

## **RELIGION, SOCIETY, AND ARCHITECTURE: A STUDY OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE RELIGIOUS TEMPLES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY GEORGE TOWN, PENANG**

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### **Abstract**

This research represents a preliminary investigation into the social functions of traditional Chinese religious temples in nineteenth-century George Town, Penang. By developing a framework for analysing heritage temples that integrate social, religious, and architectural dimensions, the study addresses a critical gap in existing research that neglects the architectural attributes of these temples and their role in fulfilling symbolic and functional societal needs. Employing a structural functionalist approach from the sociology of religion, this study combines field observations and a focused literature review to analyse how temple architecture accommodated religious and social practices within the migrant Chinese community. The findings demonstrate a strong interdependence between social practices and architectural attributes, showing how the temples adapted to meet religious and communal functions within the urban context, serving as focal points for religious practices, community interaction, and expressions of power and authority. This framework offers an integrated approach to investigating heritage temples in similar historical and cultural contexts. By demonstrating how social, religious, and architectural dimensions were interconnected and mutually influential, this research contributes to a more holistic understanding of cultural heritage preservation, particularly within the UNESCO World Heritage Site of George Town.

Keywords: Penang, Social functions, Social practices, Traditional Chinese religious temples, Traditional Chinese temple architecture.

## **1. Introduction**

This study represents a preliminary investigation into the relationship between traditional Chinese religious temples and the social structures and practices of the Chinese community in nineteenth-century George Town, Penang. In his study of the Chinese in Malaya, Purcell observed that the religious landscape of the Chinese society was significantly shaped by local folk religion [1]. His study reveals a strong connection between religion and Chinese society, with traditional religious temples as physical manifestations of this relationship. Vaughan further emphasises the profound influence of these temples on the identity and social lives of the Chinese community [2]. These findings suggest a strong connection between the religious temples, religion and Chinese society.

However, the significance of architecture within the context of Chinese society and religion has not been fully recognised. While existing research has explored the social, economic, and religious dimensions of nineteenth-century Chinese society in Penang, the focus on the relationship between this society and its architectural heritage remains limited [3-6]. Studies of traditional Chinese architecture in nineteenth-century Malaya primarily focus on typology and structural aspects, with inadequate attention to the socio-cultural contexts of their development [7-9].

Scholarly research on traditional Chinese architecture, particularly temples in Penang remains scarce. Existing research on Chinese religion often focuses on deities, dialect groups, and rituals [10-13]. Still, it neglects the architectural attributes of traditional Chinese religious temples, indicating that the interplay between these domains remains under-explored. This suggests a lack of understanding of how architecture can fulfil symbolic and functional societal needs.

Without recognising the historical significance of traditional architectural elements, contemporary renovation efforts often prioritise modern materials and techniques over preservation. Consequently, many heritage temples with more than a hundred years of history have been renovated by replacing traditional materials with concrete and steel framing, eradicating the temporal evidence of their close relationship with the society of the nineteenth century.

Given the efforts to preserve the architectural heritage within the UNESCO World Heritage Site of George Town, it is crucial to maintain the architectural attributes of these heritage temples. A framework that addresses religion, society, and architecture is necessary to strengthen the conservation significance of these temples and prevent them from undergoing contemporary interventions that alter their historical character.

This paper fills this gap by adopting structural functionalism, a theoretical approach from the sociology of religion, to address two dimensions: religious effects on society, and the attributes of temple architecture to fulfil the religious needs and social practice of the Chinese society of nineteenth-century George Town, Penang. This research demonstrates how temple architecture in nineteenth-century George Town embodied specific social and religious functions, establishing a framework that integrates architectural, social, and religious dimensions for analysing heritage temples.

This analytical framework will help evaluate other heritage temples in similar historical and cultural contexts. Findings from this study may guide future

conservation of these heritage temples, by showing how architecture served specific community needs. This will help preserve the physical evidence that points to the society of the nineteenth century.

## **2. Religion as A Social Phenomenon**

Religion is a social phenomenon that cannot be simply categorised or defined. Its true nature lies within the fundamental relationship between humans and the divine. This relationship forms the core of the religion-society interplay, leading to various doctrines, practices, and organisational structures.

Sociologists view religion as a social phenomenon; they are interested in examining its function in society rather than its specific beliefs or assertions of truth. This sociological perspective involves comprehending social structures, analysing societal functions, and investigating social changes [14-16] within the context of religion.

