



The propagation of the belief of Bueng Tou Gong Ma in Khon Kaen Province, Thailand

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Abstract

The Chinese community in Thailand exhibits a diverse array of folk beliefs, which have exerted a profound influence on Chinese society. Among these, the Bueng Tou Gong Ma faith is a prevalent folk belief within the Thai-Chinese community in Khon Kaen Province, playing a significant role in local social activities. Traditional festivities organized by the Khon Kaen Bueng Tou Gong Ma Council, such as the Lantern Festival and the Grand Procession during the lunar tenth month, contribute significantly to strengthening the faith and cohesion of the Khon Kaen community, as well as fostering local economic development and tourism. The Khon Kaen Bueng Tou Shrine serves as the sacred abode for the worship of Bueng Tou Gong and Bueng Tou Ma. This study employs a literature review methodology and on-site investigation to explore the intricate relationship between the Bueng Tou Gong Ma faith and the local Thai-Chinese community. The research findings reveal distinctive characteristics in the establishment, ritual practices, and administrative framework of the Khon Kaen Bueng Tou Shrine. In addition to venerating traditional deities, such as Bueng Tou Gong Ma, the shrine also pays homage to local Thai monks. Despite the challenges faced by the intergenerational transmission of the Bueng Tou Gong Ma belief, it continues to play an irreplaceable role in fostering community ties, uniting the local populace, and propagating Chinese culture.

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Introduction

The Thai-Chinese community is a populous ethnic group spread across various regions of Thailand. Over the years, they have integrated extensively into Thai society through intermarriage with local Thais, obtaining Thai

citizenship, and incorporating Chinese culture into Thai daily life. As a result, they wield significant influence within Thai society. The focus of this paper is the deity associated with *Bueng Tou Gong Ma* (本头公妈), hereafter referred to as *BTGM*, which is the most commonly worshipped deity within the Thai-Chinese community.

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Previous studies have reported that almost every area where Thai-Chinese people gather has a *Bueng Tou Gong Shrine* (本头公庙); there are approximately one to two hundred Bueng Tou Gong shrines throughout Thailand, making it the most prevalent belief among Thai-Chinese communities (Zheng, 2005). The *BTGM* belief encompasses three entities: *Bueng Tou Gong* (本头公), *Bueng Tou Ma* (本头妈), and the union of Bueng Tou Gong and Bueng Tou Ma. Duan (1996) observes that, unlike in China, where the *Earth God* (土地爷) and *Earth Goddess* (土地婆) are often worshipped together in the same shrine, it is rare in Thailand to find a shrine that combines the worship of Bueng Tou Gong and Bueng Tou Ma. However, the Khon Kaen *Bueng Tou Ancient Shrine* (本头古庙) is an exception, as it simultaneously enshrines both deities. This paper examines the *BTGM* belief in the Khon Kaen region of Thailand without delving into detailed distinctions between them. During my work in Thailand, I have visited over fifty provinces and encountered Bueng Tou Shrines everywhere, such as in Bangkok, Suphan Buri, Nan, and Khon Kaen. Although the names of these shrines may vary, some are referred to as *Da Bueng Tou Shrine* (大本头庙), *Shi Bueng Tou Gong Ancient Shrine* (石本头公古庙), *Bueng Tou Shrine* (本头庙), or *Bueng Tou Ancient Shrine* (本头古庙), their architectural styles and interior arrangements are often similar, leaving a profound impression on my mind. This served as the impetus for this research.

The region under discussion in this paper is Khon Kaen Province, located in the northeastern part of Thailand. It serves as a political and cultural center in northeastern Thailand. According to the Announcement of the Central Domicile Registration Office published in the Royal Gazette, as of December 31, 2022, Khon Kaen ranks as the third most populous provincial city in northeastern Thailand and fifth nationwide, with a total population of 1,784,641 (Department Of Provincial Administration, February 1, 2023). There are no reliable data available on the number of Thai Chinese residents in Khon Kaen Province. However, there is a history of Chinese community development in Khon Kaen spanning over a hundred years. Presently, the Thai-Chinese community holds a monopolistic position in the economy of Khon Kaen Province and plays a vital role in its industrial, agricultural, and service sectors, possessing the ability to regulate the province's economy (She et al., 2019). The local Thai-Chinese in Khon Kaen Province have also shown considerable influence in the political arena by participating in politics and organizing various Chinese cultural activities (Janthranusorn, 2013). *BTGM*, revered by the local Chinese community in

Khon Kaen Province, is a deity widely worshipped. The various celebratory events organized annually by the Khon Kaen *BTGM* Council attract participation from Thai-Chinese individuals residing in Khon Kaen Province and even from across northeastern Thailand, holding significant influence within the local Thai-Chinese society.

