

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF WOLFGANG FRANKE: REVISITING CHINESE TEMPLES IN BANGKOK

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ABSTRACT—In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Chinese immigrants constituted up to 50% of the population in Bangkok. Beyond their religious role, Chinese temples served as community centers, fostering social connections, news exchange, and providing entertainment for newcomers in the Thai capital. With archival records scarce, the preserved epigraphy within these temples emerges as a crucial historical source. This article revisits Wolfgang Franke’s documented sites from the 1970s and 1980s, finding that the inscribed objects generally remain intact, and indicating stability in Bangkok’s Chinese temple culture over the last fifty years. Addressing the lack of a comprehensive listing of Chinese temples and their locations, the article presents a geo-referenced survey, significantly expanding previous lists. The survey data are available online as supplemental material, contributing to the documentation of Chinese religious sites in Southeast Asia. The article concludes by reflecting on the historical evolution of temple construction in Bangkok.

KEYWORDS: Bangkok; Chinese Immigration; Chinese Inscriptions and Temples; Geo-referenced Survey; Thailand; Wolfgang Franke

The Legacy of Wolfgang Franke

Between approximately 1965 and 1990, the renowned German Sinologist Wolfgang Franke (1912–2007) conducted extensive fieldwork in Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia.³ His aim was to record

the epigraphic traces of overseas Chinese immigrants to Southeast Asia. By collecting such data with technology available at the time—camera and pen—he created invaluable records of the inscriptions. Chinese epigraphic materials, he wrote, contain a wealth of information on the customs and beliefs of overseas Chinese individuals, groups, and institutions “which are often not visible at first sight, but can only be picked out and little by little elaborated”

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³ Franke published his findings regarding Malaysia in three volumes (1982–1987), followed by three on Indonesia (1988 and 1997), and one tome on Thailand (1998). While Franke’s work remains difficult to access, there has been continued interest in Chinese temple epigraphy in Southeast Asia and well researched volumes on Singapore (Dean & Hue 2017) and Hong

Kong (Li 2023) have appeared in recent years. For an overview of the spread of Chinese temple networks in Southeast Asia, see Dean 2019; for a concrete example of the spread of a temple network from Shantou to Bangkok, see Yau 2021.

(Franke 1998: 14). Following in Franke's footsteps, this study has been an attempt to find ways in which we can document more fully and elaborate upon this wealth of information.⁴ Returning to the temples that he documented several decades earlier, we record some of the changes that have occurred since Franke's visits. We build on his project by further surveying and geo-referencing Chinese temples in Bangkok, to better pick apart those "not visible at first sight" which can lead us to better understand the development of Chinese society and religion there.

After a century of assimilation, it is easy to forget that in the 19th and early 20th century Bangkok very much "had the stamp of a Chinese city", with about half of the population being first- or second-generation immigrants (Skinner 1957: 87–88). When King Rama I (r. 1782–1809) set up the palace of his new capital on the eastern bank of the Chao Phraya River, a community of Chinese immigrants was cleared off the land. With the traditional Siamese system of *corvée* labor barely functioning at the turn of the century, King Rama III (r. 1824–1851) instituted a period of increased immigration of Chinese workers to build his temples and canals. Chinese immigration only increased during the remainder of the 19th century. The Bangkok Passenger Steamer Company opened a popular line between Shantou (汕头市) and Bangkok in 1882, and the arrivals of Chinese immigrants doubled until, likely due to a surge in Siamese nationalism and anti-Chinese senti-

ment, numbers of new arrivals dipped in the early 20th century (Sng & Pimpraphai 2015: 191). Chinese immigrants were central to the formation of Bangkok and, hence, central to the formation of the modern Siamese state and its culture.⁵

Despite the importance of temple life to overseas Chinese and the wealth of historical information they contain about these communities, temples are generally given short shrift in studies of the Chinese diaspora in Thailand. Of the pioneering monographic studies on the Sino–Thai such as Landon (1941), Purcell (1951: Part III), Skinner (1957 & 1958), and Coughlin (1960), only Landon (1941: 100–117) and Coughlin (1960: 92–115) include a chapter on Chinese religion at all.⁶ Newer overview studies on the history of the Sino–Thai such as Sng & Pimpraphai (2015) or Wasana (2019) hardly mention religion at all. The lack of interest in Chinese temples is foreshadowed in the assumptions of the Protestant German missionary Karl Gützlaff (1803–1851) who wrote in the 1830s that the Chinese in Bangkok tended to rapidly adapt to the religious customs of the Siamese and that "within two or three generations" all Chinese "become wholly changed to Siamese" (Ho 1995: 26). Yet, over the course of the century after Gützlaff made this observation, the number of Chinese temples in Bangkok more than doubled. These temples, then, can

⁴ See Streiter et al. (2019) for a more detailed overview of Franke's project and strategies to digitize the information.

⁵ For the economic impact of Chinese elites, see Wasana 2019.

⁶ Both Landon and Coughlin underestimate the number of temples in Bangkok (see below) and were little interested in them. Temple culture plays even less of a role in general geographic studies of Thailand such as Pendleton 1962.

provide valuable insights into the resilience of Chinese religion and identity in Bangkok, highlighting its strength rather than its decline.

Indeed, Chinese temples and the epigraphic traces they contain are one of the few sources we have to understand the history and development of Chinese society, identity, and religion in Thailand. Questions which can be investigated by documenting and collating data on Chinese temples include the relationship of Chinese religion and Thai religious art and ritual and how that relationship compares to the role of overseas Chinese religion elsewhere, such as in Indonesia, Malaysia, or Cambodia.⁷ What were the exact roles of “speech groups”, such as Teochew or Hakka, for the formation of temples, and were these “speech groups” really as rigid as we suppose?⁸ Temples also play a role for the Chinese philanthropic associations, which though less mentioned than speech groups became in many ways more important in the second half of the 20th century.⁹ While this article does not set out to answer all of these questions, it assesses the current state of epigraphy and provides

the so-far largest survey of Chinese temples in Bangkok, as a first step in uncovering the patterns beneath which the answers to these questions lie.

Terminology

While the English word “temple” is a relatively flexible term that encompasses a variety of sites, Thai parlance maintains a clear conceptual difference between *wat* (วัด) and *sanchao* (ศาลเจ้า). *Wat* is generally translated as “monastery” or “temple” and is used for Theravada temples as well as monasteries that are registered with the Chinese and the Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhist associations of Thailand. The expectation is that a *wat* houses ordained monastics of some sort. In the case of Chinese temples, *wat* generally translates *si* (寺).

Sanchao, which in Thailand is often translated into English as “shrine” is a compound of the Sanskrit *śāla* “hall” and the Khmer–Thai *chao* “deity, lord”. It is generally used for religious buildings that house Chinese deities. *Sanchao* are maintained by lay people and may be owned privately or communally. Usually, the main deity is present at the central altar, but most *sanchao* have additional altars for other deities. The Chinese name of *sanchao* in Bangkok usually ends on *miao* (廟) or *gong* (宮), sometimes on *tang* (堂) or *tan* (壇).¹⁰

⁷ Franke (1998: 12) even opines that a “syncretism” of Chinese religion and Thai Theravada Buddhism is a “common feature” in Thailand.

⁸ According to a list of Chinese speech group associations registered with the government in the 1950s, the main groups were the Teochew (Chaozhou), Hakka, Hokkien (Fujian), Hainan, Taiwan, Canton (Guangdong) and Jiangxi–Zhejiang (Skinner 1958: 23). For the term “speech group” (*fangyanzu* 方言組) instead of e.g., “language group”, see Skinner 1957: 35.

⁹ On *shantang* (善堂) type associations in Thailand, see Formoso (1996, 2003), and Kataoka 2015; for the *Shantang* connections between Chaozhou, Malaysia, and Singapore, see Tan 2012.

