

Article

Recontextualizing Nanyang Buddhism Based on the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si

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Abstract

This study examined the recontextualization of Nanyang Buddhism and its practices at the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si, considering their adaptation to the requirements of contemporary urban communities in China and Southeast Asia, as well as local cultural values. This research employed historical methodologies alongside a qualitative framework that included semi-structured interviews. This investigation analyzed the recontextualization of Nanyang Buddhism by conducting a textual analysis of the Lankavatara Sutra and Avatamsaka Sutra, which was further supported by interviews with nine participants which included senior monks, scholars, and members of the Chinese diaspora in Guangzhou, South China; Malaysia; and Singapore. The results revealed that the Guangxiao Si plays a strategic role in the adaptation of Mahāyāna Buddhism to meet the social and spiritual needs of the Chinese diaspora community by integrating spiritual teachings with local cultural practices. This process illustrates Buddhism's adaptability to evolving socio-economic conditions and highlights the significance of temples in influencing the spiritual identity of the Chinese community in Southeast Asia. We recommend that other researchers compare the recontextualization processes of Buddhism in Southeast Asia and analyze the role of the Guangxiao Si in cultural diplomacy and international relations.

Keywords: Nanyang Buddhism; Guangzhou Guangxiao Si; recontextualization; Chinese diaspora community; cultural adaptation



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1. Introduction

The Guangzhou Guangxiao Si is a historically significant temple in Southern China and has been instrumental in the dissemination of Buddhism to Southeast Asia since the Tang Dynasty (Ebrey 2022). This temple established itself as a focal point for the transformation of Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings and practices. It served as a significant transit point for priests traveling south via maritime routes (Sen 2014; Shinde 2025), thereby establishing a strong foundation for the influence of Mahāyāna Buddhism in Southeast Asia, particularly in regions such as the Malay Peninsula and Srivijaya (Lin 2023; Sen 2019). This result confirms Mecci's (2004) observation, which found that the dissemination of Buddhism through the Guangxiao Si incorporated theological dimensions and Buddhist cultural and artistic practices. Although numerous studies have investigated the role of the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si and maritime routes in the dissemination of Buddhism, these investigations

tended to concentrate on historical analyses, were conducted outside of Nanyang Buddhism in Southeast Asia and failed in adequately integrating the modern socio-political scene and multicultural interactions (Kuah 2019; Yü 2001).

Chia (2020) introduces and elaborates on the concept of “South China Sea Buddhism,” which is translated as “Nanyang Buddhism” (南洋佛教) in the official Chinese edition of *Monks in Motion*, which refers to the unique expressions of Buddhism that have developed in Southeast Asian regions. For instance, Southeast Asian Buddhism, or “Theravāda Buddhism,” is a dominant religion in Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. Whereas, Vietnamese Buddhism and most of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore are Mahāyāna Buddhism. This concept encompasses the diverse practices, beliefs, and adaptations of Buddhism as it interacts with local cultures, historical events, and socio-political dynamics. Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism have a similar lesson and objective, while in the religious ceremonies they are different. Mahāyāna explains a lot of religious ceremonies, while the religious ceremonies are quite simple in the Theravāda. Furthermore, Theravāda Buddhism is characterized by its syncretic nature, where Mahāyāna teachings are blended with local customs, resulting in a rich tapestry of religious expression that reflects the identities of the Chinese diaspora in the Southeast Asia region.

The evolution of local Buddhism in Southeast Asia was significantly influenced by the rituals that originated from Buddhist temples (W. Li 2023; Ray 2014). Furthermore, Wang et al. (2024) found that the adaptation of Buddhist teachings from the Guangxiao Si to local traditions, which includes the integration of traditional rituals into Buddhist practices and the incorporation of local languages into traditional Buddhist texts in Southeast Asia. The Guangxiao Si serves not only as a place of worship but also as a center for cultural exchange and education. The temple also hosts various activities, including meditation retreats, lectures, and community outreach programs, which foster a deeper understanding of Buddhist principles among both locals and visitors (Jinbo 2014). However, there are failures to provide insight due to the lingual and cultural differences between Mahayana and Theravada. The tradition of depicting the changes from Buddhist kingdoms to a modern Buddhist-majority state has been long and popular in Southeast Asia. It is the complicated situation facing the Chinese diaspora and the immigration of Chinese monks. The essential connection between Buddhism in Southeast Asia also plays an important role in Buddhism’s roles and efforts in the modernization of local Buddhism. It allows Buddhism to remain relevant in contemporary society.

This process illustrates the survival and flourishing of spiritual values through re-contextual strategic adaptation (Hu 2024). Hence, recontextualization is a mechanism for transmitting traditional values while simultaneously establishing new relevance within a dynamic social context, particularly in sustaining the relationship between Nanyang Buddhism and its community (Chumkhot 2024; Zhang et al. 2024). It underscores the necessity of reevaluating the relationship between religious centers like Guangxiao Si and the dissemination of Buddhism to Nanyang, including highlighting Buddhism’s adaptation within Southeast Asia’s socio-cultural context. Using both historical and modern studies as well as interviews, this study investigated the relevance of the Guangxiao Si in the adaptation of Buddhist teachings and practices inside the Nanyang region as well as the consequences of this evolution on local Buddhist identities. This engagement is crucial in a rapidly globalizing world, where the values of compassion, mindfulness, and ethical living resonate with many seeking spiritual guidance.