The inheritance and development of folk beliefs among the Thai-Chinese ethnic group are receiving increasing attention from academia. However, currently there is a lack of research focused on the folk beliefs of the Thai-Chinese community in northeastern Thailand. Particularly, studies of the *BTGM* belief within the Chinese community of Khon Kaen Province are limited and often incomplete. Research on the *BTGM* belief among the local Chinese population in Khon Kaen Province has both practical and academic significance. It not only enriches the study of folk beliefs among Thai-Chinese but also provides insights into the social dynamics of the Chinese community in northeastern Thailand.

Literature review

Theoretical Foundation

This study incorporates Clifford Geertz's (1973) concept of religion as a cultural system and the idea of cultural identity to analyze the Bueng Tou Gong Ma (*BTGM*) belief within the Thai-Chinese community in Khon Kaen Province.

Geertz's theory emphasizes the symbolic and interpretive aspects of religious practices. Religion is perceived as a system of symbols that establishes powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence. In the context of the *BTGM* belief, this involves:

1. **Symbolic System:** The *BTGM* belief includes various symbols (deity statues, offerings) and rituals (temple festivals, worship ceremonies) that convey sacredness and community values.
2. **Moods and Motivations:** These symbols and rituals evoke emotions and motivations, strengthening community bonds and faith.
3. **Cultural Identity:** Participation in *BTGM* religious activities reinforces the Thai-Chinese community's cultural identity and sense of belonging, playing a crucial role in constructing and maintaining group identity through cultural practices.

4. Cultural Transmission: Annual festivals and religious activities ensure the transmission of cultural traditions, integrating local elements like Northeastern Thai music and dance.

5. Community Cohesion: These activities provide a common cultural platform, enhancing relationships and cooperation among community members.

Previous Research

The dissemination of folk beliefs among overseas Chinese communities has been a subject of academic interest. Li (1999) identifies three major characteristics of the overseas dissemination of folk beliefs. Firstly, folk beliefs spread alongside the emigration of Chinese overseas. Secondly, shrines coexist with Chinese guild halls, serving as important cultural and religious centers. Lastly, overseas Chinese communities often develop indigenous deities based on their own folk beliefs. This highlights the role of folk beliefs in preserving cultural identity and community cohesion among overseas Chinese populations. In the context of Southeast Asia, Cai (2019) examines the dissemination of *Fujian folk beliefs* (福建民间信仰) and argues that they contribute to the consolidation of the Chinese ethnic group and resistance against cultural assimilation. These beliefs can also serve as a means of promoting cultural diplomacy under initiatives such as the *Belt and Road Initiative*, as they possess characteristics that are people-oriented, secular, culturally significant, and uniquely Chinese. The Chinese population in Thailand predominantly comprises individuals with ancestral roots in *Teochew* (潮州), Hainan, Fujian, and Yunnan region. Among these groups, those of Teochew descent constitute the largest proportion (Pan, 2012). *The Five-Relationship* (五缘文化) often serves as a theoretical framework for studying Chinese culture, first proposed by Professor Lin Qitan, encompassing five dimensions: *Kinship* (亲缘), *geographical relationship* (地缘), *religious relationship* (神缘), *business relationship* (业缘), and *product relationship* (物缘) (Shen & Huang, 2009). Zheng (2005) used the concept of *Five-Relationship* to describe the patterns of cohesion and communication within the Thai Chinese community. The various ancestral halls and shrines that have developed from the worship of deities reflect significant cultural cohesion.

Thai scholars Surasit Amornwanitsak and Kanokporn Numtong, as well as Chinese scholars Li Tianxi and Zheng Zhiming, have conducted specialized research on the belief in local deities among the Thai Chinese community. Amornwanitsak (2011, 2014) employs field research methods to conduct detailed investigations of

