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Caretakers and Community: A Case Study of Guanyin Temples from the Cluster 3.4 Fieldwork

Trip in Bangkok, Thailand

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It is always a fascinating subject, to the modern religious historian, how people *actually lived*. Further, the modern religious historian seeks to understand how the contents written in historical documents reflect, narrativize, skew, or portray the true religious experience of those in said period. This paper seeks to provide what would be a jewel to the future religious historian, which is a description and overview of temple communities and temple caretakers of a selected sample of Guanyin (觀音) temples in Bangkok, Thailand based off of the data extracted from the From the Ground Up: Buddhist and East Asian Religions (FROGBEAR) Cluster 3.4 project in May of 2023. Contrary to a traditional anthropological approach, which aims to place phenomena within the bounds of social, political, and economic contexts, this paper seeks to place the information gleaned from the Cluster 3.4 project in the scope of religious studies and to relate the information to its relevant religious landscapes.

In many ways, the FROGBEAR Cluster 3.4 Fieldwork trip expanded beyond the frontier of both the methodology and subject of traditional fieldwork research ventures in Buddhist studies. Forced to abandon potential location selections for fieldwork in China due to lingering COVID-19 concerns, fieldwork director Christoph Anderl looked outwards to Chinese diaspora communities. Seeking to establish a research project that combined Chinese religious studies and expounded upon the work of previous fieldwork researchers in Southeast Asia, the project settled on Bangkok, Thailand. Furthermore, the project aimed to supplement the work of the late German sinologist Wolfgang Franke, who compiled lists of hundreds of inscripted artifacts in temples and religious sites all over Thailand. Franke later published this data in his 1997 work, *Chinese Epigraphic Materials in Thailand*, which was the foundation for the selection of temples for the project. The Cluster 3.4 project not only expanded upon those objects already recorded by Franke, but also added further research sites, objects, and information. While Franke mainly

focuses on “permanent” materials, such as inscriptions found on tombstones or bronze materials that are not as susceptible to the natural movement and renovation that occurs within a bustling place like Bangkok, this paper seeks to displace the focus from material culture. Rather, this paper seeks to highlight the living culture of these temples, particularly the temple communities and temple caretakers. These caretakers and communities lived and are actively living in these religious sites and are modifying these places as they both conserve and reform practice, ritual, and material. Although this paper only focuses on the information gleaned from nine temples, it is the hope that this small sampling can give readers and researchers an idea of the religious landscape in Bangkok as it pertains to Chinese temples, rituals, and practice relating to Guanyin as of May 2023.

Because the fieldwork setting for the Cluster 3.4 project was unique in location, scope, and content, the professors and the student participants were required rethink how fieldwork should be done. As the project was aimed to be equal parts pedagogical as well as productive, the students were largely unfamiliar with how to conduct this kind of anthropological research and looked to the professors for methodological guidance. As a result, each group developed different methods to acquire information about the temple as well as how to construct digital data useful for metadata input and research. For the group with which this paper focuses, the group examining Guanyin temples, the developed methodology of these fieldwork visits centers around interviews with temple caretakers. The Guanyin group, which consisted of Christoph Anderl, Kira Johansen, Saly Sirothphiphat, and Oliver Thomson, discovered through consistent reevaluation of data acquisition methods that temple caretakers are inseparably embedded in the fabric of the temple community, surrounding community, and the temple itself. Through the organic process of readjusting methodology after each temple visit, the group discovered that in

addition to scoping out the temple space digitally by taking sequential and detailed photos of every area, conducting personal interviews with the temple caretakers gave life to the inanimate objects of the space, and constructed a narrative that enriched the data.

The following paper plans to focus on first how the fieldwork participants of the group tasked with documenting various Guanyin (觀音菩薩) temples in the Bangkok area in May 2023 navigated the terrain of conducting fieldwork, ultimately discovering that temple caretakers were integral in the pursuit of building a temple's history and character that could be properly and vividly relayed to the public in subsequent data creation for the FROGBEAR project. The focus will then move to specific examples in which these temple caretakers were intimately connected to the community surrounding the temple and the temple itself. Temple caretakers slept in their temples, cleaned them, managed temple affairs, and developed their own special practices related to Guanyin as a form of respect and ritual. It is in these examples participants found that common practice and ritual extended beyond just the community's norms but to the level of the individual. The final portion of this paper will discuss themes that emerged from these examples that participants gleaned in extensive conversation after fieldwork visits and after the fieldwork trip, which include miracle tales, integration of modern technologies into traditional rituals, and the importance of temple community in the living imprint upon the inanimate material culture of a space.

