

Saving the Chinese Ghosts Overseas: A Study of the Yogacara Ulkā-Mukha Ritual in Thailand

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Abstract

Currently, the most common methods for preserving supernatural beings from foreign lands involve conducting religious ceremonies and beseeching spiritual creatures in close proximity. This inquiry aims to explore the spiritual significance and function of the Yogacara Ulkā-mukha ritual practices in the redemption of Chinese spirits that are residing abroad. The research design employed a phenomenological approach, involving nine monks in Thailand as participants. The data-gathering process involved conducting in-depth interviews and engaging in participant observations. Subsequently, the data were subjected to thematic analysis to ascertain the significance and function of the difficulties in the execution of the ritual. The study yielded three significant findings: first, the Yogacara Ulkā-mukha ritual embodies the concept of Buddhist compassion and the duty to rescue wandering souls in their quest for tranquility; second, it explores the adaptation and challenges faced in preserving tradition and cultural heritage within the modern context; and third, it examines the potency of intention and prayer in transcending the constraints of space and time. These findings are elaborated in the concluding section of this paper. Moreover, this study suggests the creation of a ritual adaptation model that considers the use of technology to enhance the participation of overseas Chinese communities in preserving spiritual customs.

Keywords: Chinese Ghosts; Ghosts Overseas; Ritual Function; Spiritual Meaning; Yogacara Ulkā-mukha Ritual



INTRODUCTION

Ulka-Mukha was derived from the esoteric Buddhism of the Chinese Han kindship of Buddhism, which was then combined with the ritual from Tibetan esoteric elements during the authority of the Yuan Dynasty. The ritual consists of a series of ceremonial acts and devotional prayers performed by monks to alleviate the suffering of these souls and to assist them in achieving enlightenment. This ceremony, which reflects the intricate relationship between the Chinese Mahayana Buddhist tradition and the predominant Theravada Buddhist culture in Thailand, was adopted and refined by the Chinese population residing abroad. Research conducted on Yogacara Ulkā-mukha offers a unique perspective on the dual functions of this religious ritual as a spiritual practice and a method of preserving cultural and religious identity in a diverse society (Yuzhen, 2015).

In the past, research concentrated on the economic, social, and cultural aspects of Chinese rituals. Nevertheless, current research on specific aspects of religious rituals, such as the Yogacara Ulkā-mukha, is extremely restricted. Some studies, such as Cheung (2004), Liu (2016), and Tan & Liu (2022), prioritize the economic function of Chinese communities but neglect to investigate their religious components. Previous studies (Bhatia, 2002; Bhatia & Ram, 2001; Guo, 2022) also investigated cultural acculturation, but refrained from addressing the adaptation of religious rituals, including Yogacara Ulkā-mukha. Other studies (Bun & Kiong, 1993; Burusratanaphand, 1995; Tobias, 1977; Toyota, 2003) have examined the identity of the Chinese ethnicity in Thailand, with an emphasis on social and political aspects and a disregard for the relevance of religious rituals. Other studies (Kuhn, 2006; Lai, 2004; H. Liu, 2011; Poston & Wong, 2016) concentrate on historical aspects and disregards religious rituals. Other studies (Keyes, 1987; Obeyesekere, 1979; E. White, 2003) have

examined the relationship between Mahayana and Theravada Buddhist traditions in Thailand but do not specifically address Yogacara Ulkā-mukha. Therefore, there remains a significant demand for research that focuses on religious rites.

Conversely, the ritual of saving ghosts overseas that has been established thus far has been limited to prayer activities and ascending requests to spiritual entities, all of which lack a comprehensive understanding of the fundamental cultural and spiritual contexts. Many studies emphasize the ritualistic and religious features of this practice (DeBernardi, 1984; Z. Li, 2017; Weller, 1987), but fail to investigate how this ritual adjusts to contemporary social and cultural dynamics, hence neglecting its adaptive nature. Majority of studies (M. Li, 2022; Oxfeld, 2004; Tam, 2018; Yang, 2015) have focused on the historical and traditional aspects of the ritual of the saving of spirits, completely disregarding the impact of globalization and changing times on the ritual's implementation and significance in the contemporary context. This research generally assumes that ritual practices remain stagnant despite the fact that rituals' continuity is significantly influenced by their ability to adapt to social and cultural changes.

The originality and novelty of this study lies in its interdisciplinary investigation or exploration of transnational ceremonies or religious practices, cultural differences, and Buddhist ritualistic adaptations. This study uniquely understands how the Ulkā-mukha ritual, rooted in the Yogācāra Buddhist tradition, has been localized in Thailand to address the ghosts or spiritual needs of overseas Chinese communities. By emphasizing the interplay between different cultural values and identities, diaspora experiences, and religious rituals, this research provides new insights into how religious traditional practices transform in multicultural contexts. This inquiry not only sheds light on an underexplored aspect of Buddhist

areas, but also significantly contributes to fruitful discussions on the fluidity of ritual practices and their roles in preserving cultural history and heritage in global situations.