Guangxiao Si plays a pivotal role in preserving and disseminating Buddhist art and literature, contributing to the cultural identity of the region. Hence, the temple remains relevant and influential, ensuring that the teachings of Buddhism continue to inspire and guide future generations towards embracing contemporary issues such as environmental

sustainability and social justice. A Buddhist lens also exemplifies and facilitates the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity in the dissemination of Buddhism (Buan 2021; Hu 2024; Shinde 2025). It fosters a deeper understanding of Buddhist principles among diverse audiences towards hosting meditation retreats, lectures, and community outreach programs. The Buddhist teachings continue to inspire and guide individuals in addressing the complexities of modern life by exemplifying the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. It has an essential role in a globalized world, where individuals seek spiritual guidance that resonates with their lived experiences.

The majority of the Chinese communities in maritime Southeast Asia are believers in Mahayana, which is commonly seen as an extension of Chinese Buddhism instead of a domestic religion of Southeast Asia. It became an obstacle for scholars of the Theravada tradition in Southeast Asia due to substantial linguistic and cultural differences between Mahayana and Theravada (Dean 2018; Yan et al. 2020; Zhu 2024). Furthermore, the sensitive and underprivileged Chinese communities' status is a crucial factor in influencing religious issues. Unfortunately, some studies focus more on Theravada Buddhism in mainland Southeast Asia than on Mahayana Buddhism (Chia 2020; Nelson 2020). Hence, the transformation of Buddhist practices in response to modern challenges, such as globalization and environmental concerns, is crucial to investigate without leaving out the historical migrations of monks from China to Southeast Asian regions.

RQ 1: What does the recontextualization of Nanyang Buddhism's teachings and practices to local cultural values among urban communities in China and Southeast Asia?

RQ 2: How does the recontextualization of Buddhist teachings and practices contribute to the Chinese diaspora community in Southeast Asia?

RQ 3: How do the dynamics of socio-political and cross-cultural interactions influence the transformation of the rituals and doctrines of Nanyang Buddhism?

2. Literature Review

Defining Recontextualization Nanyang Buddhism and the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si

The evolution of Nanyang Buddhism can be distinctly understood through its first and second stages, which highlight significant differences in historical context, cultural integration, community engagement, and theological development (Chia 2020, 2021). In the first stage, Nanyang Buddhism emerged primarily as Chinese immigrants settled in Southeast Asia during the 19th and early 20th centuries, bringing with them their religious beliefs and practices (Lin 2023; Sen 2014; Yan et al. 2020). This initial phase was characterized by the establishment of temples and communities that closely mirrored those found in China, with a strong emphasis on preserving traditional Chinese Buddhist practices, rituals, and texts. The focus during this period was on maintaining cultural heritage and religious identity, as these immigrant communities sought to create spaces for worship that reflected their origins. In contrast, the second stage marked a significant shift as these communities became more established and began to engage more deeply with the local cultures (Srihamongkon 2022; Wang and Zhang 2023). This phase saw a greater emphasis on integrating local cultural elements into Buddhist practices, resulting in a unique form of Nanyang Buddhism that resonated with the indigenous populations. The blending of traditional Chinese Buddhism with local beliefs, rituals, and languages allowed for a more localized practice that was distinct from its Chinese roots.

Reconceptualization is a critical process for comprehending the transfer, transformation, and reapplication of discourse elements across various contexts, which can result in the emergence of new meanings pertinent to specific social situations (Dean 2022; W. Li 2023).

Fairclough (2013) posited that recontextualization involves the transformation of texts or social practices, necessitating modifications to local structures, values, and norms while retaining the original meaning. In this framework, speech both reflects and shapes social reality through dialectical interactions with social institutions, practices, and policies. Krzyżanowski (2018), Neather (2020), and Wodak and Fairclough (2010) underlined the need to know the geographical and temporal links in recontextualization. The history of the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si shows that the recontextualization of Nanyang Buddhism involved the modification of Buddhist ideas to fit the cultural and social values that were common in China and Southeast Asia. This is consistent with Mitsikopoulou (2007)'s glocalization theory, which holds that global elements should be modified to fit local settings to increase their relevance for local groups. Wang and Zhang (2023) and Zhang (2019) demonstrated that religious practices in the Guangxiao Si preserve traditional elements while incorporating modern innovations to address the needs of an expanding urban community.

Nanyang Buddhism, which refers to the practices and beliefs of Chinese communities in Southeast Asia has a significant contextualization role through its historical and cultural exchanges from the Guangxiao Si temples in Guangzhou (Yan et al. 2020). Recontextualization of the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si is vital for several reasons. As one of the oldest Buddhist temples in Guangzhou, it holds immense historical and cultural significance. However, in today's rapidly changing society, there is a pressing need to adapt its teachings and practices to resonate with contemporary audiences. This process not only preserves the temple's rich heritage but also ensures that its values and philosophies remain relevant. The recontextualizing of Guangxiao Si can bridge the gap between traditional beliefs and modern lifestyles, making Buddhism more accessible to younger generations. This approach encourages dialogue between different cultural perspectives, fostering a sense of community and understanding. Furthermore, it can enhance tourism, drawing visitors interested in both historical architecture and spiritual experiences.

