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Inter actor relations in the veneration of Chinese Sea Goddess Mazu (媽祖, Māzǔ), at Tjoe Tik Kiong (慈德宮, Cí dé gōng) Temple, Pasuruan

Hubungan inter aktor dalam pemujaan Dewi Laut Tionghoa Makco (媽祖, Māzǔ), di Kelenteng Tjoe Tik Kiong (慈德宮, Cí dé gōng), Pasuruan

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Abstract

The Tjoe Tik Kiong Temple (慈德宮, Cí dé Gōng) in Pasuruan City hosts veneration ritual activity for the Chinese Sea Goddess, Mazu (媽祖, Māzǔ). This study aims to examine the relationship between the actors behind the performance of the Mazu ritual shapes the dynamics of the change process over time. The paper explores how the actors revitalize each other and re-express their Chinese Indonesian identity in the worship of Mazu. Conducted between September 2022 and December 2024, this ethnographic study focuses on the key participants temple caretakers, local Chinese Indonesian devotees, cultural intermediaries, and younger generations who each play distinct roles in the ritual process. The data collection involved direct observation, interviews, and visual documentation during the fieldwork. The results show that the participants' roles and relationships in the worship activities greatly influence changes and adaptations in the worship of Mazu. The Chinese Indonesian community's expression of its identity, as articulated through its veneration of Mazu, serves as a testament to its ability to adapt to the contemporary demands of the present. This phenomenon ultimately contributes to the distinctive characteristics of Chinese communities in Indonesia, which differ from those found in other countries.

Keywords: Chinese Indonesian religious identity; ritual performance; Tjoe Tik Kiong Temple

Abstrak

Kelenteng Tjoe Tik Kiong (慈德宮, Cí dé Gōng) yang terletak di Kota Pasuruan mengadakan kegiatan ritual pemujaan terhadap Dewi Makco (媽祖, Māzǔ). Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji relasi antaraktor di balik performance ritual pemujaan Dewi Makco membentuk dinamika proses perubahan tersebut dari waktu ke waktu. Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana para pelaku saling berinteraksi satu sama lain untuk mengekspresikan kembali identitas Tionghoa-Indonesia dalam pemujaan Mazu. Pengambilan data etnografis ini dilakukan antara September 2022 dan Desember 2024, dengan fokus pada narasumber utama pengurus kelenteng, partisipan setempat yang beretnis Tionghoa-Indonesia, pelestari dan pengamat budaya, dan generasi muda kelenteng yang masing-masing memainkan peran berbeda dalam proses ritual. Pengumpulan data lapangan termasuk pengamatan langsung, wawancara, dan dokumentasi visual selama penelitian lapangan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa dinamika pemujaan terhadap Dewi Makco tidak terlepas dari peran dan relasi antaraktor yang terlibat dalam kegiatan pemujaan tersebut. Melalui pemujaan terhadap Dewi Makco, masyarakat Tionghoa mengekspresikan dan merevitalisasi untuk menyesuaikan identitas Tionghoa sesuai dengan tuntutan masa kini. Hal ini pada akhirnya membentuk ciri khas masyarakat Tionghoa di Indonesia yang berbeda dengan masyarakat Tionghoa di negara lain.

Kata kunci: identitas kepercayaan masyarakat Tionghoa Indonesia; ritual pertunjukan; Kelenteng Tjoe Tik Kiong

Introduction

This research investigates the dynamics between ritual actors and the construction of Chinese cultural identity through the veneration of Mazu at the Tjoe Tik Kiong Temple in Pasuruan City, hereafter referred to as Pasuruan Temple. Located in Pasuruan City, East Java, Indonesia, the temple serves as a

key site for worshipping Mazu, the Chinese sea goddess revered among Chinese communities in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia. This study views religious rituals as spiritual acts and social spaces where identities are negotiated, relationships formed, and cultural meanings reshaped, positioning the temple as a stage for expressing and revitalizing Chinese Indonesian identity.

While the scholarly focus has primarily centered on major cities like Jakarta, Medan, or Surabaya, this research addresses the gap by exploring local expressions of Chinese religiosity in smaller cities. Despite comprising only about 1.2 percent of the national population (Arifin et al. 2017), Chinese Indonesians maintain intricate cultural-religious practices that warrant deeper ethnographic inquiry. Historically, Pasuruan was a significant maritime trade hub (Groeneveldt 2018), making it an apt setting to examine the intersection of maritime networks, religious tradition, and identity. This research's novelty lies in its actor-centered approach to analyzing Mazu worship rituals and how these performances reflect evolving Chinese Indonesian identity. It reveals how local religious actors co-create meaning through embodied ritual in the Indonesian context.