In addition, the current rituals are limited to the local context, whereas Chinese Ghosts Overseas poses more intricate difficulties (Leong, 2022; Perera, 2023; Xu et al., 2005; A. C. Yu, 1987). The Chinese diaspora encounters challenges in preserving cultural customs and in conducting communal ceremonies. Prior research has primarily examined the execution of rituals within the country or within the Chinese community residing in the local area (Eng & Lin, 2002; Friedmann, 2007; Holyoak, 2007). Traditional rituals such as Yogamah Ulkā-Mukha have been found to be useful for bringing peace to the wandering soul within the local community (Xu et al., 2005; Yü, 1987). Nevertheless, this study did not investigate the potential modifications of the ritual to accommodate Chinese Ghosts residing in foreign countries. This research is crucial for a comprehensive examination of the role of rituals, specifically in the context of the “Saving Chinese Ghosts Overseas” initiative.

Yogacara Ulkā-Mukha Ritual in Saving the Chinese Ghosts Overseas

In particular, the Ulkā-Mukha Yogamy Ritual is a religious practice in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition that is intended to preserve the spirit of the *gingyan* or ‘hungry specter’ by means of the passage of *Yogelau*. To alleviate the suffering of souls and facilitate their attainment of enlightenment, monks execute a series of petitions and practices. In Thailand, where Theravada Buddhist traditions are the predominant religion, this ritual is essential for preserving the Chinese cultural and religious identity. It also functions as a spiritual practice. The way the Chinese community maintains its beliefs through religious practices is indicative of the complex interplay between the Buddhist traditions of Ma-Hayana and Theravada (Chan,

2008; Chiu, 2022; Ma, 2024; Y. Shen, 2023; Yao & Gombrich, 2022), which is represented by the adaptation of this ritual.

The Ulkā-Mukha Yogamyan ritual has been adapted and adopted by the Chinese community in Thailand, illustrating the complex interplay between two distinct Buddhist traditions. Despite the significant influence of the Buddhist Theravada Buddha, the Chinese community continues to protect its religious practices as a means of preserving its cultural heritage (Y. Liu, 2024; X. Zhou & Huang, 2024). Additionally, cultural acculturation occurs when the Chinese community simultaneously adapts to a diverse array of social and religious environments while preserving the fundamental components of its own traditions (Cheung-Blunden & Juang, 2008; Zhu et al., 2023).

The Ulkā-Mukha Yogaman ritual maintains the cultural and religious identity of Chinese society in Thailand in addition to functioning as a spiritual practice. The Chinese community's ethnic and religious identities are frequently interconnected and reinforced by distinct religious customs. The relationship between the Mahayana and Theravada Buddhist traditions can be interpreted as a form of cultural diplomacy in which the Chinese community employs religious rituals to engage with and assimilate into the local community. While numerous studies have examined the impact of Chinese culture in Thailand, there remain deficiencies in research on the adaptation and distinct functions of religious rituals such as Yogamah Ulkā-Mukha. This gap highlights the need to conduct a more comprehensive investigation of the functioning of the Yogamah Ulkā-Mukha rite in a contemporary setting as well as its role in preserving the cultural identity of the Chinese population in Thailand.

The Evolution of the Ritual of Yogacara Ulkā-mukha within Chinese Buddhism

The Yogacara Ulka-Mukha ritual has spread widely over time as the practice is dedicated to altering the agony of tormented human spirits, particularly those judged to the territory of hungry ghosts. Derived from the esoteric Buddhism of Chinese Han Buddhism, this tradition incorporates doctrinal principles with compassionate efforts, relying on transferring merit to spirits to lighten the consent of their karmic burden during their lifetimes. This ritual consists of offering food, reciting sacred texts, and performing symbolic activities of liberation to lead the soul or spirits toward a better reincarnation or rebirth. Over centuries, these ritual activities have often integrated Chinese folk cultures, such as the veneration of local deities and ancestral worship, but they still maintain their foundational Buddhist philosophy under Theravada Buddhism principles.

In Thailand's context, where Theravada Buddhism became the dominant religion, the etiquette of the Yogacara Ulka-Mukha ritual has undergone notable changes and transformations. These adaptations may reflect the existence of local cultural and religious practices that integrate Mahayana principles with Thai Theravada rituals. In addition, the public and communal aspects of rituals often focus on Thai social and religious traditions. These alternations cause a progressive and dynamic interplay between preserving the core of rituals and maintaining local contexts in line with the Thai Buddhist community in general. This dynamic also underlines the resilience of the ritual itself and its capacity to transcend cultural boundaries, while promoting intercultural and faith understanding.