This approach in transnational policy analysis aligns with Jessop's (2008) concept of recontextualization based on theoretical discourse and policy. Moreover, recontextualization can address contemporary issues such as mental health, environmental concerns, and social justice, aligning ancient wisdom with modern challenges. This dynamic interplay can revitalize the temple's role in society, transforming it into a center for learning, reflection, and community engagement. Ultimately, the recontextualization of Guangxiao Si is not just about preservation; it is about ensuring that its teachings continue to inspire and guide future generations. This is particularly relevant when Nanyang Buddhism encounters modernization and state policies that frequently attempt to alter religious practices for political ends (Laliberté 2011). This results in tension at the local level due to the homogeneity of traditional values and the heterogeneity that arises from cross-cultural interactions. Based on the principles of recontextualization, Bernstein (2004) posited that the Guangxiao Si serves as a center for spiritual transmission between China and Southeast Asia, thereby establishing a new form of Buddhism that functions as a cultural bridge. The success of recontextualization in the Guangxiao Si is upon a multifaceted process of cultural adaptation and negotiation, as well as on socio-political dynamics that encompass transnational, national, and local relationships (Karl et al. 2022).

Recontextualization Nanyang Buddhism and the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si are important to understand how Buddhist teachings and practices can be adapted to resonate with local cultural values and social norms to address contemporary issues, such as social justice, environmental sustainability, and interfaith dialogue. It offers practical solutions and ethical guidance that align with current societal needs. Furthermore, the recontextualization also can help bridge the historical roots of the tradition with its modern expressions and provides a comprehensive understanding of how historical migrations, cultural

exchanges, and socio-political dynamics have shaped the evolution of Buddhism in the region. Furthermore, the recontextualizing of Buddhist teachings can foster a more inclusive and engaged community that welcomes diverse interpretations and practices. This is a vital attracting for younger generations and ensuring the continuity of Buddhist traditions in a rapidly changing world. Hence, the recontextualization contributes to the academic discourse on Buddhism and it encourages scholars to explore the complexities and nuances of Nanyang Buddhism, leading to a more dynamic and multifaceted understanding of its role in Southeast Asia.

3. Methods

This investigation was conducted through a case analysis of the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si, a Buddhist temple that is both historically significant and prominent in Guangzhou, South China. This location was chosen for its historical significance as a center for the dissemination of Buddhism to Southeast Asia during the Tang Dynasty. This research utilized a qualitative design that included semi-structured interviews and a historical perspective from nine participants from China, Malaysia and Singapore. The qualitative data analysis involves a systematic process of gathering, organizing, and interpreting qualitative information, including interview transcriptions, audio recordings, field notes, and documents. Thematic analysis was chosen as the primary analytical method because it allows researchers to go beyond surface-level meanings, capturing both implicit and explicit themes within the data. This method facilitated the identification of key patterns, relationships, and emergent themes that align with the study's research objectives. The analysis process followed several structured phases. The first stage involved an in-depth review of all collected data, including transcribed interviews, focus group discussions, and observational notes (Cresswell and Cresswell 2022).

The historical study included the analysis of primary Buddhist texts, which is outlined in the instrument section. Furthermore, interviews were conducted to obtain the perspectives of major stakeholders, such as senior priests from the Guangxiao Si, Buddhist scholars, members of the Chinese diaspora, and local religious officials. This approach aimed to elucidate the socio-political dynamics and cross-cultural interactions influencing the adaptation of Buddhist doctrine and rituals. Interviews were conducted in person for participants in China and via the online Zoom platform for those located overseas. The interviews lasted for 30 to 45 min and were recorded with participant consent. The interview subjects were intentionally selected to reflect diverse perspectives. The participant checks to confirm the accuracy of theme interpretations and triangulation to compare findings across different data sources (interviews, focus groups, and observational data) to enhance data credibility and minimize researcher bias. The final phase involved synthesizing the categorized data into meaningful themes that directly addressed the research questions. Table 1 presents the background of the participants.

Table 1. Interview participants.

No	Initial Name	Identity
1	SM	Senior monk in the Guangxiao Si
2	LRZ	Local religious official in China
3	LRZh	Local religious official in China
4	AT	Academic
5	AL	Academic
6	CDS	Chinese diaspora community member in Southeast Asia (from Singapore)
7	CDM	Chinese diaspora community member in Southeast Asia (from Malaysia)
8	CDCTTE	Chinese diaspora community member in Southeast Asia (from China)
9	CDTF	Chinese diaspora community member in Southeast Asia (from China)

3.1. Instrument

The research instrument comprised interview guidelines and historical materials. The following texts were analyzed: (1) the Lankavatara Sutra, which had a significant influence on the Chan Buddhist tradition in China and is directly linked to the teachings of profound enlightenment that were the foundation of Chan's doctrines and were adopted in the Nanyang region; (2) the Avatamsaka Sutra, which contributed to the establishment of moral and cosmological values within a cross-cultural context; (3) historical records from the Tang Dynasty, which provided documentation on the development of the Guangxiao Si Monastery and its role in disseminating Buddhism to the Nanyang region; (4) Nanyang cross-cultural manuscripts, which detail the local adaptation of Buddhist teachings, as practiced by the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia; and (5) religious policies in China that govern the functions of institutions like the Guangxiao Si in terms of cultural diplomacy and the international propagation of Buddhist teachings.