According to Groeneveldt's (2018:63) records from the Ming dynasty's Dong Xi Yang Kao (東西洋考, Dōng xī yáng kǎo), many Chinese had already settled in Java before Dutch colonization. Pasuruan later became a key colonial city due to its strategic location, with access to a port and nearby towns. The British arrived before the Dutch, who only occupied Pasuruan around 1707, when the VOC built Fort De Wilde. By 1811, the British had reported Pasuruan's healthy climate and initiated colonial infrastructure development, including the Resident's House (Campbell 1915).

Before modern road networks, the Gembong River was vital for transporting inland agricultural goods to coastal markets, dividing the city in two and flowing through it. However, its strategic importance has since declined (Handinoto 2000). Under Dutch rule, the *wijkenstelsel* segregated ethnic groups, and Pasuruan's Chinatown—located on the city's north side—was a product of this system, evidenced by the presence of Pasuruan Temple. Although the regulation ceased by the 1910s, Chinese residents had already begun living throughout the city (Pradana 2021). The remaining hallmark of the Chinatown area is its straight street grid, which starkly contrasts with the organic layout of the surrounding kampung neighborhoods (Lombard 1996).

One of the highlights of the Pasuruan Temple is the Mazu Goddess ritual. This activity is organized as a religious and cultural ritual. Based on news articles from online newspapers, it can be seen that there is a common thread between temples when organizing 'Mazu Pilgrimage' (in Indonesian, the word is *kirab*) activities and other 'Mazu Pilgrimage' activities in Lasem, Kebumen, Mojokerto, Tulungagung, Rembang, and Kediri in recent years.

The Mazu Pilgrimage in Indonesia takes two primary forms: local and regional. The local pilgrimage, as practiced in Pasuruan, involves parading the goddess within the immediate neighborhood of the temple, emphasizing community participation and reaffirming cultural identity. In contrast, the regional inter-temple pilgrimage extends across cities, linking multiple temples in a collaborative effort that fosters ritual alliances, spiritual networks, and broader cultural visibility. While the local version strengthens communal bonds and devotion at the grassroots level, the regional version reflects a broader translocal solidarity and shared Chinese heritage. **At the Tjoe Tik Kiong Temple in Pasuruan,** these rituals are vital in enhancing social cohesion, allowing community members to collectively celebrate their identity and traditions. In the context of globalization and minority identity preservation, the Mazu Pilgrimage becomes a powerful medium to express Chinese-Indonesian heritage, offering both internal cultural affirmation and external engagement with broader society, thus fostering intercultural understanding and tolerance.

Several scholars have explored the dynamics of Mazu worship from various perspectives. Chang et al. (2020) investigated how the image of religious tourism destinations like the Mazu Temple in Taiwan influences visitors' perceptions of service quality, perceived value, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions, finding that these factors significantly shape the tourist experience. Ke et al. (2021) analyzed the social networks present in the Mazu Pilgrimage Festival, highlighting its role in modern society as a cultural and historical tradition and as a means of social connection and belief transmission. Chia (2007) emphasized the importance of religious belief for Chinese immigrants, noting that it plays a key role in fostering group identity, moral support, and community solidarity.

Chen (2019), in his master's thesis on the motivations of participants in the Mazu ritual in Taichung, found that age, occupation, and educational background significantly influence motivation, loyalty, and satisfaction, providing important perspectives on participant engagement in Mazu worship. Zhong (2021) focused on the cultural localization of the Mazu festival, comparing Beigang and Baishatun in Taiwan, and concluded that Mazu-centered cultural activities contribute to cultural identity and local economic development. Lastly, Chan & Chan (2011) explored the evolution of Mazu worship, finding that mythology, state influence, and the integration of Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist values have shaped the contemporary image and religious function of the Mazu Goddess within society.

The following investigation seek to ascertain the relationship between the individuals responsible for the Mazu worship ritual and the dynamics of the change process over time. It is hypothesized that a comprehensive understanding of the role and relations between the actors behind the performance of the Mazu worship ritual is pivotal in elucidating the revitalization and re-expression of Chinese Indonesian identity. This paper explores how actors maintain and transmit their beliefs and rituals to strengthen their Chinese identity, maintain community harmony, and actively participate in the movement to worship the Mazu Goddess.

Research Method

This ethnographic research, conducted from September 2022 to December 2024 in Pasuruan, East Java, focuses on the worship of the Sea Goddess Mazu and its role in shaping the Chinese Indonesian identity. Fieldwork began with the site introduction on 25 September 2022, followed by an observation of the internal Mazu procession at Pasuruan Temple on 4th October 2022. In preparation for the Ritual and Cultural Parade in Mojokerto, the Pasuruan group held a rehearsal for carrying the palanquin on 7th May 2023, celebrated Mazu's birthday internally on 12th May 2023, and then joined the Ritual and Cultural Parade at Hok Sian Kiong Temple, Mojokerto, on 13th–14th May 2023.