Sociologists tend to focus on the impact of religion on society involving various themes, such as social unity [17], economic and cultural progress [18], institutional roles [19], and interpersonal connections [20]. These theories offered important models for understanding the mutual impact between religious practices and social factors.

The social aspects of religion greatly influence societal values and norms. According to Dai and Peng [21], religion is a societal structure based on faith in supernatural forces. Yang suggests that religion connects essential elements of human existence via its beliefs, rituals, and organisational formations [22]. Beyond personal faith, religion also unifies society by promoting a sense of community and shared beliefs, shaping and structuring social systems.

### **2.1. Religion as a functional element of society**

Structural functionalism offers a distinctive perspective for understanding society as a system with interconnected parts, where each subsystem plays a vital role in maintaining the overall social organism. Drawing parallels between social structures and physical organisms [23], this theoretical approach views social institutions, including religion, as integral to societal functioning and cohesion.

Emile Durkheim, an influential figure in the development of structural functionalism, argued that religion is not merely a set of beliefs, but a profound social phenomenon that reflects and shapes societal structures and needs [17]. He emphasised how religious practices and beliefs contribute to developing a shared collective consciousness that fosters social solidarity [24].

This perspective underscores the importance of examining religion within its specific cultural context. Researchers must analyse the broader social organisation to comprehend how religion functions within a particular culture. This analytical approach allows a better understanding of how religious practices interact with and influence other social institutions. The functional role of religion can vary significantly across different societies, making contextual analysis crucial.

Structural functionalism demonstrates that individual agents' functions are constrained by the broader social system, with structure fundamentally dictating function [25]. When religion becomes a collective practice, it becomes associated with specific functions contributing to social cohesion and stability. However, these

functions manifest differently in various cultures. It is, therefore, crucial to examine the unique structural elements of each society to understand the functional role of religion within the society. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of how religious practices shape and are shaped by social norms, values, and behaviours. It reveals religion not as an isolated phenomenon, but as a dynamic, integral part of the social system.

## **2.2. Religion and society in traditional Chinese culture**

The distinct characteristics of traditional Chinese religion and society make it unsuitable to apply Western sociological perspectives directly. A customised framework is necessary for studying the connection between traditional Chinese religion and its corresponding society.

In contrast to Western religions with clear origins and founders, traditional Chinese religions are characterised by their syncretic nature and deep roots in folk religion. Folk religion, which represents the everyday spiritual practices of common people, focuses on practical life concerns rather than formal religious doctrine, primarily addressing daily challenges and the pursuit of success [26]. As the foundation of traditional Chinese religious practice, folk religion became interwoven with Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. This integration is evident in various practices: ancestral veneration and worship rituals in Confucianism, spirit and deity worship in Taoism and miracle narratives in early Buddhist propagation - all of which originated from folk religious traditions.

According to Yang, Chinese society is influenced by a "diffused religion" that lacks centralised institutions, integration into daily life, syncretism and diversity, an emphasis on ancestor veneration, and a focus on practical concerns [22]. The diffuse nature of this religion is connected to the folk religious worldview, wherein individuals perceive life events as relational, requiring efforts to appease and influence deities, spirits, and ancestors through offerings to pursue personal interests [26]. Consequently, religious beliefs and practices are intricately woven into various dimensions of social and cultural life, encompassing family rituals, social interactions, cultural expressions, and ethical values.

Li further elaborates on this by highlighting that the relationship between humans and divinity in Chinese culture differs greatly from the dualistic paradigm found in Western religions [27]. The Chinese model focuses on relationships between people, with social order constructed primarily through blood ties and geographical associations. The foundation of the social structure was the patriarchal system, mediated by religious practices such as ancestor worship [21].

The focus on blood ties and ancestor worship became crucial in the social system, firmly establishing itself in Chinese traditions and impacting the growth of Chinese spirituality [28]. This traditional framework of intertwined religion and social structure persisted from the Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BCE), only experiencing substantial changes during China's modernisation in the twentieth century. This model spread to Southeast Asia with migration and underwent adaptation, thus expanding its influence beyond borders.

## **2.3. The fusion of religion and society: Chinese religious practices in nineteenth-century George Town, Penang**

Deriving from the traditional Chinese religious framework, Chinese religious practices in nineteenth-century George Town tend to focus on three key aspects: ancestor worship, folk beliefs, and communal worship. These practices were instrumental in influencing the social and cultural landscape of the Chinese community.