A review of the history of Teiser's (1988) *Ghost festival in medieval China* could highlight an insightful analysis of the religious and cultural significance of the Chinese Buddhist ceremony. He describes how the model of the festival evolved in Buddhist, Taoist, and

Confucian traditions in mediating harmony between living and dead spirits. His great work also underscores the ritual's role in responding to social anxieties related to death and the afterlife. This study also offers in-depth insights into the dynamics and transformation of societal values in Thailand, such as Ulkā-mukha ritual practices in relation to diasporic issues. Additionally, Rotman's (2021) *Hungry ghosts* explores the depth of the story of dead spirits from Buddhist contexts, discussing moral values, cosmology, and karmic implications.

Rotman's in-depth narratives of ghost spirits highlight the promotion of ethical behavior, as these spirits often symbolize the consequences of moral failure, greed, and attachment. Similarly, Davis's (2015) *Deathpower: Buddhism's ritual imagination in Cambodia* often highlights the connection between the ritual of Buddhism and its social structures in the country, especially how death spirit rituals can strengthen communal and religious bonds. He relies heavily on the elements of imaginative and performative religion to understand how Yogācāra Ulkā-mukha is internalized within the diasporic Chinese-Thai community. Understanding these three works can enrich the theoretical framework of the spiritual, cultural, ethical, and social dimensions of ritual practice.

Previous Research on Chinese Ghosts Overseas and Yogacara Ulkā-Mukha Ritual

The investigation of Chinese ghosts in diasporic contexts provides a rich exploration of cultural retention and adaptation, particularly when juxtaposed with traditional practices, such as the Yogacara Ulkā-Mukha ritual. The continued belief in ghosts among Chinese communities globally is rooted in ancient folklore, cultural memory, and the maintenance of ancestral veneration practices, which often dissipate under the pressures of acculturation, yet retain a significant level of resonance between migrants and their descendants.

Previous studies reveal that beliefs concerning ghosts profoundly influence aspects of life, including tourism and daily practices, among the Chinese diaspora. Yu et al. (2022) noted that Chinese conceptions of the supernatural often involve family based rituals, which are crucial in maintaining connections with ancestral spirits, particularly during festivals such as the Ghost Festival (Fu et al., 2014; Panesar & Graham, 2012). During festivals of the dead, such as the Hungry Ghost Festival, the presence of these spirits is palpably felt, influencing communal practices and individual behaviors among overseas Chinese people. Specifically, these events serve not only as a remembrance of the past, but also as an assertion of cultural identity in a foreign context (Panesar & Graham, 2012; L.-T. Zhang & Zhao, 2020).

In addition, recent literature links the Yogacara tradition to broader spiritual practices within the Chinese diaspora. The Yogacara Ulkā-Mukha ritual incorporates symbolic gestures that reflect ancestral recognition and meditation, which resonate deeply within both traditional and diasporic spiritual landscapes. The ritual emphasizes a connection with ancestors through meditation and offerings, aligning with Chinese beliefs about the significance of ancestral spirits (Wang et al., 2024; W. Zhou & Feng, 2023). The role of such rituals in diasporic adaptation illuminates how communities negotiate their cultural identity amid varying socio-political landscapes and reinforce familial ties, even in exile (Wang et al., 2024; Yow, 2016).

Furthermore, the interactions between these ghostly beliefs and practices, such as the Yogacara Ulkā-Mukha ritual, indicate the dynamic nature of cultural transmission. For instance, the Chinese perspective in Malaysia illustrates how traditional beliefs concerning ghosts have been reframed in response to local cultural narratives, while still embodying core values from their ancestral origins (Guccini

& Zhang, 2021; Wong, 2020). This transformation and hybridization highlights the adaptability of Chinese cultural practices to new environments, revealing an ongoing dialogue between legacy beliefs and contemporary experiences among diaspora communities (Panesar & Graham, 2012; Wang et al., 2024).

The scholarly discourse surrounding the Chinese diaspora and its belief systems contributes significantly to the understanding of cultural practices under globalization. By examining both beliefs about ghosts and the Yogacara Ulkā-Mukha ritual, we uncover how these frameworks provide diasporic individuals with a sense of belonging and continuity, serving to strengthen community bonds across generations despite geographical distances. This cultural resilience manifests through ritualization and shared beliefs, fostering a collective identity even in fragmented diasporic realities (Wang et al., 2024; L.-T. Zhang & Zhao, 2020; W. Zhou & Feng, 2023).

Recent studies explore the evolving interplay of Chinese religious customs and technologies in a Thai setting, with the main focus on ritual transformation practices such as Yogacara. The incorporation of digital technology platforms into Chinese Buddhist rituals is exemplified by the emergence of digital resources such as online scriptures and altar platforms, facilitating ritual practices such as virtual sutra chanting aligned with the goals of traditional soteriological activities. These forms of practices, naturally derived from Chinese monastic culture, have recently embraced digital tools such as online spaces to maintain engagement among dispersed practitioners worldwide. This new trend, often termed “cyber-Buddhism,” explains how the incorporation of digital technology not only preserves religion, but also reshapes religious expressions in diasporic environments (Agarwal & Jones, 2022).