¹⁰ Another Thai term, *rongchae* (โรงเจ), might in English be called a “temple”. This translates to Chinese *zhaitang* (齋堂) “vegetarian hall”, or, at times, *shantang* (善堂). Still other sites in our survey are located on the premises of religious organizations, which in Thai may be called *samakom* (สมาคม), usually characterized as *huiguan* (會館), “meeting hall”, or

For this study, we take a “Chinese temple” to be a building or annex with doors that is mainly used for worship and has at least one altar on which one or more Chinese deities are enshrined. Usually, an active temple has a caretaker present and is closed at certain hours. This excludes the sometimes elaborate roadside shrines which are dedicated to a deity but generally do not have “opening hours” or a caretaker present. It also excludes shrine rooms that are part of an apartment flat. As always, some borderline cases remain. For instance, we include the shrine to Rama I near the Flower Market (Pak Khlong Talat; ปากคลองตลาด) and the small Bentougong (本頭公) shrine in Ratchathewi at the canal behind the Novotel Hotel because, although they have no doors, they are still significant temple-like structures.¹¹ Where a temple seemed

xiehui 協會, “association”, in the Chinese name. There is also *mulanithi* (มูลนิธิ), “foundation”, usually for *jijinghui* (基金會) or *shantang* (善堂) in Chinese and, very rarely, the sanskritic *wihan* (วิหาร), from *vihara*. Pornpan & Mak (1994: Ch. 2, and App. 2.2) analyze the different Chinese terms closely and use a mixture of architectural terms and deities as the typology for their most comprehensive listing.

¹¹ The spelling of temple names is not standardized and can vary quite a bit, reflecting the multilingual and weakly regulated environment. There is always at least one Chinese and one Thai name, but many temples have multiple names, e.g., “official” and informal names, old and new, or full and abbreviated ones. Sometimes, the Thai name merely mirrors the Chinese, some other times it is, to a degree, independent (see e.g., Table 1b in Ho 1995: 37). The Thai transcription of Chinese temple and deity names also varies widely because the pronunciation of the Chinese names themselves varies according to the form of Chinese that is transcribed. For instance, the local protector god Bentougong, the most common Chinese deity in Bangkok, is found spelled in various ways, including: ปึงเต๋ากง, ปึงเต้ากง, ป่งเต๋ากง, ปุ่นเต้ากิง, ปุ่นเต้ากง, ปึงท้าวกง, ปุงเท้ากง, etc. For even more, see Supakan 2559: 19–26 (esp. table on p. 25 listing

closed during our recent survey, we were not always able to ascertain whether it is still active, and some temples on our list might be closed permanently. Moreover, some sites on the list are under threat by real-estate development and might vanish soon, like the Tianhou Gong (天后宮; bt-mb-139¹²) near Chulalongkorn University.¹³

Past and Present: Chinese Epigraphy and Culture in Bangkok Temples

During his visits in the 1970s and 1980s, Franke documented more than 250 Chinese sites all over Thailand with a focus on recording the epigraphy.¹⁴ In the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA), he recorded inscriptions at twenty temples (*miao* 廟, *si* 寺, *gong* 宮),

different spellings for each syllable). For this paper, wherever possible, we take the Chinese characters as they appear over the entrance of the temple building as the main name. We transcribe these in *pinyin*; of course, we are fully aware that the modern Mandarin label often does not reflect what most people who frequent the temple call it.

¹² These references indicate the data provided independently in **APPENDIX 1** and/or **2**, published separately online at: <https://doi.org/10.69486/112.1.2024.4b>.

¹³ Developers built a “copy” of this temple nearby (bt-mb-141), which was supposed to appease the community, and perhaps the goddess. As of May 2023, the community of the original temple, the Mae Thapthim Saphan Lueang (แม่ทับทิมสะพานเหลือง; 黃橋天后聖母宮), was, however, still trying to preserve the original temple.

¹⁴ Franke (1998: 1) reported to have visited Thailand on multiple occasions in 1971–1976 and 1982–1991. Short reports of two journeys (1973 and 1982) provide some insight into his *modus operandi* (Franke & Walravens 2005: 285–296, 430–448). His main collaborators were Pornpan Juntaronanont, Lee Kheng Teo, and (his wife) Chün-yin Hu. His research in Thailand was part of a larger project that aimed at documenting epigraphic traces of the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia.

six cemeteries (*yishan* 義山), two clan associations (*huiguan* 會館), one hospital (with a sizable shrine to Guanyin), one school, and one ancestral temple (*zongci* 宗祠). Such inscriptions are found on stone steles, both freestanding or embedded in walls, on bells, incense burners, and wooden plaques. Most inscriptions are monolingual, but there are some bilingual ones as well in Thai and Chinese.

As a historian, Franke was interested in the epigraphic traces of overseas Chinese in general, not merely inscriptions at religious sites. In this article, our focus is solely on religious sites. Our main research question was what changes had occurred regarding epigraphy in the forty to fifty years after Franke's visits. What was lost, what was added, what had changed? To that effect, we revisited nine temples of Franke's twenty temples to ensure a large enough sample. The sample includes one Chinese Buddhist *wat* (A 1.1), and a Guanyin temple (A 1.10), the rest of the sites are dedicated to various deities. The immigrant group distribution in the sample is incidental and not representative.¹⁵ More precisely, three of the nine temples were maintained by Hainanese (A 1.5, A 1.7, A 1.8), two by Hakka (A 1.1, A 1.4), two by Hokkien (A 1.2, A 1.6), and two by Teochew (A 1.3, A 1.10) immigrants. The visited temples are as follows:¹⁶

¹⁵ The Teochew were the largest immigrant group in Bangkok, followed by the Hokkien, Hakka, Hainanese, and a relatively small community of Cantonese. Baffie (2001: 257) mentions fourteen Hainanese "sanctuaries" in Bangkok, based on information found on a Hainanese internet site (now gone), while Achirat's list (CGB) contains only seven Hainanese temples.

¹⁶ Franke's A 1.9 is the famous and large, but not very

A 1.1 永福寺 Yongfu Si (Wat Bamphen Chin Phrot, วัดป่าเพ็ญจินพรต)

A 1.2 順興宮 Shunxing Gong (Chow Sue Kong Shrine, ศาลเจ้าโจวซือกง)

A 1.3 大本頭公廟 Da Bentougong Miao (Lao Pun Thao Kong Shrine, ศาลเจ้าเล่าปุ่นเถ้ากง)

A 1.4 新本頭公廟 Xin Bentougong Miao (Sin Pun Thao Kong Shrine, ศาลเจ้าซินปุ่นเถ้ากง)

A 1.5 水尾聖娘廟 Shuiwei Shengniang Giao (Chao Mae Thapthim Shrine, ศาลเจ้าแม่ทับทิม)

A 1.6 仙公宮 Xiangong Gong (Siang Kong Shrine, ศาลเจ้าเซียงกง)

A 1.7 泰華聖娘廟 Taihua Shengniang Miao (Thai Hua Shrine, ศาลเจ้าไต้ฮั่ว)

A 1.8 昭應廟 Zhaoying Miao (Chiao Eng Biao Shrine, ศาลเจ้าเจียวเองเบียว or Bang Rak Shrine, ศาลเจ้าบางรัก)

A 1.10 觀音聖廟 Guanyin Shengmiao (A Nia Shrine, ศาลเจ้าอาเนี้ย)

Comparing and contrasting materials from our visit with Franke's documentation, our finding overall is that most objects that he documented in the 1970s and early 1980s were still found intact. With a few exceptions, the communities that maintain the temples have preserved the inscribed objects well. In some cases, however, wooden plaques have gone missing (in A 1.5, A 1.8, A 1.10). At Taihua Shengniang Miao, we were unable to locate the oldest donor list of 1866 (A 1.7.1), and a longer donor list of 1895 (A 1.7.3) and thus Franke's transcriptions of these lists are now the

representative, Wat Mangkon Kamalawat (วัดมังกรกมลาวาส), also known as Wat Leng Noei Yi (วัดเล่งเน่ยยี่; Ch: Longlian Si, 龍蓮寺), which we did not include in the sample. The temples were visited repeatedly in fall 2022 and spring 2023. See also APPENDIX 2 (online).

only existing record of these 19th century actors. With one exception (A 1.8.4), inscribed bells were all still present and a good number of 19th century bells still ring in the temples of Bangkok. Importantly, at several sites (in A 1.3, A 1.5, A 1.6, A 1.8, A 1.10), new donor lists have been added. For example, at the Guanyin Shengmiao (A 1.10), a large metal donor tablet commemorating a large renovation in the early 1990s was installed in the front court of the temple, which records more than 240 names. This demonstrates that the recording of patronage in donor lists continues as usual, even if some of the more recent donor inscriptions are now bilingual, in Chinese and Thai, such as the one commemorating the construction of the new Tianfu Dimu 天父地母 pavilion at A 1.3 in 2012.