Additionally, the interview guidelines encompassed four primary components: (1) the history and transformation of Buddhist teachings in the Guangxiao Si, (2) cross-cultural interactions' influence on rituals and doctrines, (3) the Guangxiao Si's relationship with the Chinese diaspora community, and (4) the influence of socio-political policy on the adaptation of Buddhism in Nanyang. The questions for the four components are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Interview questions.

Component	Interview Question
History and transformation	1. What is the significance of the Guangxiao Si in the dissemination of Buddhism from Nanyang to Southeast Asia?
	2. In both historical and contemporary contexts, what is the primary value that is conveyed through texts like the Lankavatara Sutra?
Ritual and doctrine	3. Are there any rituals in the Guangxiao Si that have been modified or adapted for local significance?
	4. How has the Buddhist doctrine of Nanyang evolved over time?
Relationship with diaspora	5. What is the connection between the Chinese diaspora community in Southeast Asia and the Guangxiao Si?
	6. In what ways does the diaspora community adapt the teachings of Buddhism to their local context?
Socio-political context	7. How does China's religious policy influence the practice of Buddhism in the Guangxiao Si?
	8. How do the dynamics of contemporary politics influence the expansion and adaptation of Buddhism in Nanyang?

3.2. Operationalizing Recontextualization of Nanyang Buddhism

Intertextuality and interdiscourse analyses of the texts were employed, forming a novel discursive combination. In this context, the Nanyang Buddhism tradition's words, phrases, and stories were preserved, modified, or adapted to new contexts, such as the local religious practices of the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si. Interdiscourse entails the integration of diverse discourses, genres, and styles to establish connections between new texts and their older, related counterparts (Wodak and Fairclough 2010). Nanyang Buddhism recontextualized traditional elements, including Theravāda values, Mahāyāna rituals, and local Buddhist teachings, into new narratives that hold social and political significance in Guangzhou.

The process of recontextualization was evident through a category analysis, which encompassed investigating the legitimacy of religious policy objectives, the typical characteristics of religious genres, and argumentation devices such as persuasive rhetoric and

topoi. These components were integrated to allow Buddhism Nanyang in the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si to adapt to the local context while maintaining its fundamental identity within the Southeast Asian Buddhist tradition (McGovern 2022). The four-level context model of the discourse-historical approach (DHA) could be utilized for further analysis to investigate the specific context of particular texts or situations, including the official documents of the Guangxiao Si (Wodak and Fairclough 2010). Intertextual and interdiscursive relationships exist between texts, exemplified by the connection between traditional narratives of Nanyang and local religious reform documents. Additionally, social variables and institutional frameworks can impact contextual situations, such as the influence of local governments on religious practices and wider socio-political and historical contexts, including the historical and cultural interactions between China and Southeast Asia.

3.3. Case Study: The Guangzhou Guangxiao Si's Recontextualization of Nanyang Buddhism

The Guangxiao Si is of paramount importance in the establishment of religious and cultural networks between China and Southeast Asia. It is imperative to establish the context for the selection of the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si case study before investigating it. In addition to its historical significance to Nanyang Buddhism, Guangzhou has been the primary port in the maritime trade network since the Tang Dynasty, providing a conduit for the dissemination of Buddhism from India to Southeast Asia and South China (Berkwitz 2012). In addition, the Guangxiao Si, which was founded in the fourth century, has become a significant center for the intellectual, spiritual, and cultural exchanges that are associated with the Nanyang Buddhist tradition. The selection of the Guangxiao Si was further bolstered by the socio-economic and political changes in Guangzhou that occurred after 1978. Economic reforms and openness have facilitated the resurgence of the local cultural identity and have facilitated cross-cultural interactions through religion (Shahar 1996; Weller 2018).

The Guangxiao Si has facilitated the adaptation of Nanyang Buddhism's religious practices to a contemporary context through recontextualization. The relevance of the Nanyang Buddhist tradition within the context of urban modern Guangzhou is preserved through initiatives such as community-based cultural conservation efforts, interfaith dialogue, and cross-cultural religious education. The analysis underscored the influence of state ideology on the interpretation of traditional elements, as well as the interaction between traditional and modern religious practices (Fairclough 2013). This investigation ascertained the manner in which the Guangxiao Si incorporates novel elements into conventional practices to confront the obstacles presented by urbanization and globalization, all the while maintaining the philosophical core of Nanyang Buddhism.

3.4. Historical Record of the Tang Dynasty

The governmental and social framework of the Tang Dynasty profoundly impacted the relationship between Buddhism in Nanyang and the Guangxiao Si. The Tang Dynasty is acknowledged as a period of substantial Buddhist advancement in China, notably characterized by the propagation of Chan doctrines at the Guangxiao Si Monastery. Political policies endorsing Buddhism, exemplified by imperial patronage of prominent monks, facilitated the Guangxiao Si in becoming an intellectual and spiritual hub that is intimately connected to the Nanyang region. The historical record of the Tang Dynasty indicates that the "Guangxiao Si not only became the center of development of Chan's teachings, but also played a role in building connections with the Buddhist community in Southeast Asia through the delivery of monks and holy texts" (Z. Wang 2003). This illustrates how the political structure of the Tang Dynasty facilitated cross-cultural interactions that contributed to the transformation of Buddhist rituals and doctrines.