local deity shrines in locations such as Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam and Lampang Province in Thailand. This research delves into the development history of these shrines, the deities worshipped, and the belief in local deities, providing in-depth insights. According to the findings, the earliest written records of local deities can be traced back to the Ayutthaya period, suggesting they were protective deities revered by Chinese immigrants. In Lampang Province, they are even known as *Protective Duke of the Nation* (护国侯王). Thakolprajak and Numtong (2017) analyze cultural knowledge data on Chinese-style shrines in Thailand from 1986 to 2016, revealing that current scholarship primarily focuses on the design and preservation of the shrines, as well as historical and religious perspectives, while other aspects receive less attention. Through on-site investigations in several coastal cities in China's southeastern region and comparative visits to over ten local deity shrines in Thailand, Pranom (2016) concludes that the belief in local deities is a distinct form of deity worship that developed within the existing Chinese land deity system. The study further examined the historical development, distinctive features of local deity statues, and architectural characteristics, thereby enriching the research on the belief in local deities among the Thai-Chinese community. Sucharit (2016) focuses on the study of local deity statues in Bangkok and points out that Bueng Tou Gong is the name of a Chinese deity that cannot be found in China. The study explores the history of Bueng Tou Gong, variations in worship practices across different regions, and related legends. Additionally, detailed investigations are conducted on the various Thai spellings of Bueng Tou Gong, resulting from differences in pronunciation in the Thai language.

The belief in Bueng Tou Gong has spread widely in Southeast Asia, but there are divergent views among scholars regarding its origins. Ho (1995) argues that Bueng Tou Gong is a prominent local deity in the Teochew, serving as the protector of a village or a small locality. It is referred to as Bueng Tou Gong by the Teochew people and *Dabo Gong* (大伯公) by the Fujian people. Additionally, some ambiguity exists among the *Hakka* people (客家), who use both Bueng Tou Gong and Dabo Gong, while Guangdong people prefer to call it *Tudi* (土地) or *Fude* (福德). Duan (1996) provides a detailed account of several famous Bueng Tou Gong shrines in Thailand, such as the *Da Buengtougong Miao* (大本头公庙) and the *Xin Buengtougong Miao* (新本头公庙) in Bangkok. It is believed that Bueng Tou Gong is the local deity, namely, the *Land Deity* (本土公) or *Tudiye* (土地爷). Since most of Thailand's Chinese population

consists of Teochew people, the phrase Bueng Tou Gong in Teochew dialect is similar to Bueng Tou Gong, which is why Thailand shrines are commonly referred to as *Bueng Tou Gong Miao* (本头公庙). Li (2001) mentions that *Dabo Gong* is known as Bueng Tou Gong in Thailand, which is because Teochew overseas Chinese refer to Bueng Tou Gong as the land deity, while overseas Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia refer to Dabo Gong as the land deity. This makes it reasonable to conclude that *Dabo Gong* in Thailand is equivalent to Bueng Tou Gong. However, this view is contested by some scholars. For example, Zheng (2004) argues that Bueng Tou Gong is a result of the convergence of various religious beliefs among Thai Chinese, and it is not purely a worship of the land deity like Dabo Gong or *Nadu Gong* (拿督公). Xu (2000) discovered during his field visit to a Bueng Tou Gong Shrine in Sulu, Philippines, that Bueng Tou Gong was *Bai Bentou* (白本头), a strategist who accompanied Zheng He's voyages to the West. It is believed that Bueng Tou Gong, as a descendant of *Bai Juyi* (白居易), was one of the earliest Chinese settlers in Sulu and was revered and commemorated by the local Chinese community.

Research Objective

This study aims to investigate the *BTGM* belief among the local Thai-Chinese population in Khon Kaen Province, Thailand. It focuses on the establishment of the *BTGM* Shrine, worship practices at the shrine, its management structure, and the issues related to the inheritance and development of the *BTGM* belief among the local Chinese community.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, incorporating both literature review and on-site investigation, to explore the *BTGM* belief among the Thai-Chinese population in Khon Kaen Province. The research design allows for a comprehensive understanding of the establishment, worship practices, and management of the *BTGM* Shrine, as well as the challenges associated with the transmission and development of the belief within the local community.

Literature Review: Before researching the *BTGM* belief in Khon Kaen Province, relevant academic literature was reviewed. Existing research on the *BTGM* belief was collected, analyzed, and synthesized, providing a solid theoretical foundation for this research.

On-Site Investigation: To gather primary data, this research includes an on-site investigation in Khon Kaen

Province. This involves visiting the *BTGM* Shrine and conducting interviews with key stakeholders, such as shrine administrators, worshippers, residents, and experts in Thai-Chinese culture and folk beliefs. The interviews will be semi-structured, allowing for in-depth discussions on topics related to the establishment, rituals, and management of the shrine, as well as the social and cultural impact of the *BTGM* belief on the local community.