Cho highlights the strong foundation of ancestor worship and folk beliefs in the spiritual practices of Malayan Chinese [29]. The community diligently maintained burial sites as sacred spaces, believing that they reinforced connections among family members and subsequently strengthened the patriarchal system.

Communal worship emerged as another critical dimension of traditional Chinese religious traditions in Malaya [11]. Centred around patron gods, this worship has been crucial to Chinese society and religion for centuries. Chinese migrants in Malaya continued this tradition, discovering a sense of belonging, support, and identity. Communal temples were essential in coordinating religious ceremonies, expressing beliefs, and representing Chinese cultural ideals and desires for harmony and prosperity.

Chinese religious practices in nineteenth-century George Town were not merely a direct transfer from China's original folk religion framework. Instead, they underwent localisation through adaptation, addition, and expansion to suit the contexts of nineteenth-century George Town. DeBernardi views this localisation as a means of identity maintenance, providing a sense of shared ancestry through myths, symbols, values, and practices that created a unique identity for the migrant Chinese society [30]. His observations reveal how folk religion practices in George Town provided a structural framework for the community, involving symbolic interpretation of reality, ritual performance as a response to understanding the world and using lunar festival cycles to coordinate community activities.

This localisation manifested prominently in daily life, with DeBernardi noting the inclusive nature of religious worship, characterised by diverse deities and large-scale public rituals throughout George Town [30]. These occasions often resembled carnivals, blurring the boundary between sacred and profane - a fundamental idea in Western religion [17] but less distinct in Chinese tradition.

Religious temples became central to this dynamic religious landscape, serving multiple functions as community centres, tribunals, and spaces for social interaction [11]. A distinction must be made between religious temples and ancestral temples in Chinese architecture. While both represent sacred spaces within Chinese culture, ancestral temples (祠堂 *ci tang*) are exclusive for clan members to perform ancestor worship. In contrast, religious temples (神廟 *shen miao*) are public venues for deity worship. This functional distinction reflects important aspects of Chinese social structure. Therefore, the term "traditional Chinese religious temples" in this study specifically refers to public temples built in the nineteenth century dedicated to deity worship and religious activities.

Although these findings provide the groundwork for understanding traditional Chinese religious practices in George Town, further research is required to investigate how traditional Chinese religious temples accommodated and facilitated various social practices. This will enable us to truly understand the significance of these temples and guide initiatives for their preservation.

### 3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach grounded in the theoretical framework of structural functionalism to examine the social functions of traditional Chinese religious temples in nineteenth-century George Town, Penang. It focuses on two aspects: (1) the social structure and its corresponding religious functions, and (2) the architectural attributes of traditional Chinese religious temples that correspond to these religious functions.

The study seeks to answer the research questions: (1) how did traditional Chinese religious beliefs and practices shape social structures and interactions within the migrant Chinese community in nineteenth-century George Town? (2) how did the architecture of traditional Chinese religious temples in George Town reflect the social, religious, and cultural practices of the migrant Chinese community?

The first research question explores the interplay between religious practices and social organisations, investigating how spiritual beliefs contribute to community formation, social hierarchies, and interpersonal relationships in Chinese society. The second research question examines the physical manifestation of religious and cultural practices in temple architecture, seeking to understand how architectural attributes facilitated religious functions, social gatherings, and cultural expressions.

Data collection included a focused review of publications and site observation, incorporating two analytical components: social practice analysis and architectural attribute analysis. The social practice analysis examines the influence of traditional Chinese religious practices on the social organisation and relations of the migrant Chinese community. It focuses on worship and rituals, examining religious ceremonies, festivals, and temple worship practices. This will lead to understanding how these religious activities have built relationships within the community, reinforced cultural identity and maintained social order in Chinese society.

The architectural attributes analysis seeks to understand how architectural features of traditional Chinese religious temples in George Town reflect the social, religious, and cultural practices of the migrant Chinese community. This analysis focuses on spatial configuration and the architectural language with symbolic elements and ornamentation that communicate cultural and religious meanings.

