context of religious practice in Thailand. Historically, binary oppositional groups marked Thai society during the premodern period. Thai elites advocated for orthodox Buddhism, primarily represented by the Thammayut School, while many dismissed and disparaged the religious practices of commoners and the lower classes as superstitious.

However, the urban middle class found itself positioned outside this binary framework. Emerging from the urbanization processes in Bangkok, the middle class has remained relatively detached from both elite forms of Buddhism and practices associated with magic or supernaturalism. As a result, their spiritual practices emerged to bridge the gap between the national religion and peripheral beliefs, particularly within the context of capitalism and social hierarchy (Jackson, 1991, pp. 192-195). The sense of solidarity forged through the participation of government officials, political leaders, business elites, influential figures, and devotees in celebrating Chinese festivals and religious rituals extends beyond the shrine's sacred space into Bangkok's everyday urban life. This solidarity fosters mutual assistance and contributes to the collective enhancement of socio-economic status. As the shrine's First Assistant Secretary remarked, "Our members support one another in all matters."

Figure 7 The Pagoda and Guan Yin Image in Guan Yin Shrine Chok Chai 4
Source: Tunsuttiwong (2011)

Chinese deity worship exemplifies a delicate balance between Buddhism and capitalism. In Bangkok, this practice aligns more closely with rational religion by emphasizing moral development and the accumulation of merit. Chinese deities effectively utilize Buddhist doctrines and religious guidelines to enhance their appeal among the middle class, distinguishing themselves from other spirit cults. Followers of Chao Pho and Chao Mae, for instance, adhere to dietary restrictions, notably avoiding beef, while incorporating the Buddhist Five Precepts and dedicated practices into their daily routines. The widespread popularity of the Vegetarian Festival in Bangkok is a prime example of the intersection between commercialized religion and religious morality.

Since 1987, the Vegetarian Festival has received growing coverage from Thai network television contributing to a notable rise in participation among Bangkok residents. During this festival, vendors display vegetarian food marked by small yellow flags and religious items at every Chinese shrine. Devotees, dressed in clean white attire, enter these shrines to worship while observing various religious restrictions. They partake in consuming sacred items and rituals.

In addition, Thai Buddhist thought posits that the soteriological function of *kam* (karma) - namely, liberation from suffering- plays a crucial role in explaining many life events and experiences (Gombrich, 1996, p. 49). All living beings exist within a hierarchy defined by their varying capacities to take effective action and degrees of freedom from suffering. The composite quality of merit shapes this hierarchy (Hanks Jr, 1962, p. 1247). In Thai religious practice, both karma and merit hold significant importance. Currently, the doctrines surrounding the Chinese deities in Bangkok emphasize the accumulation of merit.

Moreover, evidence suggests that middle- class, educated urban residents and students seek religious salvation while simultaneously condemning consumer capitalism in Bangkok. Urban dwellers are confronted with both materialistic and spiritual challenges even as they benefit from the advantages of urbanization. If national Buddhism fails to address these issues, it may need to evolve, or individuals may turn to other religions. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906-1993) endeavored to make Buddhism more relevant to contemporary life by reinterpreting the teachings of the Buddha to focus on modern challenges. He adapted the method of the Noble Eightfold Path to tackle these issues and promote mindfulness in urban environments (Prasertsom, 2007, pp. 104-106).

While figures such as Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and other reformist monks are widely regarded as knowledgeable scholars and dedicated ascetics— earning respect from lay Buddhists and the broader public— the extent to which believers in Bangkok genuinely engage with rational Buddhism. Rational Buddhism is an interpretive approach emphasizing philosophical reasoning, logical analysis, and scientific compatibility in understanding Buddhist teachings. It aims to demythologize and critically examine core doctrines such as dependent origination, non- self, and karma. In contrast, practice-oriented Buddhism focuses on ritual, devotional activities, and the perceived

efficacy of karmic accumulation. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and various reformist monks represent a transitional phase from traditional to modern Buddhism. Through reinterpretations of the Buddha's teachings, they strive to sustain an interactive relationship between rational Buddhism and contemporary urban life.