By employing these research methods, this study aims to generate in-depth insights into the *BTGM* belief and its cultural significance among the local Thai-Chinese community in Khon Kaen Province.

Results

The research findings of this study are presented from three aspects: the establishment of the Khon Kaen Bueng Tou Ancient Shrine, the worship practices, and the forms of management.

The Establishment of the Khon Kaen Bueng Tou Ancient Shrine

According to the survey, there are four Bueng Tou Ancient Shrines in Khon Kaen. However, based on the interviews with shrine staff, there is no unified organization for the management of Bueng Tou Ancient Shrines across Thailand. Moreover, the four Bueng Tou Ancient Shrines in Khon Kaen are not affiliated with each other and operate independently (Interviewee A, personal communication, February 27, 2023). The focus of this study is on the Bueng Tou Ancient Shrine located by Bueng Kaen Nakhon, which is the largest in scale among the shrines in the province. The belief in Bueng Tou deities has a long-standing history in Khon Kaen. Like Chinese immigrants in other parts of Thailand, most of the overseas Chinese residing here also worship the Bueng Tou deities. Sixty years ago, Khon Kaen was not as prosperous as it is today. At that time, there were two simple wooden pavilions built on a space by Bueng Kaen Nakhon, where the deities Bueng Tou and *Chao Pu Kru Yen* (เจ้าปู่ครูเหิน) were enshrined. Despite the absence of formal shrines, on the first and fifteenth days of each lunar month, the offerings of incense remained vibrant, with devotees continuously flocking to pay their respects.

Chao Pu Kru Yen is a renowned Thai monk. According to inscriptions found in the *Chao Pu Kru Yen* Shrine and gathered information, *Chao Pu Kru Yen* was a famous diviner, doctor, and Buddhist scholar in Thai history. He was a native of northeastern Thailand and was born

in Nakhon Phanom Province. He arrived in the area before the establishment of Khon Kaen and settled in Non Than village, the present location of the Bueng Tou Ancient Shrine. Initially known as Kru Kot, he later became ordained as a monk and dedicated himself to spiritual practice, eventually attaining the status of a high-ranking monk (พระครู). It is said that Chao Pu Kru Yen had a profound knowledge of astrology and was able to accurately predict destinies and the future. He was also a traditional doctor skilled in herbal medicine, proficient in various religious rituals, and served as the master of ceremonies for these rituals. In 1939, in recognition of his contributions to the local community, he was honored with the name Chao Pu Kru Yen. The residents renovated the shrine dedicated to him, which now coexists with the Bueng Tou Ancient Shrine within the same compound. Chao Pu Kru Yen is highly revered by the local people, and the offerings and worship continue to this day.

The continuous stream of pilgrims made the original wooden pavilion of the ancient Shrine appear less solemn. As a result, two local overseas Chinese elders initiated a donation campaign to fund the construction of a new Shrine for BTGM. Their initiative received widespread support from the community. With the funds raised, they began drawing up blueprints, recruiting architects, and embarked on several months of construction. Eventually, the initial construction of the BTGM Ancient Shrine was completed, turning it into a place of spiritual solace for the residents and devotees. In 1994, the governing council at the time recognized that the ancient Shrine, having stood for over thirty years, had undergone weathering and was showing signs of deterioration. Additionally, the local population had multiplied, leading to overcrowding during pilgrimages. Furthermore, due to rapid local development, the roads outside the Shrine were elevated as part of the transportation expansion, resulting in water accumulation in front of the Shrine during the rainy season, making it inconvenient for devotees to pay their respects. In response, local philanthropists and merchants, such as Zhuang Yonglie (庄永烈), Zhang Yilong (张怡龙), Chen Liangxi (陈两喜), Wu Chengpeng (吴程鹏), and Zhang Meicai (张美财), initiated and reorganized the Khon Kaen Bueng Tou Ancient Shrine Reconstruction Committee. With the generous contributions of the local community and devout believers, the reconstruction of this magnificent and ancient Shrine became possible after years of effort. On the 21st of March 1996, a grand inauguration ceremony and consecration ritual were held to mark the completion of the reconstruction, attracting a multitude of visitors entering the Shrine with joyous celebrations. (Khon Kaen 21 Overseas Chinese Association, 2011).