In the Thai context, connectivity through social media applications has already changed the practices of these types of rituals,

creating a sacred digital atmosphere that expands ritual participation and lowers logistical barriers. Social media platforms such as WeChat and other Thai social apps can support community interaction, engagement, and ritual observance. The use of these platforms has democratized broader access to religious practices, allowing for more individualized spiritual activities that mix traditional and digital elements simultaneously. This change reflects broader issues and trends in Bangkok's religious practices, where social media apps redefine the expression of faith and religious practices, forming new forms of religion with an entrepreneurship spirit and public engagement (Agarwal & Jones, 2022). These studies collectively represent the way and strategy of Yogacara, and similar rituals are being transformed into the country to reflect its contemporary technological innovation while maintaining its spiritual core. The research questions were formulated as follows.

1. What is the meaning of spirituality and the role of the Yogacara Ulkā-mukha ritual in saving Chinese ghosts overseas?
2. What are the challenges faced by the Ulkā-mukha Yogacara ritual in the modern context and in preserving cultural traditions?

METHOD

This study employed a phenomenological approach to understand the experiences and meanings of the Chinese community in Thailand in carrying out the ritual of the Ulkā-mukha. The ritual was usually held on the 15th day of Lunar July. The Ghost festival was often celebrated under the collective sponsorship of Chinese families. The ritual costs 50,000 TBH (approximately 1,600 USD), including material offerings to monk performers, their lay associates, and the expense of decorative settings. The Ulkā-Mukha Yogamyan ceremony was conducted with utmost devotion and dedication to facilitate the wisdom spirits' escape from suffering and to attain tranquility. A

monk, under the tutelage of a master, reads sacred silk to commence the ceremonial procession. The objective of this silk reading was to summon and seek guidance from spiritual entities. This mission was of utmost importance in “Saving the Chinese Ghosts Overseas” because it guided the wandering spirits of the Chinese people in another dimension towards safety.

During the ritual, the spirits were presented with symbolic offerings such as food and incense. This offering was a symbol of reverence and magnanimity toward famished spirits, which contributed to their feelings of acceptance and gratitude. In this context, the act of offering was of great significance because it satisfied the spiritual and material needs of wandering spirits, thereby facilitating the attainment of tranquility and contentment in different dimensions. Music and chanting are the indispensable components of this ceremony. A reverent and profound atmosphere was established by incorporating sacred music and silk melodies, thereby facilitating the development of a stronger spiritual connection among participants. Music is considered capable of fostering spiritual communication between the human domain and supernatural entities, as well as calming the senses and emotions of individuals.

The ritual of water conditioning was at its zenith when the master of the ceremonies had performed it. The subsequent action was to sprinkle sacred water on all individuals and objects, serving as both symbolic cleansing and blessing. Furthermore, it was purported that this water has the ability to assuage spirits and provide relief. This technique was thought to aid in purifying the soul and preparing it for its subsequent calmer existence. After the completion of all rites, the community recites the closing prayer to express its best wishes to the spirits. After the ceremony ended, all participants joined for a shared dinner. The act of sharing a meal not only served as a ceremonial framework, but also emphasized the support and companionship that

existed within a community. This procedure was implemented as a demonstration of the community's unwavering support for spirits, thereby ensuring their eternal significance and importance.

Participant

Nine individuals, including monks, who were actively engaged in the practice of the Ulkā-Mukha rituals, participated in this investigation, primarily from the Jin Nikāya. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants, with the primary criteria being active engagement and detailed knowledge of the ritual. Nine participants were interviewed to ensure the data saturation. Participants' data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

List of Interviewees

Name	Role
Bsc	Head of ritual Yogacara Ulkā-Mukha
Sch	Monk from Jin Nikāya
Zh	Monk from Jin Nikāya
Phra	Monk from Jin Nikāya
Xus	Monk from Jin Nikāya
Xng	Monk from Jin Nikāya
Nhy	Monk from Jin Nikāya
Pn	Monk from Jin Nikāya
LnY	Monk from Jin Nikāya

Source: Primary data.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and active on-site observations. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to assist in the analysis of the comprehensive and thorough materials. Researchers were actively involved in conducting participatory observations and carefully observing every aspect of the ritual activities and the actions that took place. Prior to conducting the

interviews and observations, written consent was obtained from all participants to ensure the ethics of data collection and anonymity.

Research Instrument

The semi-structured interview guide, which was developed to investigate the experiences and meanings that participants associated with Ulkā-Mukha, was the primary instrument of this research. This interview guide included open-ended questions that encouraged the participants to provide further details about their personal experiences and perspectives. Table 2 displays the themes and interview questions. Additionally, researchers have employed reflective journals and field recordings to capture personal observations and reflections during the data-collection process. Furthermore, to facilitate data analysis, visual documentation, such as photographs and videos, was implemented.