In contrast, the Santi Asoke Movement critiques consumer capitalism and promotes a vision of Buddhism that emphasizes asceticism, aligning itself with a secular consumer society. Through the Asoke Sect, it introduces a form of Buddhist fundamentalism that highlights everyday work as a form of meditation. This approach reflects the complex interplay between religion, social class, and mobility within Bangkok's urban context. Residents of the Asoke communities in Bang Kapi District are committed to their community's spiritual and material progress. The Santi Asoke Movement presents a viable alternative to the dominant capitalist lifestyle in Bangkok, advocating for self-reliance and selflessness. Notably, the Asoke community in Bang Kapi achieved economic stability during the financial crisis (Essen, 2004, p. 17).

Conversely, while rooted in the reformative ideals of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, both the Dhammakaya Movement and the Santi Asoke Movement veer toward extremes—whether excessive capitalism or unwavering fundamentalism—failing to meet the spiritual needs of individuals in everyday urban life. In this context, Chinese deity worship appears to offer a balanced approach to urbanization, effectively harmonizing Buddhism with capitalism to satisfy the aspirations of the urban middle class.

Chinese deity worship and the working class

The worship of Chinese deities serves as a means for marginalized individuals to navigate social hierarchies and alleviate uncertainty. Historically, the distinctions between urban dwellers and rural inhabitants have persisted in Thai discourse and remain relevant today. This contrast highlights an underlying awareness of social instability (Williams, 1973, p. 347). In recent years, a binary divide between 'urban elites and the middle class' and 'the larger rural population' has exacerbated social instability in Thailand." Despite significant progress in rural areas, the pace of development has fallen behind that of urban centers due to the continuous processes of industrialization and urbanization. As a result, the "urban-rural divide" has become more pronounced.

In Thailand, urban development has indeed exerted a "pull" effect, attracting rural migrants to Bangkok—who comprised 61% of the city's population growth in the 1970s. Despite some agricultural advancements, productivity has remained low, and rural incomes stagnant, making poverty the primary driver of migration. These rural migrants, informal workers, and slum dwellers from other provinces and neighboring countries form a marginalized underclass in the capital. The Bangkok middle class often perceives them as a threat to limited urban resources, discriminates against them, and stereotypes their beliefs as irrational, superstitious, and backward.

For instance, people enshrine a century-old tree near 822/1 Sena Nikhom 1 Road, Chan Kasem Sub-district, Chatuchak District, Bangkok (see Fig. 8). People pay homage to the tree by offering flowers, incense, and water in hopes of receiving lottery numbers. The tree trunk is covered in powder, highlighting the intricate patterns of its bark. Offerings include mirrors, cosmetics, hairbrushes, strands of costume pearls, and traditional Thai dresses. Devotees often rub the tree's bark and break twigs, searching for numbers or messages that indicate winning lottery numbers. Many of these devoted individuals include motorcycle riders and household maids. They must *ha chao kin kham*, meaning they live from hand to mouth. They earn minimal incomes, save little or nothing, and often carry heavy debt burdens. They cannot manage unexpected risks, making illness or accidents financially devastating. Consequently, many turn to divine intervention, such as hoping to win the lottery, to escape poverty and improve their economic conditions in Bangkok.

Figure 8 An Enshrined Century-old Tree
Source: Author (2024)

Disadvantaged individuals often leverage their faith to empower themselves in rapidly changing socioeconomic conditions. For instance, many people from northeastern Thailand have chosen to become Buddhist monks (Kamala, 1997, p. 201). In addition to the roles of monastics, marginalized individuals may also become spirit mediums and fortune-tellers. A spirit medium associated with Chao Pho Suea stated that Chao Pho Suea descends from heaven to alleviate suffering in this world. He shared that his business collapsed utterly, and his father died in a traffic accident. Similarly, the abbot of the Guan Yin Shrine in Chok Chai 4 and the Guan Yin Boddhisattva Hall in Ram Inthra claim to be an incarnation of Guan Yin. Worshipers raise their hands and knees, bow their heads to the ground, and make offerings to her every time she comes out to preach Buddha's teaching.

The previously considered "unwelcome people" are esteemed and revered by Bangkok residents, including numerous senior Thai civil servants, military officers, and Sino- Thai businesspeople. For these marginalized individuals, serving Chinese deities is a pathway to escape their socioeconomic marginalization and elevate their social standing.

Most manufacturing factories, Sino- Thai enterprises, and Chinese-owned warehouses operate on the outskirts of Bangkok, where the urban Thai peasantry has transitioned mainly into an industrial labor force. These workers have developed a mutually dependent relationship with Sino- Thai businesses, in which Chinese religious traditions— especially the worship of deities like Guan Yin—play a key mediating role. These deities symbolize prosperity and serve as markers of moral legitimacy, thus bridging the gap between labor and capital.

