

The Influence of Wat Phanan Choeng in Ayutthaya on the Thai Chinese Community from a Multicultural Perspective

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Abstract

This article examines the influence of Wat Phanan Choeng in Ayutthaya on the Thai Chinese community from a multicultural perspective. It argues that the temple should not be understood merely as a Buddhist site, but as a dynamic socio-cultural space in which beliefs, collective memories, and identity practices of different ethnic groups intersect and are continuously negotiated. Adopting a qualitative research approach, the study combines documentary analysis, field observation, and semi-structured interviews. Fieldwork was conducted between May and July 2025. A total of five key informants were interviewed, including three elderly members of the Thai-Chinese community, one local historian, and one expert in Chinese-Thai cultural practices. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their long-term engagement with the temple and local community.

The analysis focuses on three dimensions: architecture and murals, sacred images and symbols, and traditional customs and rituals. The findings indicate that the temple embodies a multicultural religious landscape shaped by long-term interaction between Thai and Chinese cultures. Architectural spaces such as the Royal Hall, the Painted Hall, and the Goddess Shrine reflect the integration of Thai Buddhism, Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, and Chinese folk beliefs. Sacred figures such as Sam Po Kong and Chao Mae Soi Dok Mak function as symbolic mediators that connect migration history, ancestral worship, and local belonging.

At the level of ritual practice, activities such as ghost-feeding charity, Chinese New Year celebrations, Qingming ancestor worship, and cemetery-related rituals demonstrate how Chinese cultural values—particularly filial piety and charitable ethics—have been preserved, adapted, and publicly recontextualized within the Thai religious context.

The study further argues that Wat Phanan Choeng operates as a shared cultural platform through which Thai Chinese communities construct, maintain, and negotiate their identity within Thai society. However, this coexistence should not be understood solely as harmonious integration. It is also shaped by broader socio-political processes, including state patronage and historical patterns of cultural assimilation.

In the context of contemporary transformations—such as modernization, urbanization, and generational change—the sustainability of this multicultural dynamic is increasingly being challenged. The temple therefore represents not only a site of cultural coexistence, but also a space in which identity continues to be redefined over time.

Keywords: Multiculturalism; Wat Phanan Choeng; Ayutthaya; Thai Chinese Community; Collective Memory; Identity

Introduction

Historical records indicate that Chinese migration into Thailand can be traced back to the period before Ayutthaya was established as the royal capital. Early Chinese settlers were concentrated mainly in areas outside the city island of Ayutthaya, particularly around Laem Bang Kacha, Khlong Suan Phlu, and the mouth of the Bia River. A canal known as Khlong Nai Kai was later excavated to connect the Chinese settlement with other communities inside the city island. This Chinese community remained in existence throughout the Ayutthaya period until the fall of the kingdom.

Kasetsiri (2000) notes that Ayutthaya was home to a substantial Chinese population, many of whom played important roles in the royal court and administrative system. Similarly, Skinner, a major scholar of the Chinese in Thailand, estimates that in the seventeenth century the Chinese population in Ayutthaya ranged between 3,000 and 4,000, while the total population was approximately 10,000. This suggests that the Chinese constituted a significant social and economic presence in the city. Phupha (2020) further argues that most Chinese migrants who entered Thailand during the Ayutthaya period were of Hokkien origin. This group was particularly active in the royal capital and in southern towns, where they held considerable influence within court politics and regional trade networks.

These accounts suggest that Chinese settlement in Ayutthaya began even before the city became the royal capital. This was likely related to the area's geographical advantages, since many of the Chinese who arrived were skilled in navigation and commerce. The royal court also made use of Chinese expertise in operating merchant vessels, employing Chinese personnel at various levels on royal trading ships. As a result, the Chinese community occupied an important place in Ayutthaya society, enjoyed a range of royal privileges, and gradually formed a sizable settlement in the region.

The Chinese living in central Ayutthaya were among the few foreign groups permitted to establish communities and conduct trade there. One reason for this was that Chinese ancestors had assisted the king in consolidating royal authority during the early Ayutthaya period. During times of war, the Chinese-descended official Luang Aphai Phiphat organized the Chinese residents of Ayutthaya into a volunteer force. This Chinese camp developed into a large and powerful military unit, stationed in the area of the Dutch settlement and Wat Phanan Choeng (Phupha, 2020).