Table 2

Themes and Questions

Themes	Questions
Perceptions	What emotions do you experience while performing Ulkā-mukha Yogamy rituals?
Spiritual meaning and the role of Yogacara Ulkā-mukha ritual	What is your interpretation of the spiritual significance of the Ulkā-Mukha Yogaman ritual?
Perceptions	How is it possible for the Ulkā-mukha ritual to rescue Chinese ghosts that are located abroad?
Challenge	Following the Ulkā-mukha Yogamy ritual, how do you feel?
	In order to execute Ulkā-mukha yogkah rituals in the contemporary era, what are the primary obstacles you perceive?

Source: Primary data.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, which entailed subsequent procedures, was implemented for data analysis, and the transcription of interview data

and observation recordings was performed verbatim. In the second step, the transcripts were read and analyzed by the researchers to identify the initial themes. Furthermore, researchers carried out data classification by discerning text fragments that were relevant to existing topics. The main themes were determined by classifying these identifiers into a more general category. Furthermore, an in-depth understanding of the meaning and relevance of the Ulkā-mukha rite for the Chinese minority in Thailand was achieved by examining these issues in the context of relevant theories and literature. To ensure the dependability and accuracy of the study findings, triangulation of data and member verification methods were employed.

RESULTS

RQ1: What is the Meaning of Spirituality and the Role of the Yogacara Ulkā-mukha Ritual in Saving Chinese Ghosts Overseas?

This study highlights the profound spiritual importance and significant role of the Yogacara Ulkā-mukha ritual in an effort to rescue wandering souls or ghosts within the Chinese community of Thailand. The ritual's somber performance of reciting sutras, making symbolic sacrifices, and conducting a water benediction ceremony demonstrates its spiritual importance. Each level of the ritual provides a unique and harmonious spiritual aspect to provide peace to the restless souls. Upon the researcher's inquiry, "What emotions do you undergo during the execution of the Yogacara Ulkā-mukha ritual?"

"I experience a profound sense of tranquility each time I engage in this ritual. I am of the opinion that the spirits of our ancestors will achieve tranquility following this ritual. Furthermore, I experienced a stronger sense of connection with my fellow community members. The act of praying together and coming together as a group helps to strengthen our sense of unity". (BSc)

The Yogacara Ulkā-mukha ritual is firmly grounded in the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism and carries substantial spiritual importance for the Chinese community. Monk Zh, who took part in the Yogacara Ulkā-Mukha ritual, answered the researcher's question about its spiritual importance:

“The Buddha’s compassion for all beings, including the lost souls, is embodied in this ritual. We extend our gratitude to Buddha and the bodhisattvas for accepting these petitions from their followers and for granting them mercy” (Zh)

The purpose of this ritual is to guide wandering souls toward liberation through the recitation of prayers and mantras, and the offering of sacrifices. According to the researchers, “How do you respond to the Yogacara Ulkā-mukha ritual?” Unveiling Biksu Phra:

“Following my involvement in this ceremonial practice, I experienced an enhanced sense of connection to the teachings of Buddha and a heightened awareness of the significance of karma and virtuous actions in my existence.” (Phra)

Numerous participants reported experiencing a sense of tranquility and serenity after participating in a ritual. Monk Pn stated:

“I experience a greater sense of tranquility and security each time I engage in the ritual. I am of the opinion that the spirits we assist and our ancestors experience the same tranquility”. (Pn)

The findings from these interviews indicated that the ritual’s spiritual potency has psychological and emotional impacts, illustrating how religious practices can provide emotional and mental assistance to the community. However, the ritual serves as both an individual spiritual exercise and a communal effort to save lost souls, who are thought to be suffering the repercussions of their previous wrongdoings. Monk Xng responded to the researcher’s inquiry regarding the Yogacara Ulkā-mukha ritual’s ability to rescue overseas Chinese ghosts:

“The Yogacara Ulkā-mukha ritual is a profound spiritual practice that is intended to provide tranquility to the spirits who are without a place in the afterlife.” Traditionally, this ritual is conducted on ancestral land, where the spirits of the ancestors are invoked and offerings and prayers are offered to assist them in achieving peace. Nevertheless, the challenge arises when discussing wandering spirits that have dispersed abroad, or “Chinese ghosts overseas,” and how to establish a connection with this ritual despite their distance from their ancestral homeland.” (Xng)

Furthermore, he includes the following:

“The power of sincere intention and prayer enables this ritual to communicate with these spirits. We are of the opinion that thoughts and prayers possess the capacity to transcend the confines of time and space. There is a concept in Yogacara that all beings are interconnected in a single universal consciousness. Consequently, we can attract these spirits to receive the benefits of this ritual by performing it properly and with sincere intentions, despite the fact that they are located abroad, as is the case in the local context.” (Xng)

The Yogacara Ulkā-Mukha ceremony also enhances the cohesion of the Chinese community in Thailand. Individuals who actively participate in this event have a strong relationship and experience a heightened sense of interconnectedness. Additionally, they experienced a sense of connection with their forebears. Engaging in communal practices such as reading prayers, making offerings, and dining together fosters profound feelings of unity and cohesion. The results of this study suggest that the Yogacara Ulkā-mukha ritual serves as a technique to enhance social connections within the community, extending beyond the spiritual purpose of saving ghosts overseas.