A prominent example is the Guan Yin shrine located at 340/1 Bang Khun Thian-Chai Thalae Road, in the Samae Dam Sub-district of Bang Khun Thian District, Bangkok. This shrine, situated within a densely populated area where many residents work in nearby factories, attracts worshippers seeking not only material blessings such as wealth and lottery success, but also moral guidance and community recognition. While the so-called middle classes often view marginalized populations as morally deficient and socially irresponsible (Johnson, 2013, p. 310), participation in Guan Yin worship allows working-class devotees to challenge these negative stereotypes. By embracing Buddhist precepts and engaging in communal religious practices, they cultivate an image of moral respectability.

Rituals held at the shrine on Guan Yin's birthday, ordination day, and enlightenment day, such as circumambulation of the image, ritual offerings, scripture recitation, and shared meals, foster a sense of belonging and moral unity. These rituals unite factory workers, entrepreneurs, and the bourgeoisie, creating a rare space for cross-class interaction and mutual recognition. Devotees distinguish themselves from others who pursue fortune through less socially sanctioned means, such as gambling or superstitious practices associated with underground lotteries. Ultimately, the worship of Guan Yin is a powerful means for the working class to enhance their moral and social standing within an otherwise stratified urban landscape.

Marginalized individuals are particularly vulnerable and often lack the resources to navigate economic and social crises. They do not have access to social security and remain hopeful for a future free from accidents, illness, and various other hardships. Regrettably, their profits are minimal after covering essential monthly expenses, placing them in a precarious position within Bangkok's urban landscape. As livelihoods become increasingly uncertain, less affluent residents turn to profit-driven cults and engage in practices of propitiation (Kitiarsa, 2005, p. 475). For instance, as previously noted, individuals perform acts of offering and veneration toward deities in the hope of obtaining divine guidance, such as winning the lottery.

The precarious situation of marginalized individuals often stems from the potential for accidents and dangers. Rational Buddhism has struggled to gain traction outside elite circles, and the integration of scientific culture among specific populations remains limited. Many urban dwellers attribute misfortunes to malevolent spirits, interpreting these challenges as spiritual issues and signs of supernatural interference (Johnson, 2013, p. 305). People believe that specific Chinese deities possess malevolent power arising from acts of massacre, poisoning, and the punishment of sins associated with misfortune and death. In Thai society, the veneration of deities associated with malevolent powers reflects a pragmatic approach to religious belief, a deep-seated reverence for the supernatural, and a culturally hybrid religious landscape. People perceive such deities as possessing potent and efficacious spiritual power, capable of granting tangible benefits or averting misfortune. As a result, worshippers actively honor these deities regardless of their moral alignment—what matters is not whether a deity is benevolent or malevolent, but whether it is effective.

Furthermore, the appeal of malevolent deities is shaped by urban influences, often symbolizing the anxieties and uncertainties embedded in contemporary urban life. People think that neglecting to worship Tai Sui Ye or perform the appropriate rituals can lead to a year fraught with difficulties or even disaster. Figures like Guan Wu, a cold-blooded warrior, and Chao Pho Suea, known for brutal acts before their deification, embody this transfer of horrific death into a source of *barami* (charismatic power) akin to the authority held by Thai kings and magical monks (Stengs, 2009, p. 88).

In the unstable social and economic climate of Bangkok, individuals such as day laborers in the informal economy seek to convert the malevolent power of these deities into auspicious power, which in turn offers them a sense of propitiation and security. By harnessing the power of these deities, they gain confidence in addressing the challenges of daily urban life. For instance, the Buan Chun Tua Shrine, located at 433 Charoen Nakhon Road in the Dao Khanong Sub-district of Thon Buri District, Bangkok—ritual leaders host ceremonies where they pit centipedes, snakes, scorpions, geckos, and toads against one another, transforming the survivor into a new statue. Worshippers regard the victor as the primordial spirit of the newly created Chinese deity image.

These examples and situations involving the working class in Bangkok illustrate how the city's evolving socio-economic landscape, shaped by ongoing urbanization, has influenced the worship practices of Chinese deities. The rituals associated with these deities, and the presence of Chinese shrines, offer a sense of sanctuary for urban residents. These shrines function not only as religious spaces but also as catalysts for the economic vitality of their surrounding areas, making them an integral part of Bangkok's urban fabric.