The newly constructed Bueng Tou Ancient Shrine and the Chao Pu Kru Yen Shrine are located within the same courtyard. The builders erected two main gates: the left gate is a typical Chinese-style archway with the inscription *Gate of Holy Spirit and Virtue* (聖神德門), while the smaller side gates bear the characters *Prosperity and Peace* (国泰) and *People's Safety* (民安), serving as the entrance to the Bueng Tou Ancient Shrine. On the right side, the Chao Pu Kru Yen Shrine features a typical Thai-style archway with the inscription *Chao Pu Kru Yen Shrine* (ศาลเจ้าปู่ครูเย็น), serving as the entrance to the shrine. The Bueng Tou Ancient Shrine in Khon Kaen has a large architectural scale and exquisite decorations. It includes a main hall, auxiliary halls, archways, various altars for deities, dragon pillars, offering tables, incense burners, and paper pagodas for burning paper offerings.

The entrance archway of the Bueng Tou Ancient Shrine is grand and majestic, featuring inscriptions on both sides. At the top, there are large-scale sculptures of twin dragons playing with a pearl. On the top of each small gate, there are mythical creatures called *Fire Qilin* (火麒麟) looking towards the dragons. The main hall has a double-eave hip roof structure, and in front of the main hall, there are two stone lions, each with an incense burner beside it. The front hall exhibits a symmetrical structure, with the main hall's entrance gate inscribed with *Bueng Tou Ancient Shrine* (本头古庙). On both sides of the gate, there are inscriptions that *Khon Kaen offers prosperity, showcasing inherent virtue, leaving an imprint on the universe* (坤地呈祥本德张扬留宇宙), *Worship the gods, receive blessings, headlight illuminates, transmitting past and present* (敬神纳福头光照耀传古今). Not far from the main gate, on both sides, there are two small red wooden side doors with blue frames and yellow characters that read *出入平安* (*Safe Entry and Exit*).

Upon entering the main hall, there are tiger reliefs on the left wall and dragon reliefs on the right wall. Unlike other Bueng Tou Shrines, there is no water basin beneath them. The entire main hall is adorned with intricately carved beams and painted rafters, showcasing Chinese cultural characteristics. Various traditional Chinese stories are depicted on the beams, including *Zhao Yuan's Quest for Longevity* (赵元求寿) and *Zhang Liang Receives the Book* (张良收书).

The Worship Practices

Early Chinese immigrants who arrived in Khon Kaen Province were unfamiliar with the local surroundings. To seek peace, wealth, and health, they practiced the worship of deities such as BTGM among others.

Over more than a century, the *BTGM* belief system has become deeply integrated into the local Chinese community. It is not limited to Chinese people alone, as some local Thai individuals also come to the Bueng Tou Shrine to pay their respects to *BTGM*. As an important spiritual sanctuary for the local Chinese ethnic group in Khon Kaen Province, the Bueng Tou Shrine has played a significant social role. It is considered one of the oldest sacred sites in Khon Kaen, not only housing the worship of *BTGM* but also venerating deities such as *the Heavenly Empress* (天后圣母), *the God of Wealth* (财神爷), and *the Landlord* (地主爷). Those who come to worship believe that with sincere supplication and a commitment to doing good deeds, their heartfelt wishes will be granted, leading to success, prosperity, and happiness for future generations. From this perspective, *BTGM* serves as a sanctuary for the spiritual well-being of the local Khon Kaen devotees and acts as their protective deity, providing solace and comfort to their souls.

The methods and offerings involved in the worship practices at Bueng Tou Shrine are significant and are carefully observed. Several common types of offerings are included in (Table 1).

Certainly, the most common form of worship at the Bueng Tou Shrine in Khon Kaen Province is visiting the Shrine without prior preparation of specific offerings. The most prevalent practice is the ritual of joss stick or incense burning, also known as *Paying Respect with Incense* (敬香), *Offering Incense* (献香), or *Burning Incense* (烧香). Through the act of burning incense, worshippers express their wishes to the deities, aiming to establish a means of communication with the divine and demonstrate their sincere devotion to the deities. The Bueng Tou Shrine in Khon Kaen Province has established specific guidelines regarding the order and quantity of incense sticks for worship, as outlined below:

In front of each shrine where incense offering is required, there are posted instructions indicating the sequence and quantity of incense to be offered. The first shrine is the shrine of *Heavenly Father and Mother* (天地父母), located in the central courtyard of the ancestral shrine. Heavenly Father and Mother are deities almost universally present in each ancestral Shrine and they are the first deities to be worshipped in the incense offering ceremony. Three incense sticks are required for this shrine. Moving on, upon entering the main hall of the ancestral Shrine,