Additionally, the research revealed that engaging in the ritual has a beneficial effect on the psychological and emotional well-being of individuals. Several participants expressed a sense of tranquility, security, and a strong bond with their forebears, following their involvement in ceremonial practice. These emotions aided in

managing the sentiments of bereavement and unease while also fostering a sense of camaraderie in daily existence. These favorable effects indicate that the Yogacara Ulkā-Mukha rite holds significant importance in the lives of the Chinese population in Thailand. Moreover, the study emphasizes that the ability to adjust and introduce new ideas in the execution of the ritual is crucial for ensuring the long-term viability of tradition in contemporary times. Obstacles such as waning enthusiasm of the younger generation and societal expectations can be surmounted through innovative and all-encompassing strategies. For instance, providing education and outreach initiatives that emphasize the significance of the ritual might enhance comprehension and reverence among the broader community, thus fostering a more supportive atmosphere for the conservation of tradition.

RQ2: What are the Challenges Faced by the Ulkā-mukha Yogacara Ritual in the Modern Context and in Preserving Cultural Traditions?

Currently, it is difficult for the Chinese population in Thailand to practice the Yogacara Ulkā-mukha rite. In particular, the younger generation has seen profound changes in their way of life and thought processes as a result of industrialization and globalization. This is concerning because younger people are losing interest in traditional ceremonies. A considerable proportion of individuals forsake their traditional customs in favor of modern lifestyles and mainstream culture. Moreover, migration and urbanization processes cause the breakdown of traditional communities, presenting difficulties in carrying out these rituals collectively and consistently. A key concern arose from the younger demographic's apparent disinterest in the Yogacara Ulkā-Mukha ceremony. A considerable portion of young folks in the Chinese community consider this ceremony inconsequential in relation to their modern lives. The researcher

asked, “What are the main difficulties you see in implementing the Yogacara Ulkā-mukha ritual in the present time?” Bikṣu LnY expressed:

“Some young people think these traditions are irrelevant to modern life and have gone the way of the dodo. They participate in more modern activities and show an increased interest in technology.” (LnY)
“Keeping the younger generation interested is the main obstacle. They are generally more focused on their professional obligations and fast-paced lifestyles in urban regions. Many people no longer live near temples, so they rarely participate in rituals. We strive to actively involve them via social media; nevertheless, the results remain less than ideal.” (LnY)

Another problem is that globalization and modernization have made people less interested in traditional ways of doing things. Younger people often feel disconnected from the traditions and ways of life of their ancestors because they are exposed to a more global culture and technology. Monk Sch said,

“It is more likely that younger people will spend their time on social media and video games than they will learn about the cultural practices and customs of our civilization. There is a possibility that these traditions will no longer be practiced in the future.” (Sch)

Certain communities have endeavored to adapt the Yogacara Ulkā-Mukha ritual to suit present-day and specific local circumstances, despite facing various challenges. Monk Xus declared:

“We endeavor to integrate contemporary aspects into this tradition, such as utilizing technology to distribute information about the ritual and engaging the younger generation by means of social media.” (Xus)

The forthcoming challenge concerns assimilating customary practices in foreign nations. When asked about the incorporation of this ritual into other nations, Monk Nhy stated:

“The main obstacles are the cultural differences and the scarcity of traditional ritual materials commonly found in Asia. It is possible that some countries will not be able to access certain offering materials. Not

only that, but we also tell you how to use other materials that have the same spiritual importance. It's also hard to make sure that the ritual happens at the right time for people in different time zones. This is especially hard to do when the ritual involves people from communities that are spread out across several countries." (Nhy)

He underscored the significance of intention and mindfulness in executing rituals. The implemented modifications do not detract from the spiritual essence of this ritual, as the primary aspect resides in the intention to rescue these spirits and grant them serenity. This ritual is versatile and, as long as it is carried out with sincere intentions, the results will remain reliable.