In the expedition of documenting Guanyin temples throughout Bangkok, the Guanyin group's first approach used digital photography and observation as the sole means for gathering data on the temples. It became clear that it was nearly impossible to learn anything about a temple other than face-value information from this approach without drawing from other methods of data acquisition. Although many of these temples were created and existed in

communities of ethnically Chinese, mostly Hakka (客家) or Teochew (潮州人) Chinese¹, the influence of prolonged inhabitation in Thailand meant that veins of Thai practice, ritual, and religiosity snuck their way into these temples in underlying ways over the generations after the original immigrant communities settled there. This also meant that the original rituals and collective understandings of these deities in China for those who emigrated to Bangkok had been, over generations, lost, or significantly altered, and the contemporary Thai understandings of deities have somewhat replaced older notions, save Guanyin, whose figure seems to be in accordance with how she is generally understood in China. While Guanyin is a form of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara transformed over many centuries into a feminine figure, Avalokiteśvara is not worshipped as Guanyin in Southeast Asia, even though the worship of Avalokiteśvara can be found throughout Asia.² This means that in examining these temples, fieldwork participants found formidable examples of Thai Theravada Buddhist practice, Chinese Mahayana practice, and folk religion intersecting in unique ways in a unique spatiotemporal context. For example, fieldwork participants would encounter traditional Thai religious items set alongside traditional Chinese “folk” deities, or traditional Chinese “canon” deities. A case of this would be the placement of Thai Water Goddess (Phra Mae Thorani พระแม่ธรณี) and Thai spirit houses (San Phra Phum ศาลพระภูมิ) in the courtyard and patio areas of these temples, while the main temple space was dedicated to traditional Chinese Mahāyāna deities like Guanyin, or other renderings of the Buddha. Figure 1 shows an example of Phra Mae Thorani altar outside of the

¹ The largest groups of immigrants from roughly the 14th to the 18th centuries were the Hokkien ethnic group (泉漳) and Teochew (潮州人). After the Thon Buri (ธนบุรี) period (ca.1767-1782), Teochew people were the largest group of immigrants. This is in accordance with the groups’ data and the temples they surveyed, in which five out of the nine temples were Teochew-affiliated. Interestingly, the oldest of the temples surveyed, the Jian’an Gong (建安宮), is a Hokkien-affiliated temple. Found in *Chinese Shrines, the Faith of Bangkok*. The City Planning Department, Bangkok Metropolitan Administration. (2016).

² Chün-Fang Yü, *Kuan-Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 2.

Ancient Guanyin Temple (觀音古廟) in the Samphanthawong (สัมพันธวงศ์) district of Bangkok, whose main altar is dedicated to Guanyin.



Figure 1: Thai Water Goddess (Phra Mae Thorani พระแม่ธรณี) Altar in the Patio of the Guanyin Gu Miao (觀音古廟)³

³ For the data base entry that includes this image, see “Phra Mae Thorani Altar and the left side of the patio of the Ancient Guanyin Temple (Guanyin gumiao 觀音古廟) (ศาลเจ้ากวนอิม San Tchaw Kuan Im), <http://hdl.handle.net/2429/87619>



Figure 2: Thai Spirit Houses (*San Phra Phum ศาลพระภูมิ*) in the Courtyard of Guanyin Tang (觀音堂)⁴

Figure 2 shows another example of the intersection between the various religious influences from the groups inhabiting the Bangkok space. In this image are Thai spirit houses, which are altars dedicated to the guardian spirits of a sacred space, and to ensure the protection of a certain space through the respect and appeasement of the spirit.⁵ While these items are not common in Buddhist temples in China, they are common in Thailand, and thus the mixing of these two religious strains was evident in the iconography and material culture of the temple as the fieldwork participants photographed these temples.

The linguistic conditions of these temples additionally became a point of interest to the fieldwork participants. Many of the temple caretakers, while identifying as ethnically Chinese, could not speak Chinese. In a few instances, fieldwork participants encountered temple

⁴ For the data base entry that includes this image, see “Right Side of the Courtyard of the Guanyin Hall (觀音堂) (โรงเจกวานอิมต๋ึง)” in the FROGBEAR Database of Religious Sites in East Asia.