South of the city center and outside the city island lay Bang Kacha, where the Chao Phraya and Pa Sak Rivers converge. During the Ayutthaya period, this area served as an important riverine trade hub and a densely populated settlement. Wat Phanan Choeng is located in this area. The temple was built before the formal establishment of Ayutthaya as the capital.

According to legend, Phra Chao Duang Kriang Kritsana Rat, ruler of Sena Ratcha Nakhon, built the temple in memory of Phra Nang Soi Dok Mak. He also commissioned the Royal Hall, which enshrines Phra Tri Ratana Nayok, locally known as Luang Pho To and referred to in the Chinese religious context as Sam Po Kong. This monumental sacred image has long been revered by both the Chinese community and local Thai people. The very fact that such a large Buddha image could be created suggests that the community at the time was already substantial, and that Chinese settlers had likely established themselves there before Ayutthaya became the capital. This interpretation corresponds with Chanthawit (2009), who states that Wat Phanan Choeng is the only temple built before the official founding of the Ayutthaya Kingdom. The *Royal Chronicles, Luang Prasoet Version* records that “in the year 686 of the Chula Sakarat era, the Buddha image Chao Phanan Choeng was established,” which corresponds to 1324 CE, twenty-six years before King Ramathibodi I formally founded Ayutthaya as the royal capital. This chronology suggests that the area had already developed into an important settlement with a population sufficiently large to support the construction and continued worship of a monumental Buddha image.

Chaiya and Wiwatthanachote (2015) further point out that after Ayutthaya fell to Burma in 1767, the capital region was temporarily abandoned. Some scholars suggest that part of the Chinese population moved to Thonburi and later to the new capital during the early Rattanakosin period. At the same time, however, some Chinese communities continued to reside in the old neighborhoods surrounding the city island, thereby maintaining continuity of settlement.

Some Thai-language sources, drawing on accounts attributed to Sir John Bowring, have also proposed the hypothesis that King Rama I may have been born in the Pom Phet area across the river from Wat Phanan Choeng and extending toward Wat Suwandararam. As this remains a sensitive and debated historical issue, it should be treated with caution rather than accepted as an established fact. Even if such accounts cannot be taken as conclusive historical evidence, they still reflect the historical significance of the area surrounding Wat Phanan Choeng within broader narratives of Ayutthaya and early Rattanakosin memory.

Even after Bangkok became the new capital, he is said to have returned to Ayutthaya several times to supervise the restoration of temples both inside and outside the city island, including Wat Sala Poon, Wat Toom, Wat Phanan Choeng, and Wat Suwandararam.

Today, Wat Phanan Choeng has become an important Buddhist center for the Thai Chinese community in Ayutthaya. Against this historical background, this article examines the temple as a cultural space through which Thai Chinese people construct, maintain, and negotiate their identity. The discussion proceeds from three dimensions: the temple's architecture and murals, the sacred images and symbols within the temple, and the traditional customs and rituals practiced there. Through this analysis, the article seeks to reveal the multicultural dynamics that have characterized Ayutthaya society in both historical and contemporary contexts. Wat Phanan Choeng is not simply a Buddhist temple in the narrow sense, but a complex religious and socio-cultural space that has long embodied Thai-Chinese exchange, ethnic interaction, religious fusion, and the transmission of collective memory. Within this space, Thai Chinese people are not merely passively integrated into Thai society; rather, through sustained engagement with temple space, sacred symbols, and ritual practices,

they actively embed cultural memory, ancestral consciousness, and identity into the local social world.

2. The Architecture and Murals of Wat Phanan Choeng: A Spatial Representation of Multicultural Coexistence

From the perspective of architecture and murals, the coexistence of different architectural forms and visual systems within Wat Phanan Choeng clearly reveals the interweaving of Thai, Chinese, and other foreign cultural elements. This spatial arrangement reflects the temple's long-standing openness and inclusiveness.