In analyzing Franke's documentation, our follow-up study reveals that the published record of individual temples is more fragmented than anticipated.¹⁷ Franke nowhere promises a comprehensive record; obviously the number of objects he was able to include was limited due to the constraints of a print publication.¹⁸ Nevertheless, we found that at some sites the objects recorded by Franke are only a fraction of the material present. At Shunxing Gong (A 1.2), Shuiwei Shengniang Miao (A 1.5), and Zhaoying Miao (A 1.8), Franke

documented only around 20–30% of inscriptions on display. All three are Hainanese temples, which seem to have a particular predilection for a dense program of calligraphic tablets hung under curved ceilings. When confronted with a larger number of inscribed objects than he could include, Franke sensibly gives precedence to the oldest dated inscriptions.

Although our follow-up study indicates that inscribed objects have been preserved relatively well in Bangkok's temples over the last forty years, an assessment of the vitality of Chinese religious heritage overall requires that other indicators, for example, the role of literacy, must be considered. Not captured by an epigraphic survey, for instance, is the ability of people to read the inscriptions. We cannot expect that in the past all, or even most, visitors to a temple were able to read Chinese. Moreover, at religious sites especially, inscriptions have emblematic and decorative value beyond their content, such as Latin inscriptions in Christian churches, which were also often not accessible to all members of a parish. We noted that at Yongfu Si (A 1.1), although all items that Franke documented are still present, the *duilian* (對聯; "couplets") A 1.1.3a (assuming the order in Franke is correct) had been mistakenly rehung with sides reversed. Elsewhere, the right and left sides of a *duilian* pair have been exchanged (A 1.5.7b). This is an indicator of a loss of Chinese skills since the correct order is easy to ascertain if one can read the characters and identify their tones.¹⁹ Anecdotal evidence

¹⁷ For an account of how the photos were developed and the inscriptions transcribed, see Franke & Walravens 2005: 294.

¹⁸ On one journey alone, he took over 1,400 photos (Franke & Walravens 2005: 287). We made several attempts to find negatives or original photos, but to no avail. A former collaborator for the Indonesian volume confirmed that the originals had not been archived in any systematic way.

¹⁹ For a detailed overview of *duilian* prosody, see Yu 2000.

gathered during our fieldwork points to a decline both in the ability to speak at least one form of Chinese as well as in Chinese reading literacy among the visitors to the temples. Many caretakers we encountered were neither able to read the inscriptions nor speak any form of Chinese.²⁰ This is in line with what is known regarding the decline of Chinese skills among the Sino–Thai in general (Morita 2003).²¹

Another aspect of textuality, not covered by a survey of inscriptions, is the presence of printed religious literature, often offered freely to visitors near the entrance of Chinese temples. These religious tracts range from canonical and apocryphal sutras to morality books (*shanshu* 善書), hagiographies, booklets for sutra-copying practice, as well as laminated cards with a printed *gāthā* or *dharāṇi* perhaps with dots by which to trace one’s progress in recitation. The free distribution of such printed material is an important feature of the text-temple nexus, and the tradition is very much alive in Chinese temples in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and to a lesser degree even in Malaysia and Indonesia. Compared to the communities in those countries, we found this aspect of temple culture much reduced in Bangkok. Again, this must be seen as a direct result of the lack of Chinese skills

among those who frequent the temples. Some temples provide recitation booklets in which the Chinese characters are glossed with Thai letters to clarify the pronunciation, like the way *bopomofo* (Mandarin phonetic symbols) transcription is used in recitation manuals in Taiwan or *pinyin* in Malaysia. However, in Bangkok comparatively few texts are on display and religious literature in Chinese for free distribution is comparatively rare, especially in non-Buddhist temples. Here too more studies are needed for a better overview. Such studies would have to take the history of Chinese language printing in Thailand into account.

Still another feature of temple life that seems to have changed since Franke’s survey are the temple processions (*youshen* 游神) in which (images of) the deities seated on palanquins are paraded through the streets. Such processions are very much part of Chinese temple life, remaining ubiquitous in Taiwan and other parts of the Chinese world. Historically, they were an important feature in Bangkok as well. Documents by government officials in 1892 describe large-scale processions with fireworks and costumes in which Chinese gods or “lords” (*chao*; เจ้า) were invited from separate Chinese shrines to participate at a larger shrine, then taken back by procession. Chinese opera productions were intended “for” these gods and there were usually Chinese palanquins present so that the gods could “leave” the shrine afterwards (Achirat 2565: 25). Although most temples in Bangkok have retained their set of wooden signs and the wooden replica of weapons, which are part of the parade, the processions themselves have mostly lapsed. Caretakers

²⁰ There were exceptions to this general impression. At Shuiwei Shengniang Miao (A 1.5) for example, there always seemed to be people speaking Chinese. A dedicated survey probing the remaining Chinese skills in Thailand would be helpful. It would be interesting to know, for example, whether some speech groups have preserved their form of Chinese more successfully than others.

²¹ For a contemporary account of the repression of Chinese education in Thailand, see Skinner 1957: 365–372.

usually cite the dense traffic and inconvenience, but the end of processions deserves notice.

Yet another aspect of Chinese temple culture, ritual Chinese opera performances (*choushenxi* 酬神戲 or *shengongxi* 神功戲 in Chinese, *ngiw* จิว in Thai) in the temple yard, seems not to have diminished in popularity. In our sample group, both the Shuiwei Shengniang Miao (A 1.5) and the Shunxing Gong (A 1.2) have dedicated stages in their front yards where performances are staged several times a year. Anecdotal observation at other sites too suggests that annual or biannual performances during temple festivals seem to continue. Both the past and present practice of Chinese opera performances in Thailand deserve further research.²²

Another noteworthy change in some temples is how religious images are moved or displaced. For example, at Shuiwei Shengniang Miao (A 1.5), Franke's documentation (1998: 22) allows us to see that the left altar hall used to be dedicated to the Three Great Emperor Officials (三官爺爺, 三官大帝). However, today this shrine hall has been taken down and the space is currently used as a storeroom. In the altar hall to the right, Bentougong has been joined by Guan Yu.²³

²² Perhaps along ethnomusicological lines such as the dissertation on Chinese Mahayana music in southern Thailand by Rewadee (2010: 64), which mentions Teochew opera performances during religious festivals in the 19th century.

²³ The Bentougong (本頭公, ปุณเฑาะง) cult is specific to the oversea Chinese in Thailand, Cambodia, and parts of Malaysia, where it has been attested since the 18th century (Chia 2017: 449). The deity under

At Dabentougong Miao (A 1.3) the titular Bentougong altar is not in the center facing the door but to the right after the entrance on the right. The deity on the main altar is Xuanwu 玄武 (= Da laoye 大老爺).²⁴ It has been suggested that the temple dedicated to Xuanwu was built by the Hokkien community (an 1824 bell inscription mentions a Hokkien donor), but later came to be maintained by Teochew immigrants and was re-dedicated to Bentougong.²⁵

Such shifts in the worship of deities at specific locations are not the primary focus of this research project. However, observing how deity statues are exhibited in each temple can offer fresh insights into the dynamics of the “social network” of Chinese deities in Bangkok.

this name is not worshipped in China, yet there are records of his cult in Thailand since at least the Ayutthaya period. *Khamhaikan Khun Luang Ha Wat* (คำให้การขุนหลวงหาวัด), “Testimony of the King Who Entered a Wat”, a chronicle likely from the end of the Ayutthaya period, mentions that a Bentougong shrine existed north of a market at Wat Doem (วัดเดิม) canal in Ayutthaya. Today, more Chinese temples in Bangkok are dedicated to Bentougong than to any other deity.