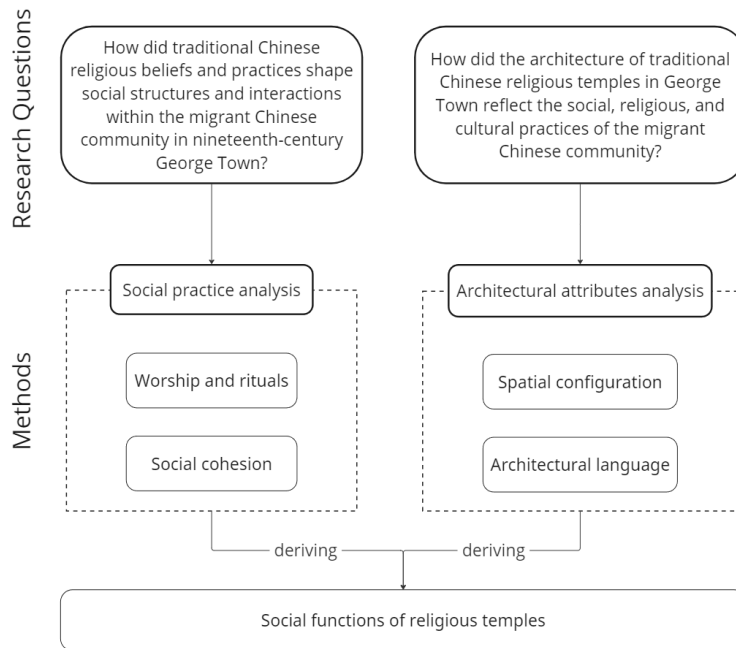
The data was analysed using a structural-functionalist perspective to understand how the temples' social practices and architectural features impacted different social functions. This included identifying patterns in religious practices and their corresponding spatial arrangements, exploring how architectural features facilitated particular social and religious activities, and evaluating the temples' significance in maintaining social hierarchies, resolving disputes, and safeguarding cultural traditions.

This research focused on traditional Chinese religious temples located within the core zone of the George Town UNESCO World Heritage Site, particularly those built in the nineteenth century. However, several additional temples within the buffer zone and one outside were included to provide a broader understanding. These temples were selected based on their historical significance and proximity to the heritage site.

The traditional Chinese religious temples that have been identified are as follows: (1) Hock Teik Cheng Sin Temple (福德正神廟) at Armenian Street, (2) Thai Pak Koong Temple (福德祠) at King Street, (3) Seng Hong Beow Temple (

城隍廟) at Bridge Street, (4) Kong Hock Keong Temple (廣福宮) at Pitt Street, (5) Loo Pun Hong (魯班行) at Love Lane, (6) Penang Ta Kam Hong (庇能打金行胡靖古廟) at Muntri Street, (7) Thean Hou Temple (天后宮) at Muntri Street, (8) Wu Di Temple (武帝廟) at King Street.

As illustrated in Fig. 1, this study seeks to develop a thorough understanding of the social functions of religious temples by combining insights from social practice analysis and architectural attribute analysis. This approach allows us to explore the role of these temples in maintaining the stability, unity, and cultural heritage of the Chinese migrant community in nineteenth-century George Town, which aligns with the core principles of structural functionalism.



**Fig. 1. Research framework.**

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Social structure of the nineteenth-century Chinese society in George Town, Penang

The social structure of the Chinese community in nineteenth-century George Town, Penang, was shaped by lineage or clan distinctions, linguistic differences, guilds and trade associations, and rivalry between dialect groups.

Lineage or clan distinctions based on geographical origin were important in organising Chinese society. Migrants from different parts of mainland China, such as southern Fujian, Guangdong, Chaozhou and other regions, often formed clan associations. Kuhn argues that the clan is a powerful social unit utilising kinship, dialect groups, regions, and rituals to achieve political and economic advancement

[31]. These clan associations provided a sense of belonging, mutual support and a platform for collective action [32].

Linguistic differences also influenced the social alignment of members of the Chinese population. The migrants spoke mainly Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka and Teochew dialects, forming distinct dialect-based groups. This is evident in the social structure demarcated by the dialect groups, with Hokkiens forming the largest proportion of the population, followed by Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka and Hainanese [33]. These factions often competed for resources and social status, occasionally leading to conflict and tension [34].

Guilds and trade associations played a crucial role in the Chinese social structure. These associations were usually formed along dialect lines and were professional associations for various trades and professions. They provided economic protection, regulated trade, and offered mutual support [35]. These institutions were fundamental to the economic survival of their members and the broader Chinese community, in response to the challenging economic environment of colonial Penang.