Beyond Mazu-related activities, additional rituals in Pasuruan were observed as part of the research, such as the Birthday Celebration of Lord Guan Gong on 29th July 2024 and the Ghost Festival on 18th August 2024, alongside informal visits to temple events. Key interviews were conducted on 7th March 2024 with officials from the Department of Education and the Department of Tourism, Youth, and Sports of Pasuruan City, as well as the Head of Community Empowerment and Cultural Infrastructure of Gadingrejo Subdistrict. Participant observation, in-depth interviews with caretakers, performers, and devotees, informal conversations, visual documentation, and the collection of ritual texts and symbols formed the core methods, with the data being analyzed thematically according to roles, symbolic meanings, and identity expressions, guided by theories of ritual practice, material agency, and diaspora identity.

Although centered on Pasuruan Temple, comparative visits were also made to the Mojokerto Temple (13th –14th May 2023), the Madiun Temple (11th August 2023), the Gudo Temple in Jombang (4th April 2024), the Kediri Temple (1st May 2024), the Tuban Temple (29th July 2024), the Lasem Temple (November 2024), several temples in Surabaya (14th June and July 2024), and temples in Semarang's Old Chinatown, including participation in the "Tay Kak Sie Cultural Parade" on 4th August 2024. International field trips included visits to Mazu temples in Xi Men Ding (Taipei) and Kaohsiung, Taiwan, in October 2023 were followed by visits to a temple in Melaka and Thean Hou Temple in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in early December 2024. Reflexivity and member checking ensured accuracy and cultural sensitivity throughout the research.

These visits served as crucial comparative contexts to understand how Mazu worship is locally adapted, negotiated, and performed across different regions. Including these sites enhances the depth of the analysis by identifying shared patterns, distinctive practices, and variations in ritual actors, pilgrimage forms, and temple-community relationships. It also allows the study to distinguish what is unique about the Chinese Pasuruan case and what may be part of a broader translocal trend among Chinese Indonesian communities. These comparative visits are not merely supplementary but are methodologically urgent to situate the Pasuruan temple within a wider ritual network, to reflect critically on the dynamics of Chinese identity rearticulation, and to avoid overly localized interpretations.

The selection of informants and sources in Table 1 for this research employs an approach developed within the tradition of performance studies, an interdisciplinary field of study that Richard Schechner pioneered in the 1980s. Schechner (2020) defines performance as “an act of behavior that is intentional and designed to be shown to others.”

Table 1.
Informant's social profiles

The creator	Temple Leaders	2
	Member of the Temple Committee	3
The performer	Bearer of Deity Statues	1
	Bearers of the Goddess's Sedan Chair	3
The participant	Young Temple Worshippers	3
	Onlookers and the Surrounding Community	4
	Secretary-General, Tri Dharma Worship Association	1
The social and cultural context	Cultural Arts Representative, Tri Dharma Worship Association (Central Java), also Author of “Dewa Dewi Klenteng” (2013)	1
	Officials from Pasuruan City Government	2
Total		20

Source: Primary data

Based on these concepts, the researcher sought to identify suitable informants and conducted in-depth interviews in person (face-to-face) via the social media platform WhatsApp. Social media was also used to establish communication with and disseminate information to the research informants. The researchers employed a variety of methods for the data collection. In instances where permission to record was granted, audio interviews and video blogs were recorded. In cases where permission to record was not granted, the researchers took notes after the interview. The interviews conducted via WhatsApp were based on the chat history. However, it should be noted that there were also interviews conducted via voice calls from WhatsApp that were not included in said chat history.

Results and Discussion

The analysis aims to understand how ritual actors at the Tjoe Tik Kiong Temple in Pasuruan engage with and reinterpret the worship of Mazu, the Chinese Sea Goddess, in a way that reflects their evolving identities as Chinese Indonesians. The discussion is structured around the key themes that emerged from the fieldwork: the relational dynamics between ritual actors, the symbolic and material dimensions of the ritual space, and the role of ritual in negotiating identity and community belonging.

These findings are contextualized within broader regional patterns observed during comparative visits to other Mazu temples in Java. This approach helps reveal the distinctive characteristics of the Pasuruan case and how local practices participate in wider networks of meaning-making and religious adaptation. The discussion contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how ethnic and religious identities are actively maintained, contested, and transformed through ritual performance in a minority cultural context.

The meaning and significance of religion, and its role in Chinese politics

The term “religion” (宗教, zōngjiào) did not originally exist in the Chinese vocabulary. The two characters that came to be interpreted as religion were a term that emerged after Indian Buddhism entered China. It also initially lacked the connotations and denotations of “religion” that modern Chinese have today. According to the explanation provided in the Shuowen Jiezi (《说文解字》, shuō wén jiě zì) by Xu Shen (许慎, Xǔ Shèn), a renowned classical and philological scholar during the Han Dynasty, the character zōng (宗) is defined as ‘honoring ancestral temples’. This single character consists of two components: mián (宀) and shì (示). The term “shì” is understood to signify “picture of the sky”, and is regarded as a representation of good or bad fortune directed towards humans. To elaborate further,

the practice of astrology entails observing celestial images to discern alterations in nature and unveiling phenomena regarded as "supernatural". The term "jiào" can be interpreted as "teaching", signifying that the actions of the superior will have a significant impact on those below (Hue 2011).