²⁴ The temple website explains that “according to the hierarchy of the deities, Da laoye ranks above Bentougong, who is a local deity. Therefore, Da laoye became the main protective deity of this Puntaokong temple” (若按神職級別則大老爺比地方神的大本頭公高，所以；大老爺才成為這座大本頭公廟的鎮廟神明). See: http://laopuntaokong.org/altar/index_cn.asp (accessed June 2023). For an extensive study of the Bentougong cult in Bangkok, see Supakan 2559.

²⁵ Ho (1998: 28–29) considers this as an example of a “temple coup”, by the economically prosperous Teochew majority group over the Hokkien, though it could also have been a more benign amalgamation of communities and interests.

Survey of Chinese Temples in Present-Day Bangkok

Revisiting Franke's sites, we noticed that there was no comprehensive listing of Chinese religious sites in Bangkok. Below, we take stock of previous surveys of Chinese temples in Bangkok, then introduce our own, which builds on and significantly expands on these previous efforts.

In 1994, Pornpan Juntaronanont and Lau-Fong Mak published a large and deeply researched study of Chinese temples in Bangkok and Singapore, trying to come to terms with their imagery, calendar, and rituals. The survey was published in a monograph series in Taiwan and remains a foundational, comprehensive study of Chinese temples in the region. Unfortunately, it was largely forgotten and not cited by any of the surveys that followed (except by Franke).²⁶ Pornpan & Mak (1994: 5) mention a list of 227 temples in Bangkok, of which 118 had a known foundation date. The exact source for these numbers is unclear, but they seem to originate from government sources (*ibid.*: 4). The survey itself does not include a complete list, however, perhaps because many locations could not be confirmed. The most comprehensive listing of sites in Pornpan & Mak is found in their Appendix 2.2 (1994: 132). It comprises 125 temples "organized" in 13 (mutually

overlapping) architectural and religious categories: *tan* 壇 (6 sites), *ma* 媽 (6), *niang* 娘 (3), *di* 帝 (3), *tang* 堂 (2), *mu* 母 (4), *zu* 祖 (3), *shi* 師 (4), *gong* 公 (12), *gong* 宮 (18), *miao* 廟 (39), *qita* 其他 (12), *fosi* 佛寺 (13). The rather vague addresses and the fluid naming conventions provided in this list make it difficult to confirm whether the sites still exist thirty years later (2024).²⁷

Only a few months after Pornpan & Mak's survey appeared in Taiwan, another smaller, but still important, survey appeared. Chuimei Ho's 1995 article in the *Journal of the Siam Society* lists 35 out of 38 Chinese temples the author visited in 1991, focusing on the Sampheng quarter, which in terms of modern *khet* (เขต) or districts includes all of Samphanthawong, the south of Pom Prap Sattru Phai, and, across the river, the northern bank of Khlong San.²⁸ This region, often perceived as "Chinatown", is what appears in our survey as the main cluster containing 43 out of all located temples [MAPS 3–4].²⁹ Although Ho's list is focused only on this limited area of Bangkok, it already includes more temples than Franke documented for all

²⁶ Pornpan is listed as co-editor in Franke's Thailand volume, but according to the acknowledgments (Franke 1998: 3), she joined Franke's team only in 1989 to edit the Thai-Chinese inscriptions for publication, not during the data collection in the 1970s and early 1980s. It is thus possible that her own survey was inspired by Franke's work.

²⁷ We were only able to confirm approximately 70 of the 125 entries. We might simply have missed some sites; others are almost certainly gone (or have been moved) due to city development in the indicated area. For instance, of the 13 Buddhist sites, only 6 were still identifiable. Generally, the smaller and newer a site in 1994, the less likely it is that we can still find it today.

²⁸ The list is somewhat confusing. Items 7, 16 and 17 are missing. A footnote explains that 7 and 17 "are not used" (Ho 1995: 36). Of the remaining 35 sites, we were only able to identify and geo-reference 29 sites.

²⁹ For an overview of the development of this area, which was also home to sizable Indian and Vietnamese communities, see Courtine 2001.

the capital. Ho's main aim was to trace the early geographic spread of Chinese temples based on their founding dates. She proposes three phases. In phase one, the oldest temples were built on the banks of the Chao Phraya, roughly along the stretch between the Phra Pokklao and the King Taksin Bridge. Next, the temples along the Sampheng Road (today Soi Wanit 1, ซอยวานิช ๑) were established as that neighborhood became the center of Chinese commerce in Bangkok. Third, for the last quarter of the 19th century, Ho finds a movement north from Sampheng Road into, and along, its parallel Charoen Krung Road which was completed in 1864. This credible narrative corresponds well to the growth of the main cluster. However, like Franke and Duan, Ho does not include the second main cluster of equally old temples in Thonburi and the exact relationship between the two clusters awaits further research.

In 1996, Lisheng Duan published a rich account of 60 Chinese temples all over Thailand, complete with floor plans and images. The descriptions often contain transcriptions of epigraphy found at the temples. Of the 60 temples, 24 are in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region. As the term *simiao* (寺廟), “temple”, in the title implies, Duan does not distinguish between *wat* and *sanchao*.

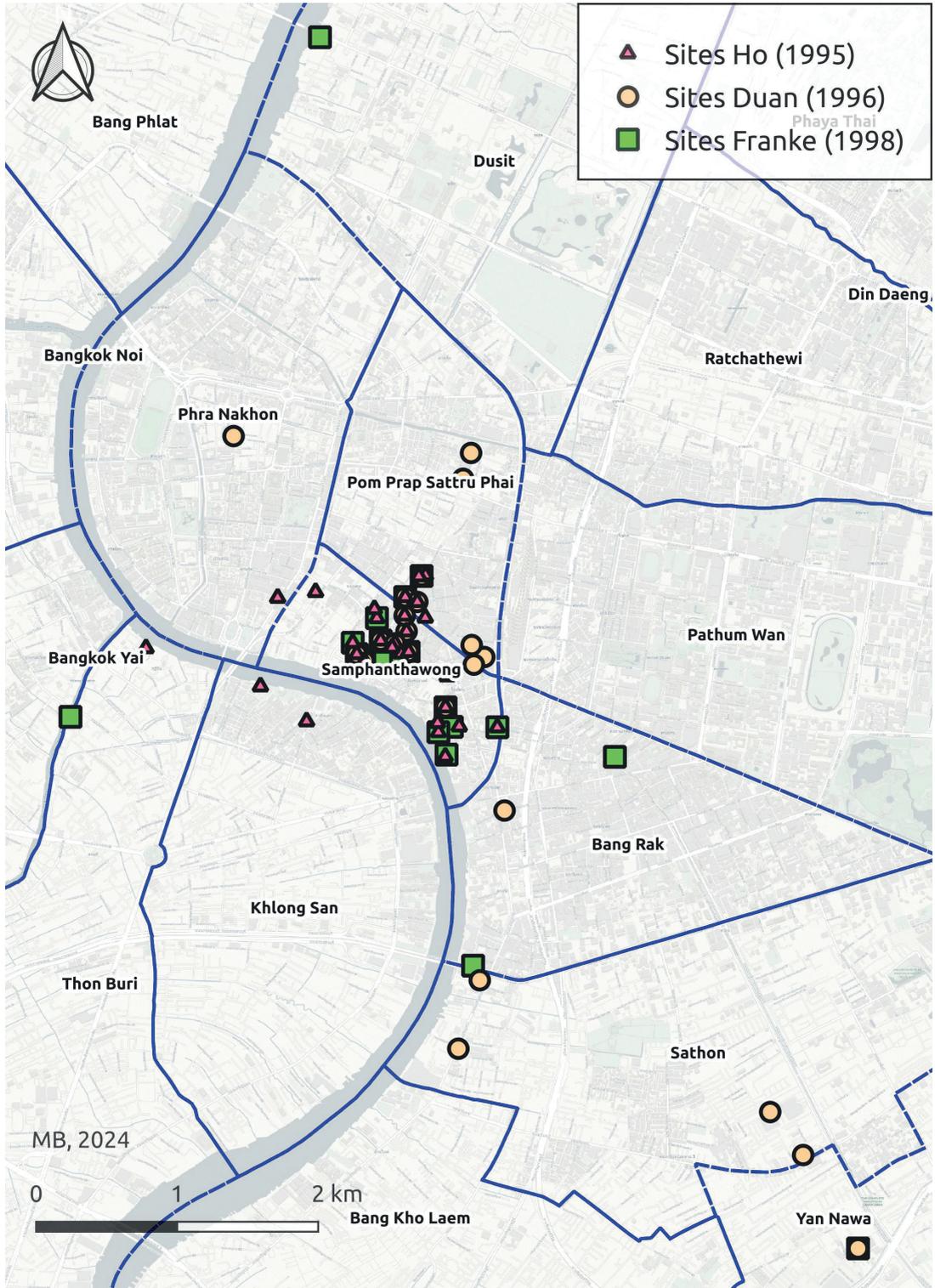
As **MAP 1** illustrates, Ho, Duan, and Franke provide little information about sites in Thonburi and Khlong San. Although there is a considerable overlap in the Samphanthawong district, there is little overlap in other districts, indicating that there are many more temples outside of Samphanthawong. How many? Earlier studies by foreign