The Tang Dynasty represents a cosmopolitan era characterized by maritime trade and cultural migration, facilitating cross-cultural interactions. Prominent ports such as Guangzhou functioned as focal centers for merchants, intellectuals, and monks from various civilizations. This socio-economic condition enabled the adaptation of Buddhist teachings to the local setting in Nanyang, as implemented by the Chinese diaspora. The Buddhist teachings of the Guangxiao Si were modified to suit the spiritual requirements and cultural background of the Southeast Asian populace. Nanyang's cross-cultural manuscript states that the "Chinese diaspora brings moral values from the Avatamsaka Sutra and integrates them with local traditions in the Nanyang region, resulting in unique Buddhist practices" (Chia 2020). This interaction demonstrated how the dynamic social structure of the pliers enhanced the transformation of Buddhist doctrine in the Guangxiao Si.

The dissemination of Buddhist teachings, particularly in a cross-cultural context. The government endorsed the dissemination of Buddhist teachings internationally. However, it restricted the autonomy of the monastery in domestic matters. This can be seen in the adaptation of Chan's teachings, which prioritize universal morality over exclusive rites. The Tang Dynasty's historical records indicate that the "Guangxiao Si exemplifies the integration of Buddhist teachings that are more inclusive and acceptable to multicultural communities in Nanyang" (Z. Wang 2003). The political structure of the Tang Dynasty was influenced by both the dissemination of Buddhism and the ritual adaptation and doctrinal developments at the Guangxiao Si.

4. Results

RQ 1: What does the recontextualization of Nanyang Buddhism's teachings and practices to local cultural values among urban communities in China and Southeast Asia?

The process of recontextualizing Nanyang Buddhism in the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si exemplifies the integration of Buddhist teachings with local cultural values and the requirements of contemporary urban communities in China and Southeast Asia. The Lankavatara Sutra provides teachings on profound enlightenment that form the foundation of the Chan tradition, which was subsequently adapted to the cultural context of Southeast Asia (K. Wang 2022). This teaching underpins the formation of spiritual practices among the Chinese diaspora that are pertinent to their daily lives in Southeast Asia towards instilling moral and cosmological values in cross-cultural societies.

This value facilitates the acceptance of Buddhism among diverse local cultural communities in the Nanyang region. The Guangxiao Si Monastery, as documented in Tang Dynasty historical records, emerged as the primary center for the dissemination of Buddhist teachings to the Nanyang region (Wu 2022). It serves as both a religious center and a cultural bridge between China and Southeast Asia, significantly connecting the Chinese diaspora with their spiritual tradition. The adaptation of Buddhist teachings within the Chinese diaspora community in Southeast Asia is exemplified by the Nanyang cross-cultural manuscript system. This shows how flexible Buddhism is in handling the social and financial needs of the nearby society. Furthermore, religious regulations in China helped to control establishments like the Guangxiao Si, enabling the global spread of Buddhist ideas and the support of cultural diplomacy (Madsen 2020).

This process of promoting cultural diplomacy and fostering cross-national understanding illustrates the dynamics of the homogenization of traditional Buddhist values and the heterogenization that results from cross-cultural interactions. It demonstrates that the Guangxiao Si functions as a symbol of the preservation of Buddhist tradition and a center for strategic religious innovation, addressing the needs of contemporary communities

in the context of social change. The interview results were consistent with the findings of historical research on this component:

“Guangxiao SI has a very important role in the spread of Buddhism to Nanyang and Southeast Asia, mainly because of its strategic position in Guangzhou, which is the center of trade and culture. Since the Tang Dynasty, Guangxiao SI has been an important place for meetings between various cultures and religious teachings, including Buddhism. At that time, this monastery not only functioned as a center of worship, but also as a place of education and spread of Buddhism. The monks who live in Guangxiao SI are active in spreading this teaching to areas outside of China, especially to Southeast Asia, through trade and trips abroad”. (SM)

“The Lankavatara Sutra has a very deep value in the teachings of Buddhism, especially in terms of inner enlightenment and understanding of higher reality. This silk teaches the importance of direct experience in achieving enlightenment, as well as emphasis on self-awareness and control of mind. This value is very relevant in a modern context, where many people feel alienated or trapped in material and worldly lives that quickly change. In the context of Buddhism recontextualization in Guangxiao Si, Lankavatara Sutra helps monks and people to understand that enlightenment is not only spiritual achievement but also a way of life that reflects inner peace and wisdom in facing the challenges of the times”. (SM)

The interview responses suggested that the Guangxiao Si is instrumental in the dissemination of Buddhist teachings from China to the Nanyang region, with a particular emphasis on Southeast Asia. The monastery is situated in Guangzhou, a cultural and commercial hub, and it functions as a nexus of Buddhist teachings and local cultural values. The interview’s exploration of the recontextualization of Buddhism in the Guangxiao Si illustrates the doctrine’s capacity to adjust to the changing conditions of the times. The concepts of the Lankavatara Sutra aim to address the challenges posed by urbanization and globalization, including the spiritual needs of metropolitan populations, economic strain, and social alienation.