⁵ For a greater discussion of how Thai Spirit houses are embedded in the phenomenological landscape of urban areas in Thailand, see Michael Pearce, “Accommodating the discarnate: thai spirit houses and the phenomenology of place.” *Material Religion* 7, no. 3 (2011): 344-72.

caretakers who could speak Chinese, but only spoke with a few other members of the community in limited contexts. As a general, the linguistic landscape of these temples was largely overtaken by Thai, which is supported by the eventual disappearance of Chinese being the primary language of communication in these Chinese diaspora communities and in the life of the temple. This was particularly evident when fieldwork participants later analyzed the name plaques placed in front of deities and their linguistic function. While the majority of these plaques were written in both Thai and Chinese, the Thai were often transliterations of the Chinese dialect the temple had been established with. Thus, there was a clear dissonance between the temple's original linguistic foundations and the current linguistic context of the space. Figure 3 shows an example of this at the Yuegang Guanyin temple (粤港觀音宮) in the Samphanthawong (สัมพันธวงศ์) district of Bangkok, where the Thai reads, ปู่ก๊วยฮุก read phonetically as Pu gui hook, another name for the deity Phra Sankajai (พระสังกัจจายน์). The Chinese reads 桑卡猜佛像, which is a transliteration of the deity's name: "Sāngkǎcāi." Phra Sankajai is a deity known especially in Thai Buddhist circles, and is often confused with Budai (布袋), the famous "fat Buddha" or "laughing Buddha" due to their similar pump appearances. It can be difficult to distinguish the difference between the two, as they both are often cast as large figures with elongated earlobes, and carrying sacks, but here, the label has provided clarity. It may also be the case that this figure was originally intended by the creator to be a depiction of Budai, but the Thai interpretation has rendered him as Phra Sankajai. This is just one example of larger phenomena of two religious traditions and smaller traditions converging.



Figure 3: Phra Sankajai inside the Yuegang Guanyin Temple (越剛觀音宮)⁶

Because the linguistic nature of these temples developed out of a Chinese-speaking community that, little-by-little, transformed into a largely Thai-speaking community integrated with other streamline Thai Buddhist phenomena, it became clear that, in addition to the linguistic features, the practices and rituals of these temples also developed out of a unique, multi-cultural context. As fieldwork participants became increasingly acquainted with this phenomenon, they began to discover that the Chinese temples they visited had their own character different from any of the other Thai Theravāda Buddhist temples in the area and traditional Chinese Buddhist Mahāyāna temples they had previously encountered in other parts of East and Southeast Asia. In fact, there were practices fieldwork participants found were localized only to Guanyin temples in Bangkok. One of the most interesting examples of this is the common offering of strings of

⁶ For the database entry that includes this image, see “Middle island altar of Yuegang Guanyin Temple 越剛觀音宮” in the FROGBEAR Database of Religious Sites in East Asia.

pearls to Guanyin, often draped over the figure's neck or placed in trays in front of her altar.

While this offering was encountered in nearly every temple that the participants visited, it is not a common offering in any other Guanyin temples throughout Asia. When asked why this offering was given to Guanyin, temple caretakers informed fieldwork participants that Guanyin “liked” pretty jewelry and the offering was an effort to please her. Figure 4 shows an example of this phenomenon from the main Guanyin altar of the Nanpu Temple (南埔宮):



Figure 4: Strings of Pearls around the Main Guanyin Altar of the Nanpu Temple (南埔宮)⁷

This notion was compounded by the fact that in one temple, Niaoshi Temple (鳥石寺), caretakers even saw offerings of makeup placed in Guanyin's altar box. While this is an offering

⁷ For the database entry that includes this image, see “Main Guanyin (觀音) Altar in the Nanpu Temple (南埔宮) (ศาลเจ้าแม่อาเหนียน)” in the FROGBEAR Database of Religious Sites in East Asia.

not entirely unheard of in Chinese temples, it is usually not associated with or given as an offering to Guanyin. Figure 5 shows this offering in the top left corner of the image:



Figure 5: Makeup Offerings in the Top Left Corner of the Main Guanyin Altar of the Niaoshi Temple (鳥石寺)⁸

Beyond the offerings of these temples being unique, the fieldwork participants soon discovered that the relationship of the temple caretakers to the temple community and to the temple itself was a special and unique facet of these temples, as the vast majority of the valuable information about the temple was extracted from the stories of the caretakers. Fieldwork participants observed and were told it was common for the majority of the temple caretakers in the area to sleep in the temples, clean them, and manage the temple's finances and donations. At some temples, like the Holy Guanyin Temple (觀音聖廟), the temple caretaker even took the