Heller (2020) posits that the narrative of Mazu Goddess, encompassing her transition from a mortal state to that of a divine entity, exemplifies the deification process inherent within Chinese cultural discourse. In the context of the Chinese culture, the narrative recounts the tale of MoNiang (默娘, MòNiáng), who was born into a family bearing the surname Lin (林, Lín). From a tender age, she exhibited characteristics that set her apart from her peers, notably by displaying an aversion to matrimony. One version of the myth posits that MoNiang died at a young age, and shortly thereafter, she was revived as a goddess who could be worshipped by all those in need of assistance at sea (Olivia 2022). Since the Song Dynasty, the worship of the Mazu goddess has gradually disseminated beyond the confines of Meizhou, accompanied by a proliferation of narratives encompassing miracles and myths. 高瑜 & 廖紫 (1998) asserted that Quanzhou maintained diplomatic relations with over 30 countries and regions during the Song Dynasty. The rise of the Mazu Goddess as a prominent object of worship within the maritime community resulted from the ruling empire's focus on this region.

Recent studies have revealed that changes in contemporary deity worship have also occurred in China and Taiwan, driven by the region's political, social, and cultural dynamics in recent decades. Madsen (2011) contends that China is undergoing a significant religious revival, characterized by the reinvention and resurgence of traditional Chinese religious practices and beliefs and the emergence of novel forms. Ku's (2019) research on the belief in the Mazu Goddess in Taiwan demonstrates that this belief has become a propaganda tool for China in its efforts against Taiwan. The historical practice of worshipping the Mazu Goddess, which has involved the ritual visitation of ancestral temples by the deity to offer incense and symbolize the ancestral land, has been interpreted as a cultural manifestation of the Mazu Goddess. This cultural practice has been identified as a significant component of the cultural identity of the Chinese diaspora. In conclusion, Ku (2019) determined that China has strategically used the Mazu Goddess to promote reunification and exert its influence in foreign countries.

History and background of Chinese beliefs in Indonesia

The traditional religions and beliefs of the Chinese people differ from those of the heavenly religions. The most significant difference is that Chinese people are inclusive, able to accept deities outside of Chinese culture and absorb components from other belief systems. Consequently, as the Chinese community disseminated worldwide, its religious teachings and beliefs also diffused and assimilated with those of local cultures. Cangianto (2012) posits that Chinese places of worship fulfil various social functions, including but not limited to educational, security, defense, social control, social institution, lodging, and free medication.

The most significant change occurred at the turn of the 20th century during the Dutch East Indies colonial rule, when some Peranakan Chinese scholars sought to explore and reinvent the concept of "Chinese religion" to modernize "Chinese society" at that time. This movement bears a striking resemblance to the shifting scope of "religion" that also occurred elsewhere and in China itself. This movement resulted from the process of modernity that the "West," understood here as Christian society, was trying to realize (Duara 2008).

A further change that significantly impacted Chinese religion in Indonesia was the state's requirement for the concept of 'religion' to adhere to monotheistic Islam and Christianity. This policy shift led to various alternative religious movements, including Balinese Hinduism, Javanese (Kejawen), and other faiths. These movements were compelled to modify their beliefs to conform to the state's conceptualization of "religion." They made various adjustments and changes to gain official recognition as a religion, including the necessity of a monotheistic deity, a prophet, holy book, and having a place of worship (Ramstedt 2004). During the Soeharto regime, these changes accelerated, as the state philosophy of Pancasila was considered indispensable as an ideology to counter communism.

The Soeharto regime implemented policies that prohibited displaying “things related to Chinese culture” publicly, citing security concerns (Tsuda 2011). Tsuda (2015) divides the history of Chinese beliefs in Indonesia into two key periods. The first, in the early 20th century, saw figures like Kwee Tek Hoay and the organization Sam Kauw Hwee respond to modernization and a Western influence by reinterpreting Confucian teachings as a spiritual foundation. This was a trend analyzed by Sutrisno (2018), who highlights how Confucianism began transforming into a religion under these pressures. The second period occurred during the Soeharto regime, when Presidential Decree No. 14 of 1967 restricted Chinese cultural and religious expression, creating challenges for many Chinese temples. In response, the *Perkumpulan Tempat Ibadah Tri Dharma* (PTITD) was established in 1967 to preserve and maintain Chinese temples, particularly in Surabaya. Rooted in the Tri Dharma teachings, PTITD aligned itself with Buddhism, one of Indonesia’s recognized official religions, to ensure the survival of Chinese religious heritage (Tsuda 2015).