RQ 2: How does the recontextualization of Buddhist teachings and practices contribute to the Chinese diaspora community in Southeast Asia?

The spiritual identity of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia has been greatly affected by the recontextualization of Buddhist teachings and practices at the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si. It underpinned the profound enlightenment that is achieved through inner comprehension, as this silk emphasizes. Therefore, form the cornerstone upon which the spiritual identity of the Chinese diaspora group develops. The Chinese people seek enlightenment in their daily lives, outside the boundaries of official instruction. This instruction manifests in spiritual and social practices that promote the development of stronger relationships with the local community while also integrating Buddhist teachings with the local culture in Southeast Asia. The historical records of the Tang Dynasty detail the growth of the Guangxiao Si Monastery and its importance in the spread of Buddhism to the Nanyang region.

The Guangxiao Si serves as a pivotal center for the propagation of Buddhist doctrines, especially within the framework of the overseas Chinese diaspora. This illustrates the monastery’s endeavor to adapt Buddhist teachings to the requirements and cultural context of Chinese society in Southeast Asia. This monastery represents the integration of traditional Buddhist teachings with local cultural values. It suggested that the Chinese community in Southeast Asia frequently integrates local cultural elements, such as art and music, into their Buddhist rituals to facilitate the assimilation of Buddhist teachings among the local population. This recontextualization profoundly impacts their spiritual identity

and strengthens their bond with the local culture, illustrating the fundamental role of Buddhist teachings in promoting the social and spiritual well-being of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia. The findings from interviews with members of the diaspora community further substantiated this component.

“Guangxiao Si is not just a monastery but a spiritual symbol that unites Chinese and Buddhist culture. Many of us have ancestors who were once connected to the teachings of this monastery. The traditions of ceremonies and rituals taught from Guangxiao Si are still maintained in our community, especially during the Vesak celebration and ancestral respect ceremony”. (CDS, Singapore)

“In Malaysia, the Chinese community also has a close relationship with Guangxiao Si. One way we strengthen this relationship is through a monk training program, which often involves senior monks from Guangxiao Si. They help us understand texts such as the Avatamsaka Sutra and the Lankavatara Sutra”. (CDM, Malaysia)

From interviews with members of the Chinese diaspora community in Singapore and Malaysia, it was found that the Guangxiao Si acts as a spiritual symbol that connects the diaspora community with Chinese Buddhist teachings, as well as a cultural center that maintains the Chinese identity of the diaspora. Further analysis of these data showed three main findings related to the recontextualization process of teachings and the formation of spiritual identity.

RQ 3: How do the dynamics of socio-political and cross-cultural interactions influence the transformation of the rituals and doctrines of Nanyang Buddhism?

Socio-political dynamics and cross-cultural connections greatly affect the way Buddhist rites and teachings change in Nanyang, especially at the Guangxiao Si in Guangzhou. The Chinese government policy regulating and overseeing religious practices is a primary factor influencing this transformation. Contemporary religious policies in China exhibit a growing openness, facilitating a more inclusive practice of Buddhism that is receptive to external cultural influences. Historical records of the Tang Dynasty indicate that “Buddhism in Guangxiao Si experienced significant adaptation, particularly in response to the needs of external society, amid the political and social changes that occurred. In particular, at the Guangxiao Si in Guangzhou, the Buddhist rites and teachings in Nanyang have evolved in response to socio-political dynamics and cross-cultural contacts. This interaction influences the teaching and practice of Buddhist doctrines by modifying the symbols, language, and local rituals to better align with the cultural context of Buddhists in the region.

Broader socio-political dynamics influence the transformation of the Buddhist doctrine in the Guangxiao Si. Political upheaval in China, including regime changes and alterations to religious policies, frequently necessitates modifications in the operational practices of this monastery, affecting both doctrinal instruction and ritual execution. The socio-political dynamics of nations hosting the Chinese diaspora minority impact the assimilation and evolution of Buddhist rites, leading to a fusion of ancient doctrines with flexible local cultural customs. This demonstrates the impact of socio-political dynamics and cross-cultural connections on the development of Buddhist rites and doctrines in Nanyang, which highlight the local context and the spiritual requirements of the populace.

Religious policies in China aim to ensure social harmony and political stability. We prioritize administrative supervision of all religious institutions, including Guangxiao Si. For example, certain rituals in the monastery must follow the guidelines set by the government, especially related to the implementation of public religious events. In addition, the teaching of the Buddhist doctrine must support national values such as the love of the motherland and social harmony. (LRZ, Local Religious Officials in China)

The current political dynamics emphasize the strengthening of cross-cultural relations and soft power diplomacy. Buddhism Nanyang, as one of the important branches of the Chinese Buddhist tradition, is an effective cultural diplomacy tool. The monk exchange program between Guangxiao Si and monasteries in Southeast Asia, such as Thailand and Singapore, is one example. However, this expansion remains closely monitored to ensure that the activity is not in conflict with the National Policy. (LRZh, Local Religious Officials in China)

The results of this interview strengthened the idea that policy interventions and socio-political dynamics forced the Guangxiao Si to adapt to a greater national context. This transformation reflects how state policy is the main driver of change in the practice of Buddhism.