observers heavily underestimate the number (and role) of temples.³⁰ Ho (38 temples in Bangkok), Duan (24), and Franke (20) sampled the field without intending a comprehensive survey.³¹ These researchers did unfortunately not reference Pornpan & Mak's earlier survey (125 temples).

A collaboration between the City Planning Department of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and Silpakorn University in the early 2010s updated city records and published a comprehensive list of temples. The project was motivated at least in part by concerns of cultural heritage preservation. A decision was made to narrow down the scope to *sanchao* “shrines” within the 50 districts of Bangkok. The results of the collaboration were published first in 2016 as *Chinese Shrines—The Faith of Bangkok* (hereafter CSFB), a lavishly produced, bilingual Thai-English hardcover volume, which provides historical outlines, descriptions, floor plans, and color images of 45 temples. An appendix lists 124 temples (including the 45 described in the main part), sorted by *khets* or district, accompanied by a single thumbnail image for each site. A similar list of 129 temples, now sorted by deity

³⁰ Coughlin speaks of “about a dozen large and small edifices scattered throughout the Chinese districts of the city” (1960: 94) which he found “not rewarding in appearance [...] nondescript [...] sooty and faded”. He also presents a statistical comparison of Chinese and Thai temples and writes that “out of 17 [Chinese Mahayana] monasteries, 15 were in the Bangkok area” (*ibid.*: 97). A generation before him, Landon wrote “while there are only six Buddhist temples for the Chinese [in Bangkok], there are countless road-side shrines where joss paper is burned” (Landon 1941: 100).

³¹ An even smaller sample is Kulsiri 2053, which describes the history and ritual practice at nine prominent Chinese temples.



MAP 1: Bangkok sites listed by Ho, Duan, and Franke © Marcus Bingenheimer

group, was included as appendix in *Chinese Gods in Bangkok* (hereafter CGB) by Achirat Chaiyapotpanit (2565). Achan Achirat, a Professor at Silpakorn who had been part of the original collaboration with the City Planning Department (2559), further enriched the list by identifying the main deity figure at the sites, and, where possible, the speech community, as well as information regarding founding dates.³²

These two related lists (CSFB & CGB), together with the previous studies by Pornpan & Mak, Ho, Duan, and Franke, served as the starting point for our own survey.³³ The main problems with the CSFB & CGB survey are the absence of Chinese characters, the unnecessary omission of “temples” referred as *wat* or *si* (寺), a lack of awareness of previous studies, and a lack of location references beyond the khet or district. Strangely, the CSFB & CGB survey omits some districts such as Rat Burana, Bangkok Noi, and Suan Luang all of which have a few older temples. Due to the lack of clear location indicators, we were

unable to locate 18 of the 129 temples listed in CGB. The CSFB survey also missed quite a few old and important *sanchao*.³⁴ The list in CGB includes some sites missed in its earlier iteration in CSFB.³⁵

Our own survey, created in 2022–2023, includes, wherever possible, coordinates and at least one Chinese name for each site [MAP 2].³⁶ As of January 2024, our list contains 199 geo-referenced sites.³⁷ That is to say, we were almost able to double the number of geo-referenced sites from the CSFB & CGB survey. Next to site visits, Google Maps and other online tools played an important role in data collection. In the event, it turned out that geo-referencing via Google Maps was more precise and more efficient than using GPS apps or GPS enabled cameras on-site. We did not try to contribute to the photographic record, beyond experimenting with photogrammetry and indoor 360° panoramic photography. Generally, for public sites such as our temples, the benefit of fieldwork photography must

³² Achirat’s bibliography in CGB (2565) contains relatively few works specifically on Chinese temple culture in Thailand, and, despite including some English and Chinese sources, does not mention any from Pornpan & Mak (1994), Ho (1995), Duan (1996), or Franke (1998). Especially remarkable is the extra work he put into researching the dating, speech group, and iconographic program of a temple, without engaging with the similar information collected by Pornpan & Mak.

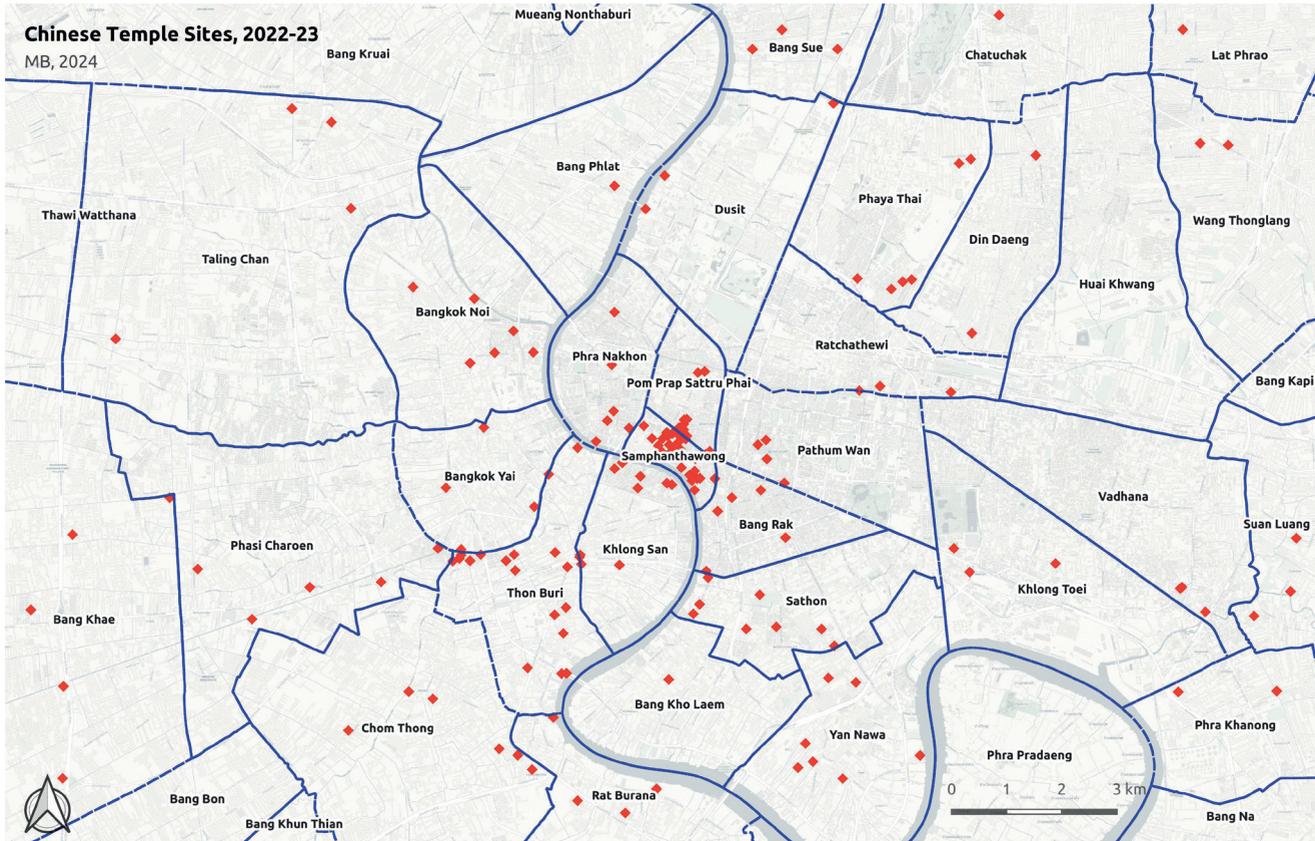
³³ CSFB (2016: 44) states that the team worked from a list of 261 shrines of which they were able to confirm 124 which had “official residence registration” and were open to the public. Of these 261, 77 temples came from an early 20th century list created as part of a registration initiative under Rama VI and which were included in Sec. 5 of the “Local Administration Act” of 1914. This list of 77 (or a later iteration) is reproduced in Jesada (2561: 48–49) and deserves further study.