We must always be able to broaden our horizons as widely as possible, but we should never forget our true identity—as a nation, as an ethnicity, as Muslims, or as Chinese, or as Christians, as Hindus—nor should we blur those identities. That’s why I say Chinese Indonesians lose out compared to Mas Novi Basuki. Mas Novi Basuki is a Javanese Muslim, but he gave his child a Chinese name, while many Chinese Indonesians themselves don’t necessarily give their children Chinese names. I even saw for myself that Mas Novi Basuki and Pak Dahlan Iskan joined in temple rituals even though they are Muslims. Meanwhile, many Chinese who have converted to another religion refuse to go to the Chinese temple, saying it is idolatry, saying it is polytheism... that’s very complicated. So we really must learn how to broaden our knowledge and how to ground our religious teachings in our actions and behavior. (TikTok video by informant HAR, link: <https://www.tiktok.com/@harjantohalim/video/7399428601168399621>, from minute 2:45 to 3:30, accessed September 19, 2024; author also received this video file privately from informant HAR via WhatsApp on August 5, 2024).

The above excerpt shows how the current Chinese generation has been influenced by the ban on Chinese culture during the Soeharto era. Older Chinese generations sometimes forced their children to convert to other religions. After converting to another religion, the leaders of other religions tend not to allow their followers to practice their traditions. This has caused the tradition of worshipping the goddess Mazu to undergo shifts and changes, as lamented by Harjanto Halim, a Chinese figure, cultural activist, and influencer, in one of his TikTok videos.

The history and administration system of Pasuruan Temple

Two publications contain literature regarding the existence of the Pasuruan Temple. These are the book by Franke et al. (1997) and a book written by Moerthiko (1980). In addition to following the provenance of the two books, this research also draws on the historical records published in a newspaper in 1858 as evidence (Figure 1). The newspaper’s contents demonstrate that Pasuruan Temple was inaugurated on October 17, 1857, but they started collecting funds before moving to building construction, and planning in 1853.

The Pasuruan Temple is an association, not a foundation. The administrators and congregation comprise individuals from diverse backgrounds, predominantly ethnic Chinese residing in the Pasuruan City area, with some even inhabiting the vicinity of Surabaya. During the tenure of President Soeharto, the Pasuruan Temple was under the jurisdiction of PTITD, hence the signboard’s inscription, “Place of Worship of Tri Dharma Tjoe Tik Kiong” (in Indonesian, Tempat Ibadah Tri Dharma Tjoe Tik Kiong).

From an administrative perspective, the Pasuruan Temple continues to adhere to traditional practices, as evidenced by the absence of documented records or minutes of joint meetings. The concerned individuals verbally remember the results of meetings and their respective tasks. The humanist and family sides are closely linked among the administrators and the congregation. The organization of photographs and documentation of activities is inadequate. Historically, photograph preservation has

entailed printing photographs, their subsequent insertion into photographic albums, and their storage within cupboards. This method of documentation has often lacked a systematic record of the date and name of the event. The old photo albums were placed and stacked in a single cupboard without regard for systematic arrangement. As digital cameras became more prevalent, this engendered another issue, namely that there were no printouts of the documentation available for reference. These were stored on the subjects' mobile phones.

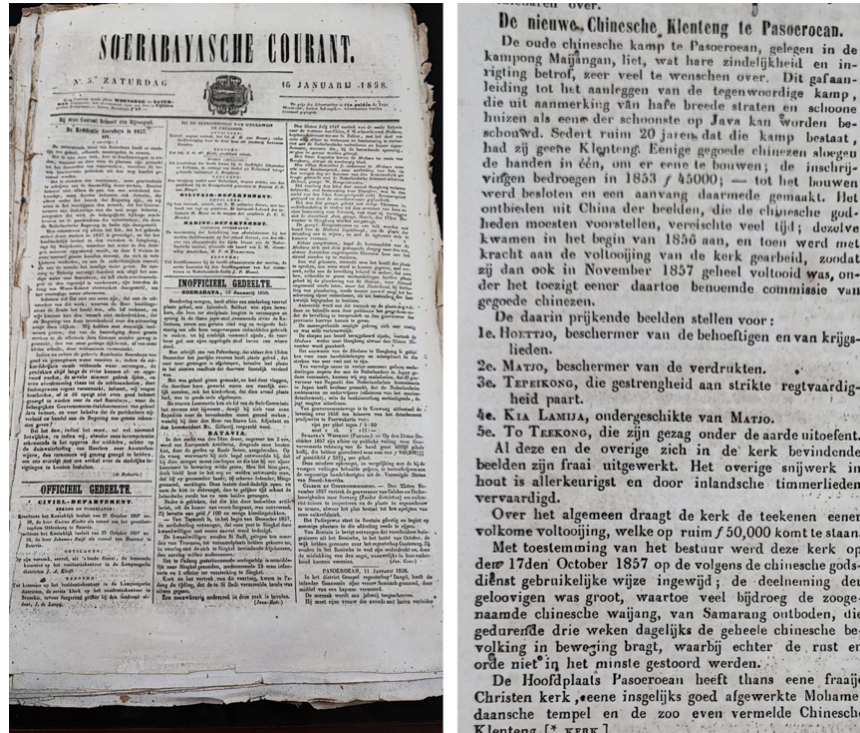


Figure 1.