5. Discussion

5.1. *Recontextualization Strategy of Nanyang Buddhism in the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si*

As a center of culture and economics, Guangzhou offers a strategic environment for the interaction of transnational religious movements, including the influence of Nanyang Buddhism. [Li and Wang \(2023\)](#) and [Zhu \(2024\)](#) highlighted that social and economic relevance is an important aspect in the spread of modern Buddhism, which is seen in the way Guangxiao Si integrates values such as spiritual development and inner peace with activities that support community empowerment, such as education, philanthropy, and interfaith dialogue. This finding was also supported by [Zhang et al. \(2024\)](#), who stated that temples in China, including Guangxiao Si, have increasingly adopted a contextual approach to ensure the sustainability of Buddhism amidst the dynamics of modern urban society. Hence, the recontextualizing strategy not only strengthens the relevance of Buddhism in daily life but also helps build a religious identity that harmonizes with the aspirations of modern Chinese society. It demonstrated an integration of Buddhist ideals into a strategy aimed at enhancing local culture and tourism while adapting to contemporary needs. Guangxiao Si serves as both a place of prayer and a hub for social and educational activities. It aligns with modern values of “social harmony,” making it more suitable for the demands of urban regions.

These activities enhance Guangxiao’s function as a platform for promoting universal Buddhist principles, engaging both residents and international travelers ([Ashiwa and Wank 2006](#); [Tomalin et al. 2019](#)). The government’s endorsement of Buddhism’s integration into social and cultural programs reflects a broader initiative to utilize traditional values as tools for social advancement, evident in the analysis of religion’s role in sustainable development in China and Southeast Asia ([Travagnin 2017](#); [Zhu 2024](#)). Consequently, this model offers a precise depiction of the continuous development of Nanyang Buddhism at Guangxiao Si as a fundamental element of modern society. This is a response to the necessity of adapting to contemporary challenges, primarily emphasizing the enhancement of the relationship between spirituality and everyday existence.

The effects of social and cultural transformations on the temple’s social and cultural framework require further assessment. Engaging the active involvement of various societal elements and stakeholders in developing this approach is imperative to fully understand its potential for widespread acceptance and effective implementation in the future. [Lu and Zhang \(2024\)](#) noted that the successful adaptation of Buddhism to modern circumstances substantially depends on collaboration among religious leaders, local communities, and the government. Furthermore, [Zeng et al. \(2021\)](#) underlined that the sustainability of this approach relies on a participatory assessment system that includes feedback from diverse community groups to enhance the development process. Nanyang Buddhism represents a modern model of religious adaptation at Guangxiao Si, demonstrating how spir-

itual principles can be transformed into concrete actions to advance a more inclusive and harmonious society.

5.2. Nanyang Buddhism Recontextualization in the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si: Concluding Remarks and Context-Dependent Struggles

The findings indicated that recontextualization in the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si has encountered difficulties. Tension exists between the application of pragmatic and purely spiritual teachings of Buddhism, as upheld by certain traditional circles (Chia 2021; Dean 2022). The excess of materialistic elements may diminish the spiritual core of these teachings. This alteration, motivated by the intention to render Buddhism more pertinent to contemporary demands, incites discourse among monks and local communities over the equilibrium between tradition preservation and innovation. Some groups embrace this modernization as a means to connect Buddhist teachings with the younger generation and metropolitan populations. This study's findings align with those of (Chumkhot 2024; Flatt 2023; Foxeus 2019), which showed that religious modernization often leads to a conflict between preserving core values and meeting social relevance.

Ruan et al. (2023) further proposed that the local socio-economic context, which includes the need to boost urban community involvement and generate income through tourism-related activities, often shapes this conflict. As modern activities, such as meditation training for mental health and environmental seminars, garner more attention than ancient rites, the conflict at Guangxiao Si will become more prominent. A hybrid strategy combining conventional and creative elements could somewhat successfully address this discrepancy (Liu 2023). Guangxiao Si exemplifies how integrating fundamental Buddhist ideas into a contextual framework allows religion to adapt to current circumstances while preserving its spiritual core. Consequently, it is essential to persist in observing the evolution of this strategy and its impact on the religious community and society at large.

The recontextualization of Nanyang Buddhism in Guangzhou, particularly at Guangxiao Si, is a multifaceted and arduous process influenced by numerous local and societal elements, such as socio-economic needs, modernization, and urbanization. The recontextualization of Guangxiao Si Buddhism in Nanyang seeks to integrate ancient teachings with the needs of modern communities increasingly linked to the global sphere. However, it faces limited resources, ingrained hierarchical systems, and pushback from groups that perceive these developments as threats to their spiritual authority (Huang 2024; Ott 2015). Although various policies for this reform exist (including improved access to Buddhism-based education and the creation of more egalitarian social programs), their execution is hampered by the struggle between tradition and modernism due to financial and human resource limitations (Li and Wang 2023; Wu 2022).