³⁴ For instance, Taihua Shengniang Miao (A 1.7/bt-mb-144) or Xiangong Gong (bt-mb-143), both of which were included by Ho, Duan, and Franke. Similarly, Longwei Gumiao (bt-mb-152), one of the oldest shrines in Bangkok (with a bell dated 1843) was overlooked.

³⁵ The lists are identical. In APPENDIX 1 (online): Cgb-30, Cgb-31, Cgb-37, Cgb-39, Cgb-119 are not in CSFB. Csfb-a124 seems not to appear in CGB. Cgb-40 seems identical with cgb-42.

³⁶ The Chinese name is generally cited according to the inscription over the entrance to the main hall. Coordinates are given to six decimal places (with 0.000001 ~ ca 11cm).

³⁷ The discrepancy consists of the 18 temples in the CSFB & CGB survey that we were unable to locate. These are often small, difficult to find, Bentougong sites. We suspect the “Banyan Shrine” (bt-mb-076) is the small shrine in Talat Noi at 13.733962, 100.512046. Also, csfb-a45 and csfb-a45 might be listed separately but are actually part of csfb-a44 (= bt-mb-44).



MAP 2: Locations of Chinese temples (2023 survey) © Marcus Bingenheimer

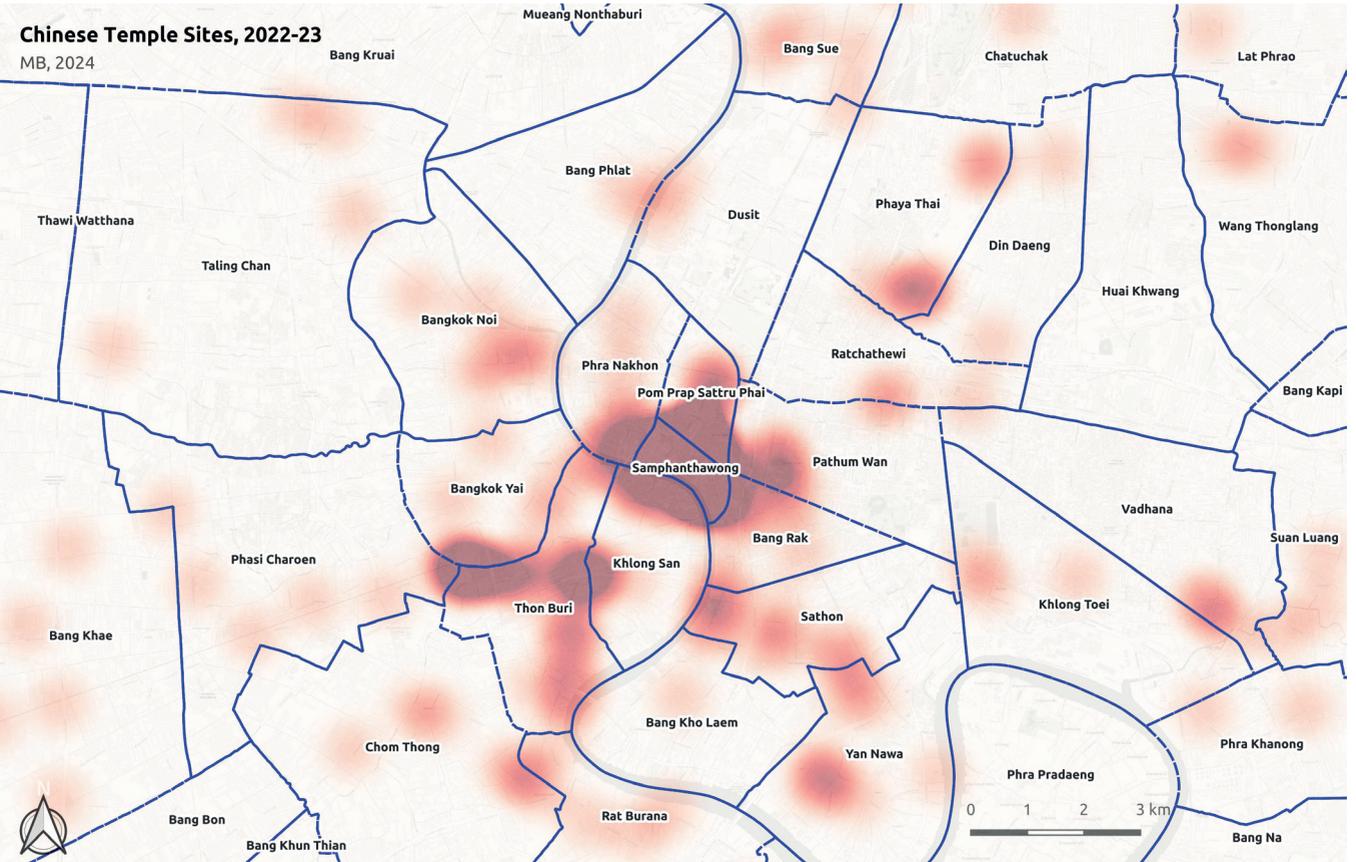
be considered in the context of the large amount of readily available images on Google Maps, Instagram, and other online platforms.³⁸

As usual, when it comes to what to include, there are a handful of borderline cases. Next to *wat* and *sanchao* “temples”, we have included temple-like buildings at cemeteries, clan ancestral shrines, and religious buildings at speech group associations. We also included the handful of

“Vietnamese” (*annam nikai*; อนันนิกาย) Buddhist temples (e.g., bt-mb-147 or 149), which in Thailand are usually considered distinct from both *sanchao* and *chin nikai* (จีนนิกาย) or Chinese Mahayana Buddhist temples (Liu 2020). However, the difference of these temples to so-called “Chinese” temples in terms of architecture, iconography, and ritual, is not greater than the difference between *sanchao* temples of different speech groups.

Other borderline cases, without doors and a mixed program of Thai-style murals and Chinese inscriptions, are the shrine to Lord Taksin in Bangkok Noi (bt-mb-191) and the shrine to Rama I near the Flower Market (bt-mb-160). Sometimes, there seems to be no clear

³⁸ The FROGBEAR workshop held in Bangkok on 24 May–2 June 2023, documented some 25 sites from our survey. Photography from that workshop can be accessed as part of the FROGBEAR database (<https://frogbear.org/>). A related GitHub organization collects GIS data layers for sites in Southeast Asia at <https://nanyang-data.info/>. A large dataset of fieldwork photography taken at more than 800 Chinese cemeteries has been published by Oliver Streiter (2017).



MAP 3: Heatmap view of MAP 2 © Marcus Bingenheimer

connection to Chinese religion at all, for instance, with the small shrine to “Father Chui” (พ่อจ้อย; bt-mb-097) or the shrine next to the Banyan tree (*sanchao tonsai*, ศาลเจ้า ต้นไทร) in Talat Noi (bt-mb-076). But such cases are few and widely dispersed, and Chinese temples are almost always easily identified as such.