The rivalry between the two main dialect groups, Hokkien and the combined Cantonese, Hakka and Teochew groups, was a prominent social phenomenon. Being the majority, the Hokkiens, often held a dominant position in the political and economic domains. The Penang Riot of 1867 epitomised these tensions, illustrating the profound impact of inter-group conflict on social and economic stability [34]. To address these tensions and maintain social order, the Kong Hock Keong Temple was established in 1800 by the southern Fujian and Guangdong Chinese. This temple served as a platform for mediating disputes and promoting community cohesion [36].

Vaughan notes that during the early nineteenth century, Cantonese clan organisations were formed by people from the same geographical region. Southern Fujian clan groups were mostly lineage-based, originating from the same surname village in their homeland [37]. Some of these surname groups accumulated wealth and power. They flourished in the mid-nineteenth century, with Khoo, Lim, Cheah, Yeoh, and Tan clans, commonly known as the Big Five, dominating Penang's economic, political, and social domains [38].

As more clansmen arrived in George Town, and with sufficient economic power, these clan organisations established their respective ancestral temples. Song posits that this behaviour symbolised clan identity reconstruction and ultimately strengthened cohesion among clansmen [39]. These temples played a crucial role in preserving clan traditions, promoting solidarity among clan members, and providing a place for ancestral worship. They also contributed to establishing religious temples through donations and serving on the committee board [36].

Despite these differences and rivalries, the Chinese community in George Town shared common cultural values and social practices, rooted in folk religion, ancestor veneration, and deity worship. These collective values helped to foster a sense of cultural identity and cohesion among the diverse Chinese population.

## **4.2. Architecture of the traditional Chinese religious temples**

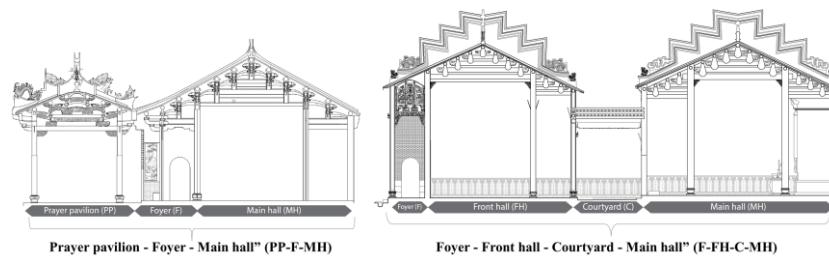
### **4.2.1. Spatial configuration**



Traditional Chinese religious temples in George Town were primarily constructed in the nineteenth century, reflecting the architectural style of the late Qing dynasty (1644-1912). These temples often exhibit common spatial configuration characteristics, such as the interplay of building blocks and courtyards, designed to reflect a hierarchy of space and functions with a specific approach to spatial configuration.

Two common configuration types can be found in George Town. The first type features a prayer pavilion directly connected to the foyer, which serves as the entrance. This space leads to the main hall where the deities' altar is located, and worship activities occur. The second type begins with the foyer connecting to the front hall, often lower in height than the subsequent main hall, indicating its lower hierarchical importance. A courtyard is typically placed between the building blocks and connects to the main hall, where the primary deities' altar is located. The main hall is usually the tallest building, emphasising its highest hierarchical significance.

This study adopts the spatial name convention introduced by Koh and Lim which distinguishes between the two configuration types as shown in Fig. 2: “prayer pavilion - foyer - main hall” (PP-F-MH) and “foyer - front hall - courtyard - main hall” (F-FH-C-MH) [40]. While most temples in the study adhere to the F-FH-C-MH configuration, two exceptions emerge: the Hock Teik Cheng Sin Temple and Seng Hong Beow Temple.



**Fig. 2. Temple section views showing typical spatial configurations of PP-F-MH (left) and F-FH-C-MH (right), adapted from [40].**

#### 4.2.2. Architectural language

Architectural language and natural language share similarities in using organised components to convey meaning [41]. The analogies between the two are made more implicitly through the signification process in semiotics [42-46].

Architectural language is a sign system that communicates cultural values through a defined structure [47]. This reflects the human mind's ability to abstract and understand the environment, leading to the generation of meanings [48]. Just as spoken language manifests identity and fosters cohesion among communities with a common cultural circle [49], architectural language serves a similar function. Architectural styles can signify the cultural identity of the associated society, creating a visual representation of shared heritage and values.