Conclusion

As Bangkok undergoes rapid urbanization, the worship of Chinese deities, represented in this research through the metaphor of Chinese joss sticks, has experienced significant transformations. Various urban factors, including shifting spatial landscapes, economic instability, the rise of the Thai middle class, and an influx of workers, have reshaped both the practices and the meanings associated with these forms of worship. Simultaneously, the worship of Chinese deities is also influencing the urbanization process. As demonstrated by the examples discussed in this research, it becomes evident that these religious practices play a substantial role in shaping Bangkok's urban landscape. They contribute to the city's religious consumption dynamics and reflect a localized negotiation between urbanization, Buddhist traditions, and capitalist aspirations. By addressing the spiritual and material needs of different social classes in Bangkok, they offer a form of emotional refuge. Their practices and spaces have become integral to the city's evolving socio-religious fabric.

It was explained that urban dynamics, using the skyscrapers as a metaphor, impart new meanings and worship practices to Chinese deities, who are believed to protect urban residents against demolition and to offer blessings for fair land transactions. The relationship between Chinese deities and Thai capitalism parallels the economic boom, highlighting the significance of material religion and the exchange of merit for monetary gain. Conversely, the middle class appreciates these deities' ethical and merit-focused qualities during economic downturns. For migrants, worshipping Chinese deities represents a pathway to enhancing their social standing and assimilating into the community. Additionally, certain malevolent Chinese deities are worshipped by urban residents because people believe such deities possess potent and efficacious spiritual power, that is capable of granting tangible benefits or averting misfortune. In parallel, malevolent deities symbolize the anxieties and uncertainties in everyday urban life. The ritual worship of these deities serves to convert uncertainty into perceived certainty, offering urban residents in Bangkok a sense of psychological security amid social and economic flux.

This illustrates that urban religion, specifically Chinese deity worship in Bangkok, has become a fundamental aspect of urbanization and daily life in the city. Building on Stephen Lanz's arguments, it is evident that Chinese deity worship is intricately connected with numerous facets of urban Bangkok, influencing and being influenced by lifestyles, infrastructures, and community practices.

The cases of the Guan Wu and Chao Mae Tub Tim shrines exemplify the intricate relationship between religion and urbanization in Bangkok, revealing how different Chinese shrines take on distinct roles within their respective communities. While all these shrines are subject to similar urban transformation processes, how people engage with them to address real-life concerns varies significantly, shaped by the specific historical background of each shrine and the community's evolving imagination of its spiritual significance.

The Guan Wu Shrine highlights how local communities strategically invoke the deity's power to safeguard their interests amid spatial and economic change. In contrast, the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine illustrates how the enduring spiritual presence of the deity actively influences the direction of urban development in the Samsen area, embedding sacred meaning into the city's evolving spatial configuration.

Similarly, the Chao Pho Suea and Guan Yin shrines underscore the diverse functions of Chinese religious sites in the urban context, each shaped by unique socio-economic dynamics and communal needs. These cases demonstrate that religious devotion in contemporary Bangkok is not merely reactive to urban change but serves as a flexible context.

The popularity of Chinese deity worship has evolved alongside Bangkok's economic development, reflecting the aspirations of its residents for prosperity and personal fulfillment. As an important expression of Thai popular religion, which emphasizes the veneration of sacred powers believed to influence wealth, career,

and romantic outcomes, Chinese deities have become deeply embedded in the urban spiritual landscape. Their shrines serve as spaces for devotional practice and shape the city's physical environment, highlighting religion's significant role in Bangkok's urban transformation.

Chinese deity worship maintains a harmonious balance amid urbanization by integrating spiritual belief with the mechanisms of capitalism to meet the needs and aspirations of the urban middle class. This relationship is evident in the construction of new temples, the organization of large- scale ritual events, the commercialization of religious items, and the encouragement of monetary donations in exchange for merit. Through these practices, religious institutions provide tangible avenues for individuals to pursue prosperity and success. In addition, Chinese deities embody Buddhist principles of moral discipline and merit- making, distinguishing their worship from purely utilitarian forms of popular belief. Instances from Bangkok's working- class illustrate how the worship practices of these deities have been shaped by the city's changing socio- economic landscape driven by urbanization. The rituals and communities surrounding these Chinese shrines offer residents comfort within the bustling urban environment, reinforcing their role as vital elements of the city's urban fabric.

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