The primary challenge may be preserving the spiritual essence of Buddhism while adapting it to resonate with the younger generation in urban and contemporary society. The efficacy of Buddhism's recontextualization in contemporary society is substantially influenced by its ability to reconcile traditional ideals with global challenges, such as sustainability, inclusivity, and social cohesion (Srihamongkon 2022; Travagnin 2017). Power struggles among diverse factions are inextricably linked to the reconceptualization of Buddhism, as is the case with many global social revolutions. The challenge is to maintain the fundamental principles of traditional teachings while simultaneously addressing the need for inclusivity in the context of modernization. The connection between the government and the temple is evolving, necessitating the active involvement of various parties.

This change is often hindered by the dominant top-down structure and the prominence of authoritative figures within the Buddhist hierarchy. This situation mirrors those observed in several countries currently undergoing reforms. Despite the establishment of policy, the degree of implementation often fluctuates from one location to another (Lin

2023; Tödtling and Trippel 2005). The Guangxiao Si temple, which has undertaken projects through international communications and Buddhist tourism to modernize the social role of Buddhism, best illustrates this problem (X. Li 2016). It shown that the urban meditation training and environmental seminars based on Buddhist ideas could a balance spirituality with secular necessities. However, local political dynamics and governmental goals often shape the way these initiatives are carried out, and they do not always coincide with the needs of traditional Buddhist groups (Huang 2024; Karl et al. 2022).

The recontextualization in the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si process is greatly affected by cultural aspects because the Nanyang citizens often view Buddhist teachings through their cultural lens, generating a range of uses for Buddhist ideas in their daily lives (Chumkhot 2024; Kirmayer 2015). This implies that the recontextualization of Buddhism consists of not only assimilation with modernity but also the interpretation of traditional values in line with local standards. The future success of Buddhism's reconceptualization in Guangxiao Si will be greatly influenced by all actors' ability to promote open discourse on tradition and modernity. A strategy combining community participation and cooperative decision-making has a crucial role to reduce resistance and preserving fundamental Buddhist values (Shen and Midgley 2015; Wang and Zhang 2023).

6. Conclusions

This study demonstrated that the recontextualization of Nanyang Buddhism's teachings and practices at the Guangzhou Guangxiao Si reflects Buddhism's adaptability to local cultural values and the requirements of contemporary metropolitan communities in China and Southeast Asia. Buddhism in the Guangxiao Si has a crucial effect on profound spiritual principles and integrates religious traditions with local cultural practices within the Chinese expatriate community. Furthermore, the Guangxiao Si deftly navigates the socio-economic needs of various cultural communities while upholding universal moral principles, acting as a central hub for the spread of Buddhism. The harmonious cross-cultural ceremonies serve to uphold the spiritual identity of the Chinese diaspora while simultaneously illustrating the enduring significance of Buddhism amidst the challenges posed by urbanization and globalization.

This result offers significant theoretical contributions to the understanding of Buddhism's adaptability and cultural integration in a globalized context. Because Guangxiao Temple serves as a focal point for the interaction between traditional Chinese Buddhism and the diverse cultural influences of Southeast Asia. This interplay highlights the dynamic nature of Buddhist teachings, demonstrating how they can evolve and resonate within different cultural frameworks. Furthermore, it incorporates local beliefs and practices, enriching the Buddhist tradition while maintaining its core principles. This phenomenon challenges the notion of a monolithic Buddhist identity, emphasizing instead the pluralistic and adaptive characteristics of the religion. It also reflects contemporary interpretations of Buddhist ethics, illustrating how Nanyang Buddhism addresses modern societal issues such as social justice and environmental sustainability. It provides insights into the transformative power of Buddhism in diverse cultural landscapes.

This study also enhances community life and spiritual practice within the region. As a prominent center for Buddhist worship and cultural exchange, the temple actively engages in various community outreach programs, including educational initiatives, meditation retreats, and social services. It not only promotes the teachings of Buddhism but also fosters a sense of belonging and support among local residents, particularly among the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the practical integration of Nanyang Buddhism encourages intergenerational dialogue and participation, allowing younger practitioners to connect with their heritage while adapting to contemporary societal needs. This em-

phasis on social responsibility reflects a commitment to addressing pressing issues such as poverty, mental health, and environmental sustainability. Hence, the temple exemplifies how Buddhist principles can be applied to real-world challenges, thereby enhancing the quality of life for individuals and families in the region. In this way, Nanyang Buddhism at Guangxiao Temple not only enriches spiritual practice but also contributes to the overall well-being of the community.

The study of Nanyang Buddhism at Guangxiao Temple faces several limitations, primarily related to the sample size and diversity of interviewees. The current research relies heavily on a limited number of monks, which may not fully capture the varied perspectives within the Buddhist community. The narrow age range and lack of gender diversity among participants restrict the understanding of how different demographics engage with and interpret Buddhist practices. Future research should aim to include a broader and more representative sample of monks, lay practitioners, and individuals from various age groups and genders. This would provide a more comprehensive view of Nanyang Buddhism and its impact on community dynamics. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could explore the evolving role of Guangxiao Temple in response to contemporary societal changes by examining how it adapts to the needs of a diverse and globalized population. Such studies would enrich the understanding of Buddhism's relevance in modern contexts. Future studies could delve into the recontextualization of Buddhism in various Southeast Asian nations by specifically examining the influence of the Guangxiao Si Monastery on cultural diplomacy and international relations. This would involve an assessment of how globalization and urbanization affect Buddhist practices within the Chinese diaspora community.

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