Table 1 Classification of Common Offerings (Provided by Interviewee B)

Category	Main Contents
1. Alcoholic Beverages	<p>1.1 When serving tea or dried tea leaves in teacups, it is customary to place three or five cups.</p> <p>1.2 In occasions where meat offerings are presented, alcoholic beverages are typically offered in three or five cups.</p> <p>1.3 During the rituals at the <i>BTGM</i> Shrine, pure water is required, usually presented in five cups, following the tea ceremony. For private worship, pure water is not necessary.</p>
2. Food Items	<p>2.1 Meat offerings commonly used in worship include pork, duck, goose, chicken, fish, and shrimp. The quantity of meat is not restricted and can be chosen based on personal intention, often using the concept of <i>three offerings</i> (三牲) or <i>five offerings</i> (五牲). Offerings can be adjusted according to the season.</p> <p>2.2 Five vegetarian dishes known as 斋菜 are often offered during worship. Common vegetarian dishes include vermicelli, shiitake mushrooms, wood ear mushrooms, dried tofu, and golden needles. These offerings are also commonly used to worship the Guanyin at Bueng Kaen Nakhon Lake.</p>
3. Fruits	<p>Oranges are the most commonly used fruit, typically arranged on a plate with four oranges, with three at the bottom and one on top, representing <i>great fortune</i> (大吉). Alternatively, five oranges can be used. If the offerings include five types of meat, five different fruits, known as <i>five fruits</i> (五果), are used, while three fruits are used for <i>three fruits</i> (三果). Commonly used fruits for worship include oranges, apples, pears, bananas, grapes, dragon fruits, and more. However, some fruits like pineapple, durian, mango, mangosteen, and rambutan are not suitable for worship.</p>
4. Desserts	<p>Desserts can be included or excluded during worship. If included, common dessert offerings include sweet buns, steamed sponge cakes, sweet biscuits, banana leaf-wrapped sticky rice cakes, glutinous rice balls, and sweet dumplings. Offering five types of desserts is referred to as <i>five cakes</i> (五饼), while three types are referred to as <i>three cakes</i> (三饼). Desserts are commonly offered during specific festivals such as the <i>Ghost Festival</i> (中元节), <i>Spring Festival</i> (春节), and <i>Winter Solstice</i> (冬至).</p>
5. Joss paper	<p>Joss paper is placed under the worship offerings and divided into five portions; one being placed for each god worshipped. Usually, silver paper money and peace paper money are used to represent joss paper, which is spirit money for the gods.</p>

Note: Classification of common offerings provided by Interviewee B during an interview on February 27, 2023.

three incense sticks are offered at the incense altar in front of the shrines of the ancestral god and ancestral goddess. The shrine of the ancestral god and goddess features a large cement platform with a depiction of intertwined dragons playing with a pearl, serving as a place to display offerings. Following that, three incense sticks are offered to the left of the shrine of the ancestral god and goddess to honor the *Heavenly Empress* (天后圣母), and then three incense sticks are offered to the right of the shrine to pay respects to the *God of Wealth* (财神爷). Once the incense offering in the main hall is completed, one turns left upon exiting and offers five incense sticks at the shrine of the *Landlord God* (地主爷). Then, proceeding to the entrance of the Chao Pu Kru Yen Hall located on the left side of the main hall, two incense sticks are offered at the incense altars on both sides. Finally, one incense stick is offered at each of the incense altars beside the stone lions on both sides of the entrance to the ancestral Shrine. In this way, the incense offering ceremony is concluded.

The Management Structure of Khon Kaen Bueng Tou Shrine

Overseas Chinese associations, overseas Chinese schools, and overseas Chinese media have long been referred to as the *Three Treasures of the overseas Chinese community* (华社三宝) (Dai, 2020). They serve as the pillars of overseas Chinese society and have always shouldered the important responsibility of maintaining the stability of the local Chinese diaspora, fostering communication and friendship, and preserving Chinese culture. Chinese shrines in Thailand have gained respect and recognition from the government and the royal family. The management organizations of these shrines often bear names such as *Association* (社), *Mutual Assistance Society* (互助社), *Council* (理事会), or *Charitable Organization* (慈善组织). The management of Khon Kaen Ancestral Shrine also relies on local overseas Chinese associations. Khon Kaen Bueng Tou Shrine is managed by the *Khon Kaen BTGM Council* (孔敬本头公妈理事会), one of the twenty-four overseas Chinese associations associated with Khon Kaen.