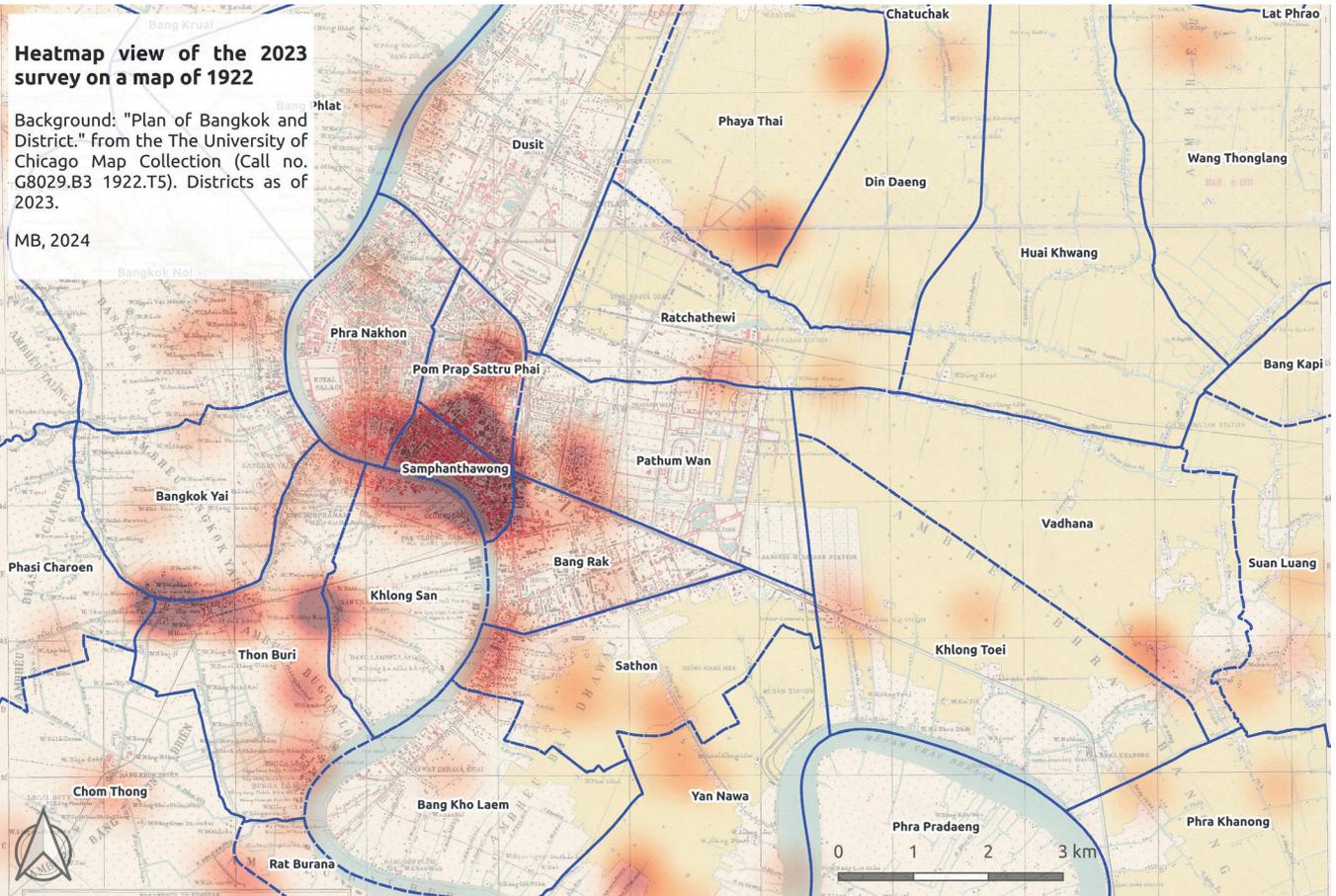
The heatmap view [MAP 3], a mode of display that highlights distribution density, clearly shows two main clusters of Chinese religious structures, the better known one in the Sampheng quarter (including the sites on the

northern bank of Khlong San), and a second in and around Thonburi, an area which sees less tourism, but which was central to Bangkok’s early history.

This relationship is also reflected in **TABLE 1**. Even based on modern district borders, which do not necessarily reflect historic settlement and building patterns, Samphanthawong and Thonburi have the highest number of temples. In this case, Pom Prap Sattru Phai belongs to the same cluster as Samphanthawong, as do the temples on the northern bank of Khlong San across from Samphanthawong.

TABLE 1: Number of Chinese Temples per District

No. of Temples	District (<i>khet</i>)
29	Samphanthawong (สัมพันธวงศ์)
18	Thonburi (ธนบุรี)
11	Pom Prap Sattru Phai (ป้อมปราบศัตรูพ่าย)
10	Khlong San (คลองสาน)
8	Sathon (สาทร)
7	Yan Nawa (ยานนาวา)
6	Phra Nakhon (พระนคร), Phaya Thai (พญาไท), Bangkok Noi (บางกอกน้อย), Chom Thong (จอมทอง), Bang Khae (บางแค)
5	Bang Rak (บางรัก), Rat Burana (ราชบุรีบูรณะ), Phasi Charoen (ภาษีเจริญ), Bang Sue (บางซื่อ)
4	Pathum Wan (ปทุมวัน), Bangkok Yai (บางกอกใหญ่), Taling Chan (ตลิ่งชัน), Bang Khun Thian (บางขุนเทียน), Suan Luang (สวนหลวง), Don Mueang (ดอนเมือง)
3	Dusit (ดุสิต), Min Buri (มีนบุรี), Chatuchak (จตุจักร), Prawet (ประเวศ), Khlong Toei (คลองเตย), Ratchathewi (ราชเทวี), Vadhana (วัฒนา)
2	Phra Khanong (พระโขนง), Nong Chok (หนองจอก), Bang Khen (บางเขน), Bang Kapi (บางกะปิ), Nong Khaem (หนองแขม), Din Daeng (ดินแดง), Wang Thonglang (วังทองหลาง)
1	Lat Krabang (ลาดกระบัง), Bang Phlat (บางพลัด), Bang Kho Laem (บางคอแหลม), Lat Phrao (ลาดพร้าว), Sai Mai (สายไหม), Khan Na Yao (คันนายาว), Nong Khaem (หนองแขม)
Total: 199	



MAP 4: Temple distribution (2023 survey) in Bangkok (1922 base map)
© Marcus Bingenheimer

MAP 4 illustrates the distribution of temples within our survey area against the backdrop of a 1922 city map,³⁹ providing contextual insight into their density. The largest cluster of temples in the Sampheng quarter is obvious and tallies with the most densely populated area of the city one hundred years ago. The more interesting cluster is perhaps along the *khlong* (canal) Bang Yai in

Thonburi to the west that takes a south turn into Rat Burana. This region was, for most of its history, more agricultural than commercial. Writing in the 1830s in *Nirat Suphan* (นิราศสุพรรณ), the poet Sunthon Phu (สุนทรภู่; 1786–1855) described the area as follows: “On both sides sprout flowers/Ravishing and refreshing to behold/I see groups of people doing farm work/Enticing ladies all along the canal”.⁴⁰ Those Thonburi temples were probably frequented by

³⁹ Printed by the Thai Royal Survey Department. The digital facsimile used here is made available by the University of Chicago as part of the “University of Chicago Map Collection”. See: <http://pi.lib.uchicago.edu/1001/maps/asian-cities/G8029-B3-1922-T5>.

⁴⁰ สองฝั่งฟุ้งพดกขพลอย/เพลินชื่น ชมเอย/แลเหล่าชาวสวน หน้า/เสน่หน้องคลองสนอม. Cited in Damrong 2549: 211.

Chinese immigrants who had taken to intensive farming along the *khlongs* to the west of the Chao Phraya, perhaps the same people whom Sunthon Phu describes.⁴¹ It reminds us that, against modern perceptions, not all Chinese in early Bangkok were low-wage laborers, traders, or businessmen.