⁸ For the database entry that includes this image, see “Main Guanyin (觀音) Altar in the Niao Shi Temple (鳥石寺) (ศาลเจ้า โฉวเจียะหยี่อาเนี้ยเก็ง) (Sanchao O Jia Yi Ania Keng)”, <http://hdl.handle.net/2429/87969> in the FROGBEAR Database of Religious Sites in East Asia.

initiative to start a Facebook page for the temple, as a sentiment towards spreading the efficacy of Guanyin's power digitally, which was a theme that became increasingly apparent throughout the fieldwork trip.

While some of the caretakers fell into the role through community choice or because it was a hereditary position, other temple caretakers echoed the sentiment of the efficacy of Guanyin's power through their own iterations of personal miracle tales that were told to participants in the interviews. Even those caretakers who obtained the position hereditarily were, at moments, struck by Guanyin's power, and experienced or heard of miracles during their time at the temples. In one particularly powerful story, the two female temple caretakers of the Guanyin Hall (觀音堂), told fieldwork participants detailed the establishment of the temple. They explained how the building was originally the site of a family residence, and the eldest daughter of the property owners became sick in early childhood. The daughter cycled through sicknesses throughout her childhood, and her parents believed that she had become possessed by a spirit that would not leave her. Later, her miracle recovery was accompanied by a bolt of lightning, and it was said that she had become possessed by the compassionate spirit of Guanyin. Still retaining slivers of the compassionate spirit of Guanyin after her full recovery, and finding herself with newfound wealth, and the daughter later used the property to establish an orphanage. Taking care of over 50 children, and feeding them vegetarian meals, the orphanage was not open to just those children whose parents had passed, but also those whose parents did not have the means to support them. If these parents found themselves in a position in the future to take care of their children, they were free to retrieve them at any time. When the daughter passed away in her 40s, the community of orphans came together to convert the orphanage to a Guanyin temple, to pay respects to the ways in which the goddess had shown immense compassion through the

eldest daughter. The two nuns who told fieldwork participants this story were themselves orphans at the temple and devoted the rest of their adult life to the pursuit of the Buddhist path and the maintenance of the temple. Later, the Guanyin Hall fell under the ward of the Fo Guang Shan Monastery Network (佛光山) and its Thailand branch, headquartered at the Tai Hua Temple (泰華寺). Its main branch is headquartered in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. Figure 6 shows one of the temple caretakers and nuns talking to fieldwork participants Professor Elsa Ngar-Sze Lau, Kira Johansen, and Oliver Thomson taking photos.



Figure 6: Temple Caretaker and Nun (left) discussing with fieldwork participants Kira Johansen (middle front), Elsa Ngar-Sze Lau (middle back), and Oliver Thomson (right)

Miracle stories like this, especially those emphasizing the efficacy of Guanyin's power and her overflowing compassion, were in abundance when fieldwork participants visited these temples. Similar to the previous story of the Guanyin Hall, the caretaker of the Niaoshi Temple

(鳥石寺) shared his own personal miracle story and how it led him to full devotion of his life in service of Guanyin as caretaker of her temple. Originally from the northern region of Thailand, he fled to the south due to political conflict in the region. He prayed to Guanyin and promised her that in exchange for her protection, he would dedicate his life to her. Because he was able to emerge out of the conflict safely, he decided to become the caretaker of the Niaoshi temple. He noted that before praying to Guanyin, he often frequented Thai Buddhist temples, but has since “converted.” Fieldwork participants surmised that he meant he converted from Theravāda Buddhism, the main vehicle of Buddhism in Southeast Asia, to Mahāyāna Buddhism, the main vehicle of Buddhism in East Asia. Figure 6 shows an image of fieldwork participants Saly Sirothphiphat and Kira Johansen discussing with the temple caretaker in front of the main Guanyin altar of the temple.