Common components of architectural language found in traditional Chinese religious temples in George Town include façade design, timber frame structure, and ornamentations [40]. These elements often signify specific geographical origins, particularly from southern Fujian and Guangdong. They also correspond to the linguistic component of the dialect spoken in these geographical locations. Based on

field investigations, the architectural language of the temples primarily reflects Southern Fujian, Cantonese, and Hakka origins, as shown in Fig. 3 and Table 1.



**Fig. 3. Typical architectural language representatives of (from left) Southern Fujian, Cantonese, and Hakka traditional Chinese religious temples.**

**Table 1. Classification of traditional Chinese religious temples in George Town by architectural language.**

<b>Southern Fujian</b>	<b>Cantonese</b>	<b>Hakka</b>
Hock Teik Cheng Sin Temple	Loo Pun Hong	Thai Pak Koong Temple
Seng Hong Beow Temple	Penang Ta Kam Hong	
Kong Hock Keong Temple	Thean Hou Temple	
	Wu Di Temple	

### 4.3. Social functions of the traditional Chinese religious temples

Findings from the study reveal that the traditional Chinese religious temples serve three primary social functions: a sacred space for spiritual practices, a public space for community interaction, and a symbol of order and control within the social structure. These functions are reflected in the architectural attributes of the temples.

#### 4.3.1. Sacred spaces: Temples as havens of spirituality

Traditional Chinese religious temples serve as focal points of religious activity and shape traditional villages and settlements' social, cultural, and religious landscapes. These temples reflect deep-rooted local beliefs and foster community cooperation through rituals and maintenance [50].

Lagerwey introduces the concept of a "temple-centric society", highlighting the central role of traditional Chinese religious temples in shaping community structures and social interactions [51]. Temple networks and festivals further underscore their significance in strengthening community bonds and promoting religious and cultural practices.

Traditional Chinese religious temples also serve as venues for organising and facilitating community-wide religious rituals and celebrations. As Vaughan notes, the Chinese lunar calendar dictates the timing of numerous festivals and celebrations, often centring around temples [2]. These events bring the community together to invoke blessings from deities [30] and demonstrate the temples' role as sacred spaces that accommodate religious rituals and reflect the community's spirituality.

The architecture of the traditional Chinese religious temples also contributes to creating a sacred atmosphere. Qin and Song suggest that religious architectural spaces are emotionally and psychologically evocative, employing symbolic

language to connect with a higher reality [52]. Bahauddin et al. postulate that sacred spaces contain symbolic meaning that creates a unique sense of place [53].

Traditional Chinese religious temples often feature timber frame construction, contributing to a sense of sacredness [54]. Intricate ornamentation, including wooden carvings, stucco sculpting, granite carvings, and cut-and-paste porcelain shards (*jian nian* 剪黏), depicting plants, auspicious creatures, and images of deities offers symbolic narratives of the spiritual realm.

Combining human-scale design, intricate carvings, and visually rich ornamentation creates a spiritual ambience. These attributes collectively transform temples into significant sacred spaces that evoke a profound sense of the divine and facilitate a deeper connection between worshippers and their spiritual beliefs.

#### 4.3.2. Community living: Temples as public spaces

Traditional Chinese villages in Mainland China serve as important cultural landscapes, supporting the agricultural economy and preserving social structures. These villages are often lineage-based, with groups sharing the same surname forming the core population. This pattern is particularly prevalent in southeastern China [55], reflecting the origins of many Chinese migrants to Southeast Asia.

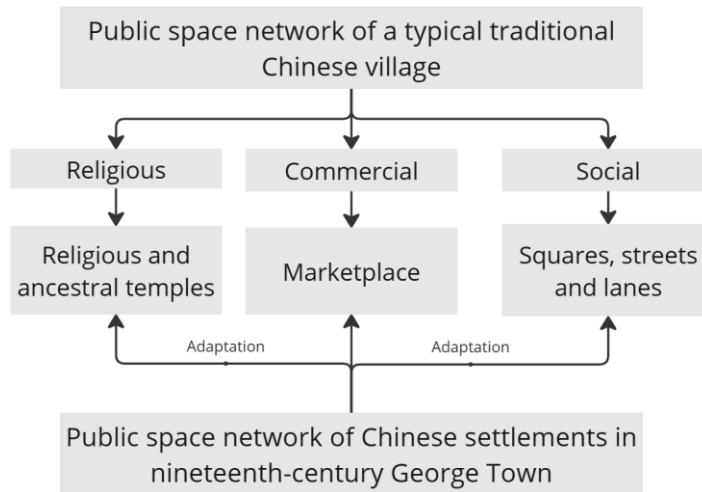
Within these villages, religious temples play a crucial role. Freedman and Knapp observed the prevalence of temples dedicated to *tudigong* (土地公) [55, 56], the earth god, indicating that religious structures were integral to traditional Chinese village composition. These temples and other public spaces form essential components supporting villagers' daily lives. Such spaces serve various needs, including commercial activities (marketplaces), spiritual practices (religious and ancestral temples), and social gathering and circulation (squares, streets, and lanes) [57].