As important places of spiritual devotion for the local Chinese community, shrines naturally become significant venues for fostering connections and deepening relationships. Like many shrines, the early Khon Kaen Ancestral Shrine did not have the same scale as it does today. At that time, the local Chinese population had not yet achieved significant economic conditions, social status, or political influence. The Shrine lacked a formal organization for management and maintenance

and relied on mutual support among the same ethnic group. However, as the local Chinese community grew in population and gained economic strength through their diligent efforts, influential Chinese leaders, who played a crucial role in leading their fellow community members, emerged. They raised funds to construct the ancestral Shrine and began organizing various community associations to promote collective development.

According to the records of the Khon Kaen Twenty-One Overseas Chinese Association (2011), initially, the spokesperson for the Khon Kaen BTGM Council was selected during the annual God parade in the lunar month of October at the ancestral shrine. Their term was only one year, during which they were responsible for overseeing the affairs of the Khon Kaen BTGM Council for the following year. Since the term was limited to one year, a new headman had to be elected annually, resulting in a lack of continuity and causing many difficulties.

Finally, in 1996, the headman at the time expressed the intention to establish a council to guide the annual headman's work. *Su Laikun* (苏来坤), *Li Shuhao* (李书豪), *Zhang Hanyu* (张汉玉), *Hong Zerong* (洪泽荣), *Ding Guorong* (丁国荣), *He Keshan* (何克山), and *Ma Liqiang* (马立强), seven influential overseas Chinese leaders at the time, initiated the organization and drafted its articles of association. They allocated responsibilities, designated the position of chairman of the council, which would be assumed by the outgoing chairman of the annual council, and applied for registration as a legal entity from the government, with the seven individuals serving as the registrants. The registration was approved shortly after, granting them legal recognition. Thus, the first council was established, with Zhang Hanyu (张汉玉) as the inaugural chairman, and other prestigious local individuals assuming various positions. At the Lantern Festival held on February 5, 2023, the Khon Kaen BTGM Council conducted the handover ceremony for the ninth and tenth councils.

The Khon Kaen BTGM Council is responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operations of the shrine and making decisions on major shrine matters. It consists of an annual council, headed by a chairman, and several members. The term of the annual council is generally two years, during which they are responsible for the Shrine's daily operations, financial management, organization of activities and celebrations, as well as implementing decisions related to the maintenance and repairs of the shrine premises and facilities made by the council.

Discussion

Local Thai-Chinese people hold a deep and devout belief in the Khon Kaen deities. Every year during the lunar month of October, a grand procession known as the *God Parade* (游神) is held. For example, the 12-day-plus-12-night event integrates the culture of Northeastern Thailand with Chinese culture and receives strong support from the local government. One day during the event, the Khon Kaen deities are taken out of the shrine and paraded around the Khon Kaen City area. The sacred artifacts of the Khon Kaen Mansion are also displayed for worship by the devotees. The festivities include Teochew opera, lion and dragon dances, as well as auction activities held over several consecutive nights, the auction items include some deity statues and oranges with auspicious meanings. The local Chinese community believes that purchasing these items would bring abundant wealth in the coming year. These activities are believed to not only strengthen the faith and unity of the Khon Kaen people but also stimulate the local economy and tourism industry.

As a folk belief of the local Chinese community in the Khon Kaen Mansion, the worship of the Khon Kaen deities is also celebrated during traditional Chinese festivals such as the Spring Festival and the Lantern Festival. The Khon Kaen BTGM Council organizes shrine fairs and lantern festivals during these important traditional Chinese holidays. The Lantern Festival is an annual event that aims to pass down Chinese traditional culture from one generation to the next. In 2023, the Lantern Festival celebration organized jointly by the Khon Kaen BTGM Council and the Chinese Consulate-General in Khon Kaen attracted representatives from the governments, military, police, overseas Chinese, businessmen, academia, and consulate delegations from 20 provinces in Northeastern Thailand, as well as representatives from the Consulates-General of Laos, Vietnam, France, and Peru in Khon Kaen, Chinese-funded enterprises, international students, and Chinese teachers, with over 3,000 participants. This event plays an important role in promoting relations with the ancestral homeland, achieving “people-to-people connectivity,” and fostering a sense of unity.