Soerabajasche Courant published on January 16, 1858

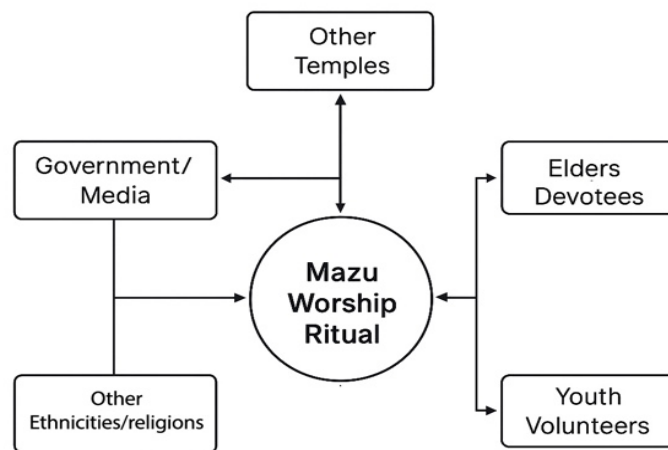
Source: Author's personal documents, retrieved on July 10, 2023.

It is a general requirement that candidates for the position of chairman of the Tjoe Tik King temple be over 50. Subsequently, the names are presented before the altar of Mazu Goddess for approval, following the execution of the 'pak pwee' (擲筊, Zhì xiào, poe divination or divination blocks) ritual. Following the attainment of the approval of the Mazu Goddess, the members of the temple, who are obligated to pay monthly dues, proceed to cast a vote. Although the temple is open to the public and to all those who wish to participate, there is a type of membership that requires members to pay compulsory dues monthly. The amount of these dues is not specified. It is imperative to note that the prerogative to cast votes is contingent upon the fulfillment of monthly dues payments to the temple.

The term of office at Pasuruan Temple is generally five years. However, people can sometimes be elected for several terms; for example, Liem Tjhoen Kiat has been chairman since 2005. Due to the global impact of the 2020 pandemic, the election of the next chairman and board was delayed. The election of the chairman and administrators of Pasuruan Temple was only held on September 6th, 2023. In Tjoe Tik Kiong Temple, all greet one another with Chinese names written in the Hokkien pronunciation rather than Indonesian names.

The roles and power relations of Pasuruan Temple

Various external parties with a range of interests have influenced the beliefs and rituals surrounding the Mazu Goddess. As a Chinese community that constitutes a minority in Indonesia, the relationships and roles of various parties significantly impact the dynamics of change in beliefs and rituals towards the Mazu Goddess.



Actor Relationships

Figure 2.

Actor relationships at Pasuruan temple

Source: Created by the author

Power relations are defined as the relationship between actors possessing different powers and interests. The primary data (Figure 2) shows that those actors possess the capacity to modify or exert influence over the actions of other actors, thereby demonstrating an element of power to influence the course of events or activities according to the interests of specific actors.

In Figure 2, the temple management leaders and other congregation members are visible. The relationship among the leaders and administrators is generally marked by a sense of kinship and mutual respect, with members maintaining close yet non-intrusive connections, avoiding direct involvement in personal disputes to preserve harmony. While the temple head often initiates activities like the Mazu Pilgrimage, sometimes even funding them personally, internal conflicts over resources and power can still arise, as exemplified by the decline of Kwan Sing Bio Temple in Tuban due to administrative rivalries since its peak in the 1980s–90s.

The relationship between the temple and the Pasuruan City Government can also be seen. As a minority group in Pasuruan, the ethnic Chinese community has long strived to maintain harmonious relations with other ethnic groups, symbolized by the presence of Pasuruan Temple. Historical evidence, such as using Chinese heritage buildings and cultural events held in public spaces like the city square, points to a past era of inclusivity and mutual respect. However, this harmony has diminished over time, as seen in the reduced public visibility of Chinese cultural expressions in Pasuruan today. The temple was officially designated as a city-level cultural heritage site in 2015 and this was reaffirmed in 2020 but the current engagement with the community remains minimal. Government support is symbolic, mainly limited to school visits and occasional lion dance invitations, without deeper cultural or political recognition.