Among the temple's structures, the Royal Hall (Phra Viharn Luang) is the most representative. The principal Buddha image enshrined there is Phra Tri Ratana Nayok. Although the building generally belongs to the architectural tradition of Thai Buddhist temples, its interior details display unmistakably multicultural features. The original descriptions note that the four walls of the hall contain niches in which Buddha images and amulets of different forms are arranged, with numerous smaller niches reserved for votive tablets or seals.

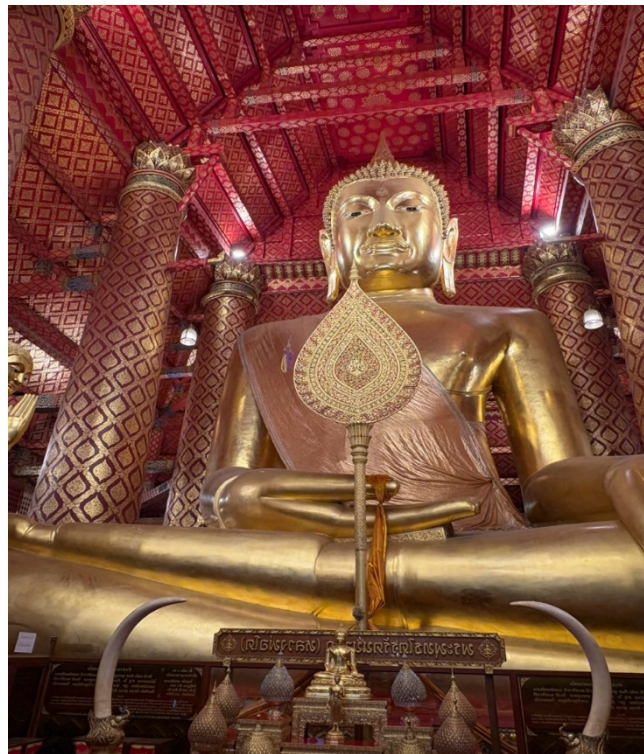


Figure 1 Phra Tri Ratana Nayok (principal Buddha image of Wat Phanan Choeng)

Chanthawit (2009) points out that the practice of filling temple interiors with large numbers of small Buddha images or votive objects in niches had already appeared in ancient monuments dating from the twelfth to fifteenth Buddhist centuries, as seen in Bagan in Myanmar and the Dunhuang caves of Tang China. This suggests that the Royal Hall at Wat Phanan Choeng should not be understood solely within a Thai temple tradition, but rather within a broader Asian network of religious and artistic exchange.

Interviews with scholars further indicate that accounts linking Zheng He to Wat Phanang Choeng are best understood as part of local legend or as a hypothesis held by some scholars, rather than as established historical fact. In the absence of definitive primary evidence, such interpretations should be treated with caution. Nevertheless, these narratives remain significant, as they reflect how local communities symbolically connect the temple to broader histories of Chinese maritime exploration and cultural memory. may once have been invited to participate in the restoration of Wat Phanang Choeng. Since Zheng He was himself a Chinese Muslim, the arched niches inside the Royal Hall have been interpreted as reflecting Persian artistic influence, while the dense arrangement of Buddha images within those niches expresses ideas associated with Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. Under this reading, the Royal Hall is not only a Buddhist place of worship but also a historical testimony to the layering of multiple cultural traditions. Additional details support this interpretation: the original red-earth motifs painted on the pillars, the Ayutthaya-style lotus capitals, the finely carved wooden doors, and the ancient bronze bells hanging on either side of the entrance all underscore the hall's composite character. Chanthawit (2009) notes that one of the bells bears a vertical Chinese inscription recording its donation by Chinese patrons, while another displays distinctly Chinese stylistic elements, including animal-head ornaments resembling dragons. Chinese stone lions carved from quartz also stand at the entrance. These elements show that the space is not defined solely by a Thai Buddhist visual order, but also preserves traces of long-term Chinese participation in acts of patronage, decoration, and meaning-making.