Applying Geertz’s theory, the *God Parade* is a symbolic act that creates a shared understanding of cultural and religious values within the community. The rituals and symbols used during the parade foster a sense of collective identity and social cohesion, emphasizing the community’s connection to their

ancestral heritage. Using Geertz’s concept of cultural identity, the parade and associated rituals can be seen as a way for the Thai-Chinese community to maintain and transmit their cultural heritage. The event provides a platform for displaying cultural identity and reinforcing social bonds within the community.

In the context of modernization and globalization, the BTGM belief in Khon Kaen has undergone formalization and transformation. These changes reflect the social evolution of the local community and demonstrate the dynamic nature of religious practices in adapting to new environments and demands.

With societal development and modernization, the religious ceremonies and activities associated with the BTGM belief have become more formalized. For example, the organization of the *God Parade* and temple festivals has become more systematic and regulated, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for participants. This formalization not only enhances the efficiency and orderliness of these events but also increases their influence and appeal.

Role of Chinese Festivals in Shaping and Transforming Worship Systems

Chinese festivals such as the Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival play a significant role in shaping and transforming the worship systems of the BTGM belief in Khon Kaen. These festivals are not only important religious events but also opportunities for cultural celebration and transmission, influencing religious practices in two major ways:

1. **Shaping Religious Practices:** During Chinese festivals, religious activities such as ancestor worship and deity worship are intensified. These activities reinforce the community’s cultural identity and continuity. For example, during the Lunar New Year, the Thai-Chinese community in Khon Kaen holds grand temple festivals and God Parades, allowing community members to celebrate and reaffirm their cultural and religious heritage.

2. **Transforming Worship Systems:** The celebration of Chinese festivals has also led to the transformation of worship systems in the BTGM belief. With the integration of modern elements and practices, these festivals have become more dynamic and inclusive. The use of social media and modern communication tools has made it easier to organize and promote these events, attracting broader participation and engagement from the community.

Challenges for the Younger Generation

The belief in the Khon Kaen deities serves as a spiritual pillar for the local Chinese community in Khon Kaen. However, the current members of the Khon Kaen BTGM Council are predominantly from the older generation of overseas Chinese. Due to historical reasons, Thailand had implemented stringent anti-Chinese policies for an extended period, severely restricting the learning of the Chinese language among the Chinese community (Lertpusit, 2023). This resulted in the younger generation of Chinese Thais generally being unable to speak Chinese. Many descendants of Chinese immigrants in Thailand no longer speak Chinese, and their assimilation has weakened, gradually resulting in a lack of interest in their ancestral culture. Therefore, further discussions are needed to explore how the belief in the Khon Kaen deities can be perpetuated and adapted to meet the development needs of the younger generation.

Although efforts have been made to involve younger members of the community in religious activities, interest from the younger generation has been limited. They are less inclined to participate in traditional religious practices, viewing them as less relevant to their modern lives. This presents a significant challenge for the long-term sustainability of the BTGM belief. Strategies to engage the younger generation, such as incorporating contemporary elements into traditional practices and leveraging digital platforms for outreach, are essential to ensuring the continued relevance and transmission of this cultural heritage.

Conclusion

The belief in the Khon Kaen deities, centered around the Khon Kaen Shrine, has always been the spiritual support for the local Chinese community in Khon Kaen. Through the act of worshipping and offering to the Khon Kaen deities, the local Chinese express their emotional connection to their ancestral homeland and demonstrate their efforts to integrate into the local society as ethnic minorities. In terms of the inheritance of the Khon Kaen cult, it is important to maintain and develop the traditional rituals and celebrations of the Khon Kaen Shrine, while also emphasizing the transmission of knowledge and rituals related to the Khon Kaen deities. It is crucial to actively involve the younger generation in the management and operation of the shrine. Additionally, efforts should be made to integrate into the local community, harness the collective strength

of various parties to promote and spread the belief in the Khon Kaen deities, and ensure its continued transmission from generation to generation.

In the media of both China and Thailand, the term “Chinese-Thai family” is often used to describe the relationship between the two countries. Most Chinese in Khon Kaen are engaged in business, and the Chinese community holds significant influence through various overseas Chinese organizations. With the recent transition of the Khon Kaen BTGM Council to a new leadership team, it is believed that under the guidance of the new council, the belief in the Khon Kaen deities will continue to contribute to the dissemination of Chinese culture and the promotion of China-Thailand friendship.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix

Appendix A List of interviewees

- **Interviewee A:** Staff of Bueng Tou Ancient Shrine Khon Kaen, personal communication, February 27, 2023.
- **Interviewee B:** Member of Khon Kaen BTGM Council, personal communication, February 27, 2023.