As Chinese migrants settled in Southeast Asia, they adapted their cultural practices to suit the urban setting of their new settlement. In nineteenth-century George Town, this adaptation is evident in the layout and function of traditional Chinese religious temples. These temples often feature adjacent squares for public gatherings, mirroring the setting of homeland traditional villages. Along with the traditional Chinese religious temples, clan ancestral temples, clan associations or *kongsis* were positioned alongside residential traditional Chinese shophouses, creating a network of interconnected community spaces. Markets are also frequently located in close proximity. These buildings are interconnected through well-planned streets and lanes, creating a functional and integrated public space network (see Fig. 4).

The temples serve as vital public gathering spaces, particularly during celebrations of deities' birthdays or important religious rituals. Their spatial configuration, characterised by courtyards and a hierarchical arrangement of spaces, efficiently directs human circulation and accommodates various activities. Many temples incorporate an open courtyard in front of the main hall, a versatile space that can be used as a venue for religious rituals, community events, and social gatherings. This multifunctionality further enhances their role as public spaces.

Some temples, like Seng Hong Beow Temple and Kong Hock Keong Temple, feature open courtyards that connect to the main streets. These spaces served as community gathering areas for commercial activities and social interaction. Hock

Teik Cheng Sin Temple has an inner open courtyard with a theatre stage that accommodates audiences for opera performances during deity birthday celebrations. In addition to the religious functions, the performance entertained the public and conveyed moral lessons, reinforcing the temple's role in cultural education and preservation.



**Fig. 4. Public space network of Chinese settlements in nineteenth-century George Town, adapted from [57].**

#### 4.3.3. Symbolic power and order: Temples and social control

In traditional Chinese villages, lineage groups typically established and managed religious temples [51, 55]. This pattern persisted in nineteenth-century George Town, where major religious temples were primarily controlled by Southern Fujian clan groups, demonstrating their influence and power within the local community [5].

The social structure of nineteenth-century George Town was demarcated by dialect groups, with Southern Fujianese being the dominant group compared to the combined Cantonese, Hakka, and Teochew groups. Influential Southern Fujian clan groups, particularly the *Big Five*, held prominent positions on the board of committees of major temples like Kong Hock Keong Temple. The Hokkien Kongsì, affiliated with the *Big Five*, extended its control to other Southern Fujian-based temples and established a presence within the Hock Teck Cheng Sin Temple. This association with religious institutions demonstrated these clan groups' symbolic power and control within the community.

In addition to their religious role, traditional Chinese religious temples also served multiple social functions. They provided platforms for resolving disputes and conflicts, underlining their importance as agents of social control. The Kong Hock Keong Temple, which both Hokkien-speaking and Cantonese-speaking groups co-founded, exemplified this mediating function [11, 36]. This dual function as spiritual centres and social mediators is an example of how traditional Chinese religious temples manifest the symbolic power of clan groups, while at the same time contributing to the maintenance of social order and the resolution of tensions

within the community. Guild-based religious temples, such as Loo Pun Hong and Penang Ta Kam Hong, which were dedicated to the professions of carpentry and blacksmithing respectively, offered support to members of the guilds. These temples combined religious practices with professional networks and provided a sense of community and mutual support.

The symbolic power of temples also reflected the identity of the associated groups. This was often expressed through architectural language. For example, the Kong Hock Keong Temple, the Hock Teck Cheng Sin Temple and the Seng Hong Beow Temple exhibit the Southern Fujian architectural style. The architectural language is a visual symbol of the dominance and authority of the Southern Fujian dialect groups, which are closely associated with the *Big Five*.

It is noteworthy that within George Town there are often clusters of temples of the same architectural style. This clustering reflects the spatial manifestation of the symbolic power and influence of the social groups associated with these temples. The architectural language adopted by the temples within these clusters reinforces the identity of the dominant dialect group. It is also a visual delineation of their domain of influence within the urban landscape.