Viewed in this light, the Royal Hall reflects the close relationship between the temple and the surrounding Thai, Chinese, and Thai Chinese communities. Temple legend holds that this area was originally a Chinese settlement, and that the temple was built by Phra Chao Duang Kriang Kritsana Rat in memory of Phra Nang Soi Dok Mak from "Krung Chin" (a term used in Thai historical narratives to refer broadly to the Chinese realm or imperial China, rather than a specific political entity). As a result, the temple's overall style reveals a fusion of Thai architectural forms with elements associated with Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. The monumental Buddha image in the hall has thus functioned not only as a spiritual center for local worshippers, but also as a sacred object that the Chinese community could enter, recognize, and rename. In this sense, the Royal Hall is more than a Thai Buddhist sacred space; it is a composite religious field open to believers from different cultural backgrounds.

Compared with the Royal Hall, the Painted Hall (Phra Viharn Khian) even more clearly manifests a Chinese visual system. Located to the left of the Royal Hall and standing beside the ordination hall, the Painted Hall is covered on all four sides with murals. These were repainted according to their original designs during restoration. The murals depict Mahayana-style offering tables decorated with flowers, animals, and various symbols associated with Chinese auspicious beliefs, which is why the structure came to be known as the "Painted Hall." These images are not merely decorative. Rather, they express the visual logic of Chinese ritual offering, worship, and auspicious symbolism.

As for the dating of these murals, some scholars suggest that they were likely produced during the reign of King Rama III or King Rama IV, when Chinese-style painting was highly popular in Siam. Given that Wat Phanang Choeng itself is associated with a legend involving a Chinese princess, the presence of abundant Chinese imagery within the temple becomes

understandable. Interviewed scholars further propose that the murals may originally have been painted during the reign of King Rama III, when Sino-Siamese trade was flourishing and Chinese influence was especially strong. During the reign of King Rama V, they may then have been restored or repainted by Chinese artisans. The offering-table images, particularly those arranged according to Confucian concepts, suggest an intention to bestow auspicious blessings upon visitors. Some interviewees speculate that the Painted Hall may once have contained traditional Thai murals, which were later modified or replaced by Chinese-influenced visual elements as historical circumstances evolved. However, the exact chronology of this transformation remains unclear. While some accounts refer to Buddhist Era 2030 (1487 CE), corresponding to the mid-Ayutthaya period, stylistic evidence suggests that the existing murals are more likely associated with artistic developments during the early Rattanakosin period, particularly in the reigns of King Rama III or IV. Therefore, the reference to BE 2030 should be interpreted with caution, as it may reflect retrospective narrative or local interpretation rather than a precise historical date.



Figure 2 Murals in the Painted Hall (Phra Viharn Khian).

Regardless of their exact date, the murals visible today constitute important evidence for understanding the Chinese cultural dimensions of Wat Phanan Choeng. They demonstrate that, for surrounding communities, the temple has never been merely “a Thai temple,” but rather a significant religious space to which Chinese people, Thai Chinese, and local Thai communities have all contributed meaning. From the perspective of religious space, the Painted Hall can therefore be seen as a symbolic space through which Chinese people and Thai Chinese embedded their beliefs, ethical values, and worldview into the temple and rendered them visible and legitimate within Thai society.

By contrast, the Ordination Hall (Phra Ubosot) primarily reflects the tradition of Thai Theravada Buddhism. Its interior decoration consists mainly of Thai-style murals depicting Theravada beliefs, floral motifs, and indigenous auspicious animals. The Painted Hall and the Ordination Hall stand side by side: the former embodies Chinese Mahayana Buddhism and Chinese devotional culture, while the latter represents Thai Buddhist tradition. This juxtaposition indicates that Wat Phanan Choeng is not dominated by a single religious culture, but has long functioned as a shared site used by groups of different religious backgrounds. For this reason, the temple has served not only as a spiritual center for the Chinese community but also as an important religious space for local Thai society, reflecting the closeness and harmony of Thai-Chinese relations in Ayutthaya.



Figure 3 The Ordination Hall (Phra Ubosot) primarily reflects the tradition of Thai Theravada Buddhism.