Historical geography also explains the prominent absences of temples in some quarters. That there are virtually no Chinese temples in Huai Khwang or Din Daeng and very few in Vadhana or Phra Khanong is because these districts, which today are densely built-up urban environments, were mere rice fields on the outskirts of Bangkok one hundred years ago. At the time those fields became part of the city in the 1930–1960s, the Sino–Thai were under strong pressure to assimilate and the founding of new temples, a hallmark of Chinese identity, was not feasible.⁴² Also changes to the immigration law in the 1930s greatly reduced new immigration from China, obviating the need to build more settlements and temples for newcomers.⁴³ This is one of the reasons why there are more (and larger) Chinese temples today in Bang Khae, Phasi Charoen, and other suburban districts which were developed only in the last 50 years, than there are in Vadhana, Din Daeng, or Ratchathewi, which became part of the urban center in the mid-20th century.

The old cemeteries of the different Chinese speech groups, but also of

Christians, Muslims, and Parsis, used to be in the southern outskirts surrounded by fields and well connected to the river via *khlongs*. Today they are in busy Sathon, engulfed, but not obliterated, by high-rise development.

Two aspects have been set aside for the time being and are not included in the survey data. First, studies of Chinese temple culture in Southeast Asia usually consider the speech groups (Teochew, Hokkien, Hakka, etc.) associated with a site.⁴⁴ Historically, many, probably most temples used to be associated with one speech group. However, the current situation, and indeed a more nuanced picture of the past, calls for restraint in employing this mode of categorization to temples today. While the association with a speech group is certainly important for the history, architecture, and iconography for most of the older temples, it is difficult to ascertain how much speech groups are still relevant for more recent temples. At times, temples were founded by one group, but are now maintained by another. Still other temples were never closely associated with a particular group. Doubts about accuracy and heuristic value apart, the lists provided independently by Pornpan & Mak (1994) and by Achirat (2565) are valid attempts to approximate what is known today about the temple-speech group relationship.⁴⁵

⁴¹ For a mention of these immigrants in the context of *khlong* excavation, see Tanabe 1977: 64.

⁴² The dearth of new Chinese temple construction between 1925 and 1955 is well illustrated by Pornpan & Mak (1994: 7, Table 1.5).

⁴³ See Landon 1941: 197–214.

⁴⁴ The most comprehensive list associating Chinese temples with speech groups is the appendix to Achirat (2565). Ho (1995), Duan (1996), and Franke (1998) also associate speech groups to the temples they surveyed.

⁴⁵ Adjacent to a discussion of speech groups and their deities (Achirat 2565: 169–206), Achirat also considers iconographic differences between speech groups. Statues in Teochew temples, for instance, tend to

Second, there is the rather important matter of deities and their presence in Chinese temples, which comes with its own difficulties of categorization. For instance, the female littoral deities, that in Chinese are distinguished as Tianhou 天后 (or Mazu 馬祖) on the one hand, and the Hainanese Shuiwei Shengmu 水尾聖母 on the other, are both usually called Mae Thapthim (แม่ทับทิม) in Thai, a name also used sometimes for Bentouma (本頭媽), the wife, or the female form, of Bentougong. The fluidity of the pantheon is one of the reasons we still lack an authoritative study of the deities of the overseas Chinese.⁴⁶ Moreover, the tutelary deity of the temple is not always the main deity. As noted above, in Franke's A 1.3 (bt-mb-85) Xuanwu sits on the main altar, not Bentougong. Thus, identifying the main deity is not really sufficient to characterize a site. Most temples have three or more altars and often the combination of deities is relevant.⁴⁷ The survey by Pornpan &

have their feet resting below their seat and pointed symmetrically, whereas in Hokkien shrines the statues' feet are in different poses more expressive of movement (*ibid.*: 55).

⁴⁶ Here too, Franke's listing (1998: 749–777) of deities associated with sites in Thailand was pioneering. The term “fluid pantheon” is borrowed from Faure (2015), many of whose findings about Japanese deities can be applied to deities in Southeast Asia.

⁴⁷ A wide spectrum of iconographic detail remains to be explored. Achirat notes that in a mural at Wat Suwannaram, Thonburi, painted in the 1830s, an image of a Chinese man on a boat worshipping a riverside shrine is painted in the *chawet* (เขวียด) style, with the flame-like frame of many Thai religious statues. Indeed, the same amalgamation of Chinese and Thai artistic style in religious icons can be found at a Bentougong temple in the Dusit area which contains a Bentougong statue holding a lotus stem and framed in *chawet* style. It was made by a Chinese craftsman imitating Thai artistic forms to sculpt this Chinese immigrant deity (Achirat 2565: 87–88).

Mak (1994: Appendices 2.6 and 2.8) is still the best attempt at mapping this aspect of the field. Ample room remains for more research and better documentation, but we must leave that to future iterations of the survey.

Beyond the Survey

In the foregoing, we have described our efforts to build on previous studies to create a new survey of Chinese temples in Bangkok. In the first section, we compared epigraphic materials documented by Franke in the 1970s and 1980s with the present. This revealed that most epigraphic material is still in place, demonstrating a good degree of care for these sites by the communities that run them [**APPENDIX 2: Online**]. We also noted evidence of a decline in Chinese literacy, strong indication of the continuing importance of donor lists and Chinese opera productions, and a decline in the significance of processions. During our study, we realized the need for a comprehensive, geo-referenced survey of Chinese temples and shrines in Bangkok. Such a survey is now made available in **APPENDIX 1** and online.⁴⁸ The hope is that such a birds-eye view will help to establish a good basis for further research. A comprehensive database of Chinese temples could allow research into the complex relationships between speech groups, deity cults, religious change, and conversations between Thai and Chinese religiosity in Bangkok. We extended existing surveys

⁴⁸ Mainly as part of <https://github.com/nanyang-temples/thailand-public> (visualized: <https://nanyang-data.info/>), where the data will be developed in the future. The dataset on which this article is based is also archived in a Zenodo repository.

by adding exact location data which allows discussion of the distribution of temple as clusters and visualization of the historical spread of temple construction in Bangkok. Such a perspective highlights a little discussed cluster of sites in the Thonburi region and helps to understand the absence of Chinese temples in many districts which are today considered part of the urban center of Bangkok.

Furthermore, our survey allows for a better estimate for the total number of Chinese temples in Bangkok. The Ministry of the Interior's Bureau of Registration registered 675 Chinese temples in Thailand overall, of which only 79 are in Bangkok.⁴⁹ This means more than half of the sites in our survey are not registered to date. Our survey is also significantly larger than that of Pornpan & Mak (1994) which listed 125 temples and that of the City Planning

Office (2016) which stood at only 124 temples.

The total count of 199 confirmed sites in our survey can be compared to the 448 Thai Buddhist *wats* and the 157 Islamic mosques in Bangkok for which the city government has published geo-referenced datasets.⁵⁰ In light of these numbers and our experiences in collecting the data, we estimate that with dedicated effort an additional 20–50 more Chinese sites might be found. It thus appears that, as of 2023, there are at least 199 and probably not more than 250 Chinese temples (as defined above) in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region. With these results in place, we could next take a closer look at the different deities housed in these temples, the relationship between primary and secondary altars, and analyze donor lists to map communities over time. This study marks just the beginning of a collective endeavor to meticulously uncover the subtle traces that Franke initiated decades ago, gradually revealing insights not readily apparent at first glance.

⁴⁹ The Bureau of Registration in the Ministry of the Interior maintains a registry of Chinese temples in Thailand (Department of Provincial Administration 2542). The documents and the respective laws are provided online: <https://www.bora.dopa.go.th/CallCenter1548/index.php/menu-general/12-service-handbook/general/41-general-shrine> (accessed October 2023). The numbers cited can be found in the Shrine Registration Manual (คู่มือการปฏิบัติงานทะเบียนศาลเจ้า). The registry is obviously not comprehensive; Jesada concludes: "The total number of Chinese shrines in Thailand cannot yet be conclusively determined" (2561: 47; our translation).

⁵⁰ Distributed by the Bangkok Geographic Information Technology Center (BMA GIS Center) at Bangkok City Hall. See: http://www.bangkokgis.com/modules.php?m=download_shapefile (accessed September 2023).

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ABBREVIATIONS

CGB = [Chinese Gods in Bangkok]
Achirat 2565

CSFB = [Chinese Shrines—The Faith of
Bangkok] City Planning
Department 2559

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