## 5. Discussions

Traditional Chinese religious temples in George Town not only preserved the spiritual practices of the migrant community but also adapted to the urban environment of George Town. This reflects the resilience and adaptability of Chinese cultural practices in a new urban setting. Table 2 demonstrates the multifaceted roles of these temples, serving as sacred spaces, public spaces, and symbols of power and social order within the community, revealing a complex interplay between social practices and architectural attributes.

The temples' primary function as sacred spaces for religious rituals and festivals is integrated with other social roles. Their architectural features, particularly the open courtyards, facilitate this by providing versatile spaces for both religious ceremonies and various public events. Such integration exemplifies how the built environment responds and adjusts to social requirements. Using timber materials and ornamental narratives creates a visually rich and spiritually evocative sacred space. At the same time, symbolic communication through architectural language also signifies social ideals, geographical origin, and dialect group affiliations. This underscores the temples' role in preserving and expressing cultural identity.

The temples' function as a public space through public gatherings allows for social interaction. Drawing on common faith and dialect also helps to promote social cohesion. These spaces facilitate various social practices, provide appropriate settings for diverse community activities, and strengthen social connections. Adaptability emerged as a key characteristic of these temple spaces, particularly evident in the design of open courtyards. These flexible spaces allowed for smooth transitions between sacred rituals and public events, supporting a diverse array of social practices. This architectural adaptability was crucial in enabling the temples to remain relevant and central to community life across various contexts and changing times.

The temples also reflected and reinforced the community's existing social structures and hierarchies. The interplay between social structure, religious

institutions, and architectural expression reveals complex power, identity, and community organisation dynamics. Traditional Chinese religious temples served as physical embodiments of the social hierarchy and cultural identity of the Chinese migrant community. The control of these spaces by specific lineage groups and the clustering of buildings sharing similar architectural styles demonstrated how architecture could express social and political dynamics. These physical manifestations embedded power structures into the urban landscape, providing a tangible reflection of the community's social organisation.

**Table 2. Social functions of traditional Chinese religious temples in George Town.**

Analysis	Sacred space	Public space	Symbolic power and social order
<b>Social practice</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Religious rituals and festival celebration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Part of the public space network of the urban setting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Established and controlled by lineage groups</li> </ul>
<b>Architectural attributes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evocative effect through the timber building material</li> <li>Visual experience of symbolic narratives through ornamentation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Public gathering spaces within the temple</li> <li>Open courtyard as a venue for various public events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Architectural language indicating specific geographical origin or dialect group</li> <li>Clustering of buildings with the same architectural language</li> </ul>

## 6. Future Research Directions

Future research may expand the historical focus to contemporary implications, including exploring the changing functions and meanings of Chinese religious temples in George Town. This may involve analysing how temples' social and religious functions have evolved from the nineteenth century to the present and comparing and contrasting historical and contemporary uses of temples.

Furthermore, examining how the architectural features of temples have been adapted or modified to accommodate changing needs and practices may be significant. A comparative analysis involving layout, symbols, materials, structure, architectural elements, etc., may contribute to assessing how contemporary interventions to these temples have impacted the preservation of their historical integrity.

## 7. Conclusion

Findings from this study reveal a strong interdependence between social practices and architectural attributes of traditional Chinese religious temples in nineteenth-century George Town. These temples adapted to serve religious and communal functions within the urban context, reflecting the resilience and adaptability of Chinese cultural practices in a new setting.

The research contributes significantly by developing a comprehensive analytical framework integrating social, religious, and architectural dimensions. This framework enables the evaluation of the historical significance of nineteenth-century traditional Chinese religious temples by capturing the intricate relationships between social structures, power dynamics, and religious practices of that period. This integrated approach allows for more accurate assessments of architectural significance, revealing how temple architecture reflected and facilitated community needs and cultural expression. Notably, this analytical framework can be applied to investigate heritage temples in similar historical and cultural contexts across other locations.

As these temples serve as significant historical evidence that illustrates the social realities of Chinese society in nineteenth-century George Town, preserving their architectural attributes becomes necessary to protect their historical and cultural integrity. The findings may offer insights for scholars, conservationists, and policymakers, demonstrating how architectural features directly correlate with historical social practices and religious functions. This understanding enables more informed conservation strategies that preserve physical structures and their embedded cultural meanings, underscoring the importance of integrating architectural, social, and cultural perspectives in developing a holistic knowledge of our heritage.

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