The Shrine of Chao Mae Soi Dok Mak should also be understood as part of this architectural system. The shrine adopts a Chinese-style brick-and-wood structure and is decorated with immortals, auspicious beasts, and celestial imagery, giving it the appearance of a Chinese temple. Chantra (2003) notes that field observation shows the site also enshrines Guanyin, and that a small image once stood on the second floor bearing the Chinese title “Mother of Compassion.” In his view, the legend of Soi Dok Mak was most likely a story transmitted over time in local Ayutthaya society, but one whose religious basis was closely tied to Sino-Siamese trade relations, Chinese shrine-building concepts, and local cultural imagination. This interpretation is supported by interviews with scholars, who suggest that the

shrine may originally have been a Guanyin shrine. Local society later combined the spirit legend of Phra Nang Soi Dok Mak with the Guanyin belief of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. Because the shrine stands at an important river mouth, it also became associated with Chinese geomantic ideas.



Figure 4 The Shrine of Chao Mae Soi Dok Mak.

Taken together, the architecture and murals of Wat Phanan Choeng should not be understood simply as a Thai Buddhist temple containing a few Chinese elements. Rather, they constitute a spatial order formed through long-term historical interaction. It is precisely this order that has allowed Thai Chinese people to situate their cultural memory and ethnic identity naturally within the framework of Thai Buddhism, making the temple a concrete spatial representation of multicultural coexistence.

3. Sacred Images and Religious Symbols at Wat Phanan Choeng: Belief as a Medium of Thai Chinese Identity

The sacred images and religious symbols within Wat Phanan Choeng do not carry a single religious meaning. Instead, their meanings have been continuously reconstructed through the interaction of Thai Buddhism, Chinese folk belief, Mahayana Buddhism, and local legend. It is through this reconstruction of sacred meaning that Thai Chinese people have been able to connect themselves with ancestral memory, migration history, and local belonging through shared objects of worship.

The principal Buddha image in the Royal Hall, Phra Phuttha Tri Ratana Nayok, is one of the largest stucco Buddha images in the subduing Mara posture in Thailand, measuring 20.17 meters across the lap and 19 meters high. Its square-shaped face reflects stylistic characteristics of the U Thong period. According to the Royal Chronicles, Luang Prasoet Version, “Phra Chao Phanang Choeng” had already been established in Buddhist Era 1867, twenty-six years before Ayutthaya became the royal capital. During the reign of King Rama IV, it was later renamed Phra Phuttha Tri Ratana Nayok. Yet in the Chinese religious context, this image is not understood merely as a principal Buddha image. It is closely associated with the legend of Sam Po Kong, that is, Zheng He. Historical and literary accounts trace Zheng He’s life from Ma He to the receipt of the Zheng surname, his seven maritime expeditions, and his major role in Asian maritime, diplomatic, and commercial history. The Ming Shilu, as cited by Chanthawit (2009), records that Zheng He’s fleet reached Ayutthaya during at least the second, third, and seventh voyages. Kasetsiri (2000) also points out that Zheng He is believed to have stopped at ports including Ayutthaya and anchored near Wat Phanan Choeng and Pom Phet. Chantra (2003), meanwhile, suggests that the title “Sam Po Kong” or “San Bao Gong” may derive from the name “San Bao,” which can refer both to “the third precious son” and to the Buddhist Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

More importantly, as the legend of Zheng He’s arrival in Ayutthaya and his worship of the great Buddha spread over time, the Buddha image acquired new meanings within the Chinese community. Many Chinese devotees came to identify themselves symbolically as descendants of Zheng He, or Sam Po Kong, based on local narratives that their ancestors had accompanied his fleet to Ayutthaya and settled there. From a social and cultural perspective, this claim is better understood not as a verifiable biological fact, but as a form of identity construction through which Thai Chinese communities create a shared historical imagination linking their ancestry to local settlement history. In this sense, the figure of Zheng He functions less as a genealogical ancestor than as a symbolic resource for articulating belonging, continuity, and cultural legitimacy within the Ayutthaya context. As a result, they began to refer to the image as Luang Pho Sam Po Kong. Within the framework of Thai Theravada Buddhism, this Buddha image remains an important sacred object worshipped by Thai people for blessings and merit. Within Chinese belief, however, it also became a sacred symbol linked to maritime travel, trade, ancestral memory, and ethnic continuity. It may therefore be understood as a shared sacred symbol: both Thai and Chinese worship the same object, yet each projects onto it different religious and cultural meanings.