The difficulties of modifying Buddhist rituals when conducted in foreign countries were emphasized in interviews with Monk Nhy. The main challenges are cultural differences and the limited availability of ritual resources, which are typically more accessible in Asia. For example, certain religious practices may not be available in specific nations, requiring practitioners to use alternatives that convey a similar spiritual importance. Coordinating the timing of the ritual to accommodate different time zones, especially when it involves communities spread across multiple countries, is challenging. Monk Nhy emphasized that the ritual's most crucial elements are intention and awareness, regardless of the challenges. The intrinsic spiritual nature of the ritual remains unaffected by adjustments made to suit the specific local circumstances. Monk Nhy claimed that the ritual is flexible and that as long as it is carried out with genuine intentions, it will successfully achieve its intended spiritual goal of bringing peace to the souls involved.

DISCUSSION

The Significance of Spirituality and the Function of Rituals in the Saving of Ghosts

The findings of this inquiry suggest that the Ulkā-Mukha Yogamy ceremony has deep spiritual importance and plays a significant role in maintaining the tradition of traveling within the Chinese minority in Thailand. This rite represents the community's duty to help spirits who have lost their way of finding peace and the kindness of Buddhism. This finding aligns with those of previous studies (Weihua et al., 2021; L. White & Leung, 2014; S. Zhang, 2023), emphasizing the importance of religious rituals in strengthening ethnic and spiritual identity and providing emotional support to individuals. Furthermore, this inquiry established that engagement in this ceremony strengthens the cultural identity of the Chinese community, prompts customary principles, and assists in safeguarding the cultural legacy in the midst of modernization. Furthermore, previous studies on cultural acculturation (Bhatia, 2002; Bhatia & Ram, 2001; Cheung-Blunden & Juang, 2008; Zhu et al., 2023) support the idea that religious and cultural activities are crucial in maintaining ethnic identity among diaspora communities.

Moreover, it is infeasible to overlook the rite's psychological and emotional repercussions. Previous studies (Wen et al., 2023; Yip, 2004; D. Zhang et al., 2022) have demonstrated the substantial impact of religious rituals in promoting psychological tranquility and offering mental assistance, as seen by the participants' accounts of experiencing serenity and security after engaging in the ritual. Because it entails incorporating a spiritual framework and acknowledging the value of that framework in one's day-to-day existence, this ritual is an excellent approach to reducing feelings of worry and grief. The study, on the other hand, sheds light on the challenges encountered while attempting to maintain the interest and

involvement of the next generation in this cultural heritage. Many young individuals struggle to understand the significance of traditional rituals because of the impact of global culture and modern technologies. Maintaining this event in the future will pose greater difficulties due to the waning interest among younger individuals in conventional religious practices (Ji, 2006). The community's ability to integrate while preserving its uniqueness is highlighted by the contextualization of rituals in different social settings and the modification of rituals to make them more relevant for the younger generation. This supports the claim that cultural practices remain relevant in the modern period, as they are innovative and adaptable (Sun, 2024; Tang & Zhang, 2020).

The Process of Adapting and Facing Problems in Preserving Tradition and Cultural Legacy within a Contemporary Context

The findings of this study indicate that the Ulkā-Mukha Yogamah ceremony, which has been modified, is confronted with a multitude of problems. However, these findings also highlight the determination of the Chinese community in Thailand to maintain its cultural history and tradition. The younger generation sees this age-old rite as outdated and unnecessary, in light of the changes brought about by industrialization and globalization, thereby posing a substantial danger to its continuation. Furthermore, younger generations place greater importance on global culture and state-of-the-art technology rather than historical religious rituals (Litke, 2013; Smith, 2008). However, this research also demonstrates the methods by which communities utilize their imaginations to identify solutions and adapt to these challenges. For instance, the community utilizes technology and social media to communicate information regarding rites and to extend invitations to young people. This is consistent with the findings of Sun (2024) and Tang & Zhang (2020), which emphasize the importance of innovation in the preservation of cultural traditions

in the present day. The use of technology facilitates the broadening of the target audience and increases the appeal of rituals to younger demographics.

Additionally, this revelation illustrates that adaptation involves modifications to the manner in which rituals are performed, as well as methods of educating and enlightening individuals about the importance of this cultural practice. The long-term sustainability of rituals is significantly influenced by education and counseling. Previous studies (Cai, 2024; Chen, 2024; Chung, 2024) found that cultural education is crucial for diaspora communities to maintain their ethnic identity. Based on these findings, it appears that good education can help people appreciate and learn about other cultures. In addition, there is social and cultural pressure from the neighboring community, which might not understand or value this ritual as much as it should. This statement corroborates findings indicating that the cultural practices of minority groups can be influenced by dominant culture (Gaffney, 2023; Z. Shen et al., 2024). However, the community can foster the development of an all-encompassing and encouraging atmosphere by enhancing comprehension and admiration from the broader community through the implementation of appropriate counseling.