According to KUR, Head of the Community Empowerment Section and Head of the Cultural Facilities and Infrastructure Section, Gadingrejo District, Pasuruan, many cultural heritage buildings belong to ethnic Chinese. Many of these buildings have been converted into government buildings during the reign of President Soeharto. This is evidence that in the past, the Chinese community in Pasuruan lived in harmony and were well accepted by the local population. From the book ‘100 Years of THHK in Pasuruan City’, this research also uncovered evidence of Pasuruan Chinese community events in Pasuruan City Square (in front of the Al-Anwar Grand Mosque in Pasuruan City). Unfortunately, the harmony of the past seen in various Pasuruan City events is no longer seen much in the present. Pasuruan City Square now seems sacred as part of the Al-Anwar Grand Mosque of Pasuruan City. About the harmony in Pasuruan city, he said:

"Pasuruan has been famous for a long time for its tolerance between religions, between ethnic groups, and between different ethnicities. However, we cannot deny specific periods, such as when Gus Dur was deposed and riots broke out and caused destruction. In Jakarta, it was clearly like that. But in Pasuruan, it wasn't actually triggered by racial factors. There is nothing wrong with churches and mosques in Pasuruan. On Jalan Jawa, there are churches located near residential areas. There are also shops in their neighborhoods. It is safe, has no problems, and has nothing to worry about." (Informant KUR).

Interviews with the Pasuruan City Education Office and the Tourism, Youth, and Sports Office revealed that the government support for events organized by the Pasuruan Temple, such as the Mazu Pilgrimage Festival, remains limited due to concerns that the ethnic and religious majority may not accept such activities (DWI, March 7, 2024). The government involvement is mainly symbolic, such as inviting the temple to perform lion dances at official events, including those outside the region. The Education Office also confirmed that, following the temple's designation as a city-level cultural heritage site, their involvement has been limited to organizing student visits from elementary to high school levels, focusing only on the temple's status as a heritage building without explaining its cultural and political significance. Despite this, the temple continues to demonstrate interethnic solidarity by hosting annual iftar events during Ramadan, such as the one on March 26th, 2024 that was attended by Vice Mayor Adi Wibowo, where 500 rice boxes were distributed freely (Bakalan 2024).

While the relationship between the government and the Temple appears cordial, real institutional support for preserving and promoting Chinese culture remains lacking. This contrasts with Mojokerto, Solo, and Semarang, where local governments actively support large-scale Mazu Pilgrimage festivals that receive national media attention. The current relationship is limited to inviting the temple to contribute to lion dance performances as part of government activities. The current demand is for representatives of cultural performances from each ethnic group. This contrasts with the cities of Mojokerto, Solo and Semarang, where the city governments are very supportive of the Mazu Pilgrimage on a large scale and they are often covered by national mass media.

Maintaining harmonious relations between the Chinese diaspora and local populations is crucial, despite their differing lifestyles and worldviews. Overseas Chinese communities often adopt strategies of mutual understanding and cooperation to integrate into their host societies, a pattern widely observed in Southeast Asia where diasporic Chinese maintain cultural roots while accommodating local norms (Hoon 2008). Kuah-Pearce & Davidson (2008) explores how collective and individual memories shape the sense of belonging among Chinese diasporic communities across the globe. The philosophy of "universal tolerance and compassion" embodied by the Mazu Goddess underpins these efforts, promoting peaceful coexistence. This principle is evident in how Chinese temples in Pasuruan interact with the broader community. The relationship between other ethnicities and religion is crucial to maintaining peace. In the field interviews with a pedicab driver near Pasuruan Station, a Flores-born bakery worker on Raya Road, and two Javanese shopkeepers near the Pasuruan Temple, all confirmed that the temple is widely recognized as a Chinese place of worship. Most locals reported only entering the temple during charitable events, such as food distribution or through school visits. Additionally, during the observation of the Hunger Ghost Festival, a 37-year-old Madurese mother (people living near the temple) was encountered helping with food preparation. She was accompanied by her two children—one in high school and the other in kindergarten—highlighting the informal local participation in temple activities.

"I have only been twice. The last time was during the fasting month when my friend invited me (pointing to the person beside him). She invited me to cook rice. Got paid IDR 125.000 yesterday. I want to see the burning paper effigies. I am originally from Madura and married to a person here. Started unmarried, in 2007 joined the sales, then married. I knew there was a temple but I never went in, except for the month of Ramadan when free food came, the same as the rice distribution." (Informant NAM).

However, from internet searches, it turns out that other ethnic groups visit the inside of the temple where the altars of the deities are located. In fact, they do not hesitate to take pictures with the statue of Guan Yin Goddess as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3.
Group photos of Haul Gus Dur 2019
Source: PPIK (2019)

The lion dance troupe affiliated with the Pasuruan Temple is now primarily composed of individuals from non-Chinese ethnic backgrounds. These performers—including musicians and dancers—actively participate in temple activities and represent the Chinese community in cultural performances requested by the Pasuruan City Government. The lion dance group is open to the public and includes many children and residents from various ethnicities in Pasuruan. Other temple-based groups, such as karaoke, dance, and the 婦女部 (Fùnǚ bù, Women's Group), also welcome participation from people of all religions and backgrounds. The temple consistently promotes inclusivity, especially during deity anniversaries and Chinese festivals, by inviting guests from outside the Chinese community. Guest lists often include government officials, religious figures, and community leaders, demonstrating the temple's commitment to intercultural and interfaith engagement. Their efforts reflect a broader openness and willingness to collaborate with individuals, organizations, and governmental bodies beyond the Chinese community.