For Thai Chinese people, calling Luang Pho To by the name Sam Po Kong is not merely a difference in terminology. It is a cultural act. Through this naming practice, Chinese communities connect themselves to maritime migration history, trade networks, and the history of local settlement, so that worship carries religious, historical, and identity-related meanings simultaneously. When Chinese devotees come to Wat Phanan Choeng, they are not simply worshipping a Buddha image. They are also using the figure of Sam Po Kong to affirm the continuity between Chinese presence in Ayutthaya’s history, ancestral mobility, and local settlement. Luang Pho To / Sam Po Kong thus functions not only as a sacred object but also as a medium through which Thai Chinese people narrate who they are, where they come from, and why they belong there.

Another important sacred symbol is Chao Mae Soi Dok Mak. The Northern Royal Chronicles recount in detail the marriage story between Princess Soi Dok Mak of “Krung Chin” and Phra Chao Sai Nam Phueng, as well as the narrative that she died on a boat through misunderstanding and was later commemorated by the construction of both a temple and a shrine. The signboard in front of the shrine bears both Thai and Chinese writing, and the term Pei Niang may be translated as either “Sorrowful Lady” or “Mother of Compassion.” The second floor once housed a Chinese-style stone image and also enshrined Guanyin, while another image depicts Chao Mae Soi Dok Mak in Chinese dress. The shrine therefore clearly reflects the influence of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism and stands as a witness to the long history of Thai-Chinese relations.

From the perspective of religious meaning, the importance of Chao Mae Soi Dok Mak lies not simply in whether she historically existed, but in how she has become a point of articulation between Thai-Chinese relations, local legend, and Chinese belief. Chantra (2003) and interviews with scholars both suggest that the shrine may originally have been associated with Guanyin worship, and that local society later overlaid the story of Soi Dok Mak onto the image of Guanyin. In this way, a Chinese princess from local legend gradually came to be endowed with the compassionate qualities of Guanyin, becoming a sacred female symbol that crosses historical narrative, local belief, and Chinese religious imagination.

For Thai Chinese people, this figure is especially important because she is not a purely Chinese deity detached from Ayutthaya local society. Rather, she is a mediating figure rooted in the local context while also evoking Chinese cultural memory and ancestral imagination. Through worshipping Chao Mae Soi Dok Mak, Thai Chinese people are able to position themselves as both connected to Chinese culture and deeply embedded in the local history of Ayutthaya. Her existence thus shows that Chinese identity need not be sustained only through the preservation of a supposedly pure Chinese tradition. It can also be maintained through the reintegration of local history, Thai Buddhist settings, and Chinese belief into a form of cultural belonging that is accepted by local society.



Figure 5 Chao Mae Soi Dok Mak

In sum, the system of sacred images and religious symbols at Wat Phanan Choeng demonstrates that Thai Chinese identity is not fixed outside the temple and then merely carried into it. Rather, identity is continually endowed with new meaning through interaction with these sacred objects. Here, sacred images and legends are not static presences. They are mediating forms of belief through which Thai Chinese people construct ancestral memory, local belonging, and ethnic identity.

4. Traditional Customs and Rituals: Practical Mechanisms for Identity Maintenance and Community Integration

Wat Phanan Choeng has become an important space through which Thai Chinese identity is continuously maintained not only because it contains architecture and sacred images marked by Chinese cultural features, but also because it has long hosted ritual activities closely related to Chinese belief, ancestral concepts, festive traditions, and charitable ethics. These activities transform the temple from a symbolic space into a practical space, in which Thai Chinese identity is repeatedly activated and reproduced through participation.

One of the most important of these traditions is *thīng krachāt* (ghost-feeding charity, or the distribution of offerings to wandering spirits), which strongly reflects Chinese charitable ethics and ancestral beliefs. (ghost-feeding charity or the distribution of offerings to wandering spirits), which strongly reflects Chinese charitable ethics and ancestral beliefs. Although its exact origin remains uncertain, interviews with scholars suggest that the *thīng krachāt* ritual

was likely institutionalized during the reign of King Rama IV, following the revival of the old capital, rather than being directly traceable to the Ayutthaya period. However, this does not contradict the broader argument of long-term cultural interaction. Instead, it indicates that certain ritual forms may have emerged or been formalized at a later historical stage while still drawing upon earlier layers of collective memory and cultural practice rooted in the Ayutthaya period. In this sense, the *thîng krachāt* ritual can be understood as a process of cultural revival and reinterpretation, through which historical memory is reactivated and adapted within a new socio-political context. Since Wat Phanan Choeng was a royal temple, scholars argue that major rituals could not easily be organized by commoners without royal permission, making it unlikely that such practices developed freely at an earlier time.