Figure 7: Fieldwork Participants Kira Johansen (left) and Saly Sirothphiphat (middle) talking with the temple caretaker (right) in front of the main Guanyin altar of the Niao Shi Temple (鳥石寺)⁹

In addition to the miracle tales, temple caretakers were also intimately tied to the temples in other ways. In a lot of cases, their individual connections to the temples went far beyond their job description of maintaining the temple's grounds and finances. The example of the temple caretaker of the Nanpu Temple (南埔宮) is evidence to the fact that the personality of the temple caretaker had a physical imprint on the space of the temple and its character. In discussion with this temple's caretaker, fieldwork participants noticed that there was a television playing a medical drama at his desk. When asked whether the television was for his own personal entertainment, he responded saying that he streams the shows for Guanyin, and that she "likes

⁹ For the database entry that includes this image, see "Main Guanyin (觀音) Altar in the Niao Shi Temple (鳥石寺) (ศาลเจ้า โฉวเจียะหยี่อาเนี้ยเก็ง) (Sanchao O Jia Yi Ania Keng)", <http://hdl.handle.net/2429/87969> in the FROGBEAR Database of Religious Sites in East Asia.

medical dramas,” hence his choice of show in that moment. Figure 8 shows a photo of the temple caretaker, and his desk in the front right corner of the temple:



Figure 8: Nanpu Temple (南埔宮) caretaker sitting at his desk in the front right corner of the temple. The show on the television is a medical drama.¹⁰

This temple caretaker was also adamant that fieldwork participants include photos of the temple’s doors in their data. He claimed that the doors were unique because they had painted images of Guanyin, which is a feature not common to most Guanyin temples. He insisted that fieldwork participants take multiple shots of the doors at different angles, for the purpose of not only showing a unique feature of the temple, but also so “the world knows she is really sacred.” He echoed that he was happy to see tourists take photos of the doors as well, so there is a larger influx of awareness about the temple, the doors, and Guanyin’s efficacy and power. Figure 8 shows an image of these doors from the perspective of outside of the temple:

¹⁰ For the database entry that includes this image, see “Temple Caretaker’s Desk in the Right Corner of the Nanpu Temple (南埔宮) (ศาลเจ้าแม่อาเหนีย)” in the FROGBEAR Database of Religious Sites in East Asia.



Figure 9: Guanyin doors of the Nanpu Temple (南埔宮) from the perspective of the outside of the temple¹¹

An additional function of Guanyin painted upon the temple doors was so that she could “watch” performances that were held at the stage across from the temple. Fieldwork participants encountered most of the temples they visited had a similar ritual of showing Guanyin performances. Often, there would be an opera stage across from the temple, and multiple temple caretakers stated that the performances were led by a theater troupe based in northern Thailand, that went on tour twice annually to perform specifically at temples. The performances at these

¹¹ For the database entry that includes this image, see “Temple Doors of the Nanpu Temple (南埔宮) (ศาลเจ้าแม่อาเหินยา)” in the FROGBEAR Database of Religious Sites in East Asia.

were not only to please Guanyin, but to provide entertainment for the surrounding community.

Figure 9 shows an example of one of these opera stages outside of the Niaoshi Temple (鳥石寺):



Figure 10: Courtyard Performance Stage of the Niaoshi Temple (鳥石寺). The boy riding the bike is the temple caretaker's son.¹²

The Cluster 3.4 Fieldwork trip initially sought to supplement the materials of Wolfgang Franke by documenting more temple materials at more locations, in addition to photographing areas that Franke had missed. The fieldwork participants, through careful adjustment of the fieldwork methodologies, came to realize the importance of the caretaker's stories and the information they held. This was not only for the purpose of relaying an animated retelling of the history of the temple in later metadata creation, but also to characterize the temples as living pieces, and pieces that are changed by those that actively conserve and reform them. Temple caretakers, as shown in the aforementioned examples, were intimately tied to the temple through

¹² For the database entry that includes this image, see “Courtyard and Performance Stage of the Niao Shi Temple (鳥石寺) (ศาลเจ้าโอเจียะ หยี่อเนี้ยเก็ง) (Sanchao O Jia Yi Ania Keng)”, <http://hdl.handle.net/2429/87951> in the FROGBEAR Database of Religious Sites in East Asia.

their own personal experiences with miracles associated with the deity Guanyin, as well as their own personal touches to the temple, like showing Guanyin medical dramas, or giving her makeup offerings. They sought to actively involve the temple community by maintaining traditions like staging performances for Guanyin. Moreover, what fieldwork participants discovered by the end of the fieldwork trip and creation of metadata, was that these temples were more than just data: they are living spaces, that are shaped by influences of those who are involved, and equally shape and impact those that inhabit that space.

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