Pasuruan temples under the Indonesian Tri Dharma Association (PTITD) generally maintain cooperative and supportive relationships in religious, cultural, and social matters, although each Temple retains full autonomy over its governance. Temple administrators often stay connected through WhatsApp groups, sharing information about upcoming events and extending invitations to each other's celebrations. These exchanges foster interpersonal ties and help improve temple management by learning from one another. Administrators who frequently visit other temples as guests or participants often become well-acquainted with their counterparts. Support is shown not only through personal attendance but also by sending greeting boards for various events. Additionally, international connections are evident, such as the visit by a delegation from Xian Liang Gang Mazu Birthplace (賢良港媽祖誕生地), Putian, China, who toured several Mazu temples across Java—including in Jakarta, Semarang, Kediri, Madiun, Jombang, and Surabaya—from 14th to 21st November 2024.



Figure 4.
Photo of Putian Delegation's Visit to Sukhaloka Temple, Surabaya
Source: Informant EVA, Sukhaloka Temple caretaker, via WA on 17 November 2024.

"No, there isn't... It's just a trend. Like modern hampers... instead of flowers, which eventually wilt and are different from others... that's all. There is no special meaning or significance... it's just to make it more useful and different from others." (Informant EVA).

The Sukhaloka Temple in Surabaya shared some interesting photos from the visit. These photos show the decorations of Mazu Goddess, which were made from several hundred thousand rupiah, as shown in Figure 4. The caretaker was asked about any special meaning behind this and provided explanation, as conveyed by the informant EVA. The efforts of each temple to establish good relationships with one another, both locally and with those coming from abroad, are evident.

Common identities of Chinese communities in the temple

In this discussion, an analysis of the identity of the Chinese temple community is proposed, considering two distinct categories: political (national) identity and cultural identity, as proposed by Wang (1991). Wang contends that cultural identity within overseas Chinese communities is anchored in the preservation of rituals and traditions deeply rooted in Chinese heritage. Recent research reaffirms and expands upon this theory. For instance, Zhang (2021) demonstrates that cross-strait Mazu pilgrimages help the diaspora cultivate a shared cultural belonging that transcends national borders, affirming ritual as a vehicle of identity consolidation. Similarly, Harianto et al. (2025) show how processions like the one for Kwan Im Goddess in Tangerang preserve Chinese religious performance while embracing inclusivity, reinforcing communal identity through continuity and adaptation. These findings resonate with the Pasuruan context—despite acculturation and the evolving social conditions in Indonesia, the local Chinese community continues to uphold traditions like the Mazu Pilgrimage to sustain ancestral connections and cultural heritage. Thus, this study confirms and advances Wang's proposition by illustrating how ritual dynamics actively shape diasporic identity in contemporary, pluralistic settings.

Many factors, including historical background, cultural norms, customs, geographical location, community characteristics, and political conditions and power in Indonesia, influence the positioning of ethnic Chinese individuals regarding cultural identity. Hall (1990) asserts that cultural identity indicates a group's historical and cultural experiences. Cultural identity is defined as a series of continuous and perpetual processes yet it always emerges during identification in the context of history and culture. This study aims to discuss how the Pasuruan Chinese community revitalizes and re-expresses its Chinese identity in the context of worship activities and the implementation of Mazu worship rituals.



Figure 5.
Pasuruan Temple in 1947
Source: Indiegangers (nd)

The identity of Chinese-owned buildings can be understood by analyzing their architectural design. However, it is noteworthy that the attributes of Chinese community symbols were incorporated into the initial construction of the Pasuruan Temple during the reign of President Soeharto. In Figure 5, it can be seen that the fence at the Pasuruan temple is straightforward. Changes and additions to Chinese

ornaments have been observed not only in the fence building but also in the pagoda shape of the kiln, which was originally simple and has undergone significant modification. The kiln has been transformed into a pagoda, which rises to a greater height and is characterized by its red and yellow colors. The color scheme of red and yellow has become synonymous with the temple building.



Figure 6.

Pasuruan Temple (temple collection) in 1975
Source: Original documents obtained by the author

Figure 6 shows that from the 1970s to the early 1980s, the Temple used red and white as its main colors, including on the main altar and the adjacent Medicine Hall. This reflects its function as more than a religious site. It also serves as a hub for social interactions, health services, education, and funeral arrangements. The temple is a cultural center where Chinese art is preserved and developed, featuring traditional decorations, deity statues, wall paintings, carvings, ceramics, and ceremonial altars. Historically, public performances such as lion dances, potehi (Chinese puppetry), and opera were common in the temple courtyard. Today, only the lion dance