In terms of ritual content, *thîng krachāt* expresses deep concern for wandering spirits without descendants, ancestral souls, and the transfer of merit through charitable giving. Chinese Mahayana monks chant scriptures to transfer merit to the unclaimed dead, and on the following day food and daily necessities are distributed to poor people, combining charitable giving with ritual salvation. On the final day, Thai monks chant blessings to complete the ceremony. The temple contains a permanent *thîng krachāt* tower as well as a towering image of Yommalat, the King of Hell, while large quantities of joss paper are burned to ensure that offerings reach the spirits. The ritual is therefore not merely an internal Chinese custom, but a religious activity that has become institutionalized and public within temple space. Through this process, a ritual rooted in Chinese belief is transformed into a public act of goodness in which the wider local community participates. Because the beneficiaries are mostly poor people regardless of ethnicity or religion, Thai Chinese people not only sustain their ancestral beliefs and religious ethics through the ritual, but also establish a social image as givers and doers of good. Their cultural traditions thereby acquire stronger public legitimacy.

The celebration of Chinese New Year at Wat Phanan Choeng likewise shows how the temple serves as a festive stage on which Thai Chinese people can publicly express their cultural identity. During the festival, the Royal Hall remains open day and night for five consecutive days, and large numbers of Chinese and Thai Chinese devotees come to offer robes to Luang Pho To / Sam Po Kong and pray for prosperity and wealth. Vegetarian food is provided so that worshippers may accumulate merit, and the God of Wealth, Chai Sing Eia, is welcomed with the belief that he descends from the south to bring wealth and good fortune. Particularly symbolic is the joint chanting ceremony performed by Thai monks and Chinese monks at the turn of the year, accompanied by firecrackers, fireworks, and festive banners bearing New Year greetings. In this way, Chinese New Year culture becomes fully embedded within the space of a Thai Buddhist temple.

Chinese New Year at Wat Phanan Choeng is therefore not merely a festival internal to the Chinese community, but a public cultural event articulated with the Thai Buddhist ritual system through the temple's shared religious platform. Here, Thai Chinese people are able to appear publicly as Chinese without placing themselves in opposition to Thai society. On the contrary, through the joint chanting of Thai and Chinese monks and the shared use of temple space, the celebration presents a recognized form of multicultural coexistence.

A further set of practices linked closely to ancestral worship includes the ancestral cemetery in front of the temple, Qingming Festival, Wan Sung Hung (the beginning of the

ancestor-worship season), and related cemetery rituals. These practices reflect the continuity of Thai Chinese identity at familial and intergenerational levels. The cemetery in front of Wat Phanan Choeng was originally wasteland belonging to the old Wat Khom. In Buddhist Era 2495, the abbot at the time allocated approximately fourteen rai of land for the permanent establishment of a public Chinese cemetery. According to the cemetery caretaker, the site may initially have been created because a member of the temple committee sought a burial place for his own ancestors, after which others gradually began to use it as well. Interviews with a second-generation Teochew resident further indicate that, because intermarriage between Thai and Chinese people has long been common, some Thai spouses chose to be buried there together with their Chinese husbands. Scholars also point out that the area may originally have been a burial ground for Thai people, so the coexistence of Thai and Chinese graves today is not accidental but the result of long-term cohabitation and marital integration. The cemetery is thus not merely a burial ground but an important cultural landscape linking ancestors, family, marriage, and local belonging. The shrine of Paekong located within the cemetery, along with Chinese murals depicting Guanyin, Nezha, Journey to the West, and Romance of the Three Kingdoms, further shows that the site is not only a space of death, but also a sacred field in which Chinese religious imagination and ancestral worship continue to operate.