Moreover, the process of ritual adaptation serves as an indication of the community's capacity to assimilate while maintaining its own identity. This demonstrates the adaptability and cultural fortitude of the Chinese minority in Thailand when confronted with social and cultural transformations. The ability to adapt and maintain significance is the most important aspect of maintaining cultural traditions over time. The community can maintain its relevance to the modern world while preserving its cultural heritage through suitable adaptation. Additionally, this study shows that participating in this event helps the Chinese community feel more connected to their

culture, keeps traditional values alive, and protects cultural artifacts from the effects of modernization. Consistent with other studies, this finding highlights the importance of religious and cultural pursuits in maintaining ethnic identity in the diaspora (Cruz & Demeterio Iii, 2024; Kanchan, 2020). Engaging in community rituals fosters the preservation of traditional beliefs, strengthens ancestral bonds, and enhances mental health and emotional well-being. According to previous studies, religious practices facilitate the resolution of loss and suffering (Norenzayan et al., 2016; Walsh, 2020; Wilt et al., 2019) by providing psychological relaxation, emotional support, and a spiritual framework.

The Capacity of the Intention and Supplication to Transcend the Confines of Space and Time

Although the entities are located abroad, the Yogamah Ulkā-Mukha ritual can still be used to contact them. The spiritual benefits of the Ulkā-mukha Yogkah ritual are believed to penetrate the limits of space and time through sincere intention and prayer. This allows spirits to receive the benefits of the ritual regardless of their location. This is consistent with Buddhist tradition's belief that the spiritual world is significantly influenced by mind and intention. For instance, Faure's (1996) research on the function of prayer in Buddhist rituals underscores the importance of genuine and in-depth intentions in ensuring the efficacy of prayer, even in a long-distance setting. This intention is regarded as a conduit between the spiritual and physical realms, enabling communication with entities in other dimensions.

In another context, the spiritual effects of the petitions offered can be bolstered by the collective intentions of the community to perform the ritual (Fuist, 2015; Whitehouse & Kavanagh, 2022). This demonstrates that the ritual is contingent upon focused intentions in addition to physical or location-based actions. In the instance of Ulkā-Mukha, the spiritual energy generated by the strong intentions of

participants, despite their geographical separation, is sufficient to reach and offer calm spirits that are located far from their ancestral land. This discovery is corroborated by a study conducted by Gyatso & Hakim (2010) on the practice of meditation and intention in Tibetan Buddhism. This study asserts that sincere intentions in rituals and meditation are capable of influencing the spiritual world without being constrained by physical boundaries. Therefore, the findings of this study confirm that the Yogamah Ulkā-Mukha ritual has the ability to go beyond the limitations of place and time through the influence of purpose and prayer. Furthermore, it may be adapted to establish a connection with spirits in Chinese diaspora residing in foreign countries.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the significance of the Ulkā-Mukha Yogkyaman rites and the challenges encountered in their implementation in Thailand. This study presents three significant findings: the adaptation and challenges faced in preserving cultural traditions and history in modern society, and the powerful impact of purpose and prayer that transcends spatial and temporal limits. This discovery illustrates that the execution of this rite in foreign countries can be improved through the active participation of younger individuals and the utilization of technology, despite the presence of numerous impediments in contemporary times, such as logistical constraints and cultural shifts. In addition, the Ulkā-mukha yogkah ceremony has been shown to effectively deliver tranquility to dispersed spirits, despite the obstacles of distance and time, owing to the potency of the intents and prayers it contains. Therefore, this study underscores the importance of preserving and incorporating innovative elements into the performance of traditional ceremonies to guarantee that spiritual and cultural traditions continue to be relevant

and significant in the context of globalization. This research posits that the Chinese diaspora would benefit from the development of a more comprehensive adaptation strategy and the utilization of technology to aid in the preservation of their spiritual heritage.

Recommendations for Future Research

The recommendation for further integration attempts to preserve the Yogācāra Ulkā-mukha ritual in Thailand should rely on technology to facilitate the accessibility and preservation of this tradition. Digital technology tools such as augmented or virtual reality can be incorporated to promote and disseminate the ritual's tradition, its history, and the importance of the tradition of Buddhist society around the globe. This technology integration can create immersive experiences, allowing people to engage remotely with the ritual's activities. It also makes the ritual more inclusive for younger people or generations, and for non-Chinese people.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: Y.L. & W.D.; Data curation: Y.L. & W.D.; Formal analysis: Y.L. & W.D.; Funding acquisition: Y.L. & W.D.; Investigation: Y.L. & W.D.; Methodology: Y.L. & W.D.; Project administration: Y.L. & W.D.; Resources: Y.L. & W.D.; Software: Y.L. & W.D.; Supervision: Y.L. & W.D.; Validation: Y.L. & W.D.; Visualization: Y.L. & W.D.; Writing – original draft: Y.L. & W.D.; Writing – review & editing: Y.L. & W.D. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board (or Ethics Committee) of the Institute of Science Innovation and Culture, Rajamangala University of Technology Krungthep, Thailand (Date of approval: August 12, 2024).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from the respondents before the interviews.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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