Within this context, Qingming becomes an important temporal moment through which the cemetery is brought back to life. Thai Chinese families come to clean ancestral graves, prepare offerings, worship the dead, and dine together, thereby expressing respect and gratitude toward ancestors. This is closely tied to the Confucian emphasis on filial piety. Interviews suggest that Qingming was once a time when extended families gathered at the cemetery as a whole, whereas today participation has gradually shifted toward smaller family units. Yet its core function remains unchanged: to bring descendants together and sustain family bonds. Qingming is therefore not merely a ritual of commemorating the dead, but an important mechanism through which Thai Chinese people reaffirm family continuity, cultural belonging, and collective identity through ancestral memory.



Figure 6 The Chinese cemetery at Wat Phanan Choeng

Rituals such as Lang Pa Cha (cemetery-cleansing or the clearing of abandoned graves) and Wan Sung Hung further illustrate the Chinese community's systematic understanding of the relationships among wandering spirits, ancestral tablets, household guardians, and local deities. The cemetery-cleansing ritual originally aimed to transfer merit to unclaimed bones, wash and reassemble them, and then cremate them. According to the cemetery caretaker, it had been practiced continuously from the establishment of the cemetery in Buddhist Era 2496 until after Buddhist Era 2543, when the cemetery stopped receiving unclaimed bodies. Although such practices have gradually disappeared, their memory remains in local narratives, preserving the temple's historical role as a space for the public management of suffering and death. Wan Sung Hung, meanwhile, marks the beginning of ancestor worship before Qingming. Thai monks and Chinese monks chant together, offerings are distributed for unclaimed spirits, and families install ancestral tablets in their homes, burn incense to inform door guardians and earth gods, invite ancestral spirits to be present, burn joss paper, and share the ritual food afterward. In this setting, Chinese ancestral worship and the burning of spirit money coexist with Thai local reverence for household and territorial spirits, forming a highly layered structure of composite belief. Even when the site of ancestor worship extends from the temple into the household, what is being maintained is still Thai Chinese identification with ancestors, family, and cultural continuity.

The significance of traditional customs and rituals at Wat Phanan Choeng is therefore not merely religious, but also social, cultural, and identity-related. Through these ongoing practices, Thai Chinese people pass down ancestral concepts, ethical values, festive order, and a sense of local belonging from one generation to the next, while adapting their forms of expression to social change without losing their cultural core.

Conclusion

To strengthen the analytical framework, this study adopts a multicultural perspective informed by the concept of cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994) and the notion of social space (Lefebvre, 1991). These theoretical perspectives allow the temple to be understood not as a fixed cultural entity, but as a dynamic space in which meanings are continuously negotiated, reproduced, and transformed through social practices.

From this perspective, Wat Phanan Choeng should not be understood merely as a Buddhist temple in a singular sense. Rather, it is a religious and cultural space that has continuously absorbed Thai, Chinese, and other foreign cultural elements throughout history, while also being repeatedly endowed with new meanings by different communities.

In terms of architecture and murals, the coexistence of different architectural systems and visual traditions within the temple reflects a spatial configuration in which multiple belief systems and cultural traditions are articulated within the same physical environment. This corresponds to Lefebvre's notion of space as socially produced, where spatial arrangements are shaped by historical processes and social interactions.

From the perspective of sacred images and religious symbols, figures such as Luang Pho To / Sam Po Kong and Chao Mae Soi Dok Mak can be understood as hybrid cultural forms that embody overlapping religious meanings. These figures function as symbolic mediators through which Thai Chinese communities connect ancestral memory, migration history, and local belonging, illustrating Bhabha's concept of hybridity as a process of cultural translation and reinterpretation.

In terms of traditional customs and rituals, practices such as *thīng krachāt*, Chinese New Year celebrations, Qingming ancestor worship, and related rites demonstrate how identity is continuously reproduced through repeated participation. These ritual practices reflect not only continuity, but also adaptation, as cultural meanings are reshaped within changing social contexts.

Wat Phanan Choeng has therefore not only borne witness to the historical process of Thai-Chinese interaction in Ayutthaya society, but also continues in the present to function as a socially produced space in which Thai Chinese identity is constructed, maintained, and negotiated. What it presents is not a static coexistence of Thai and Chinese cultures, but a dynamic process of cultural hybridity that unfolds through space, symbols, and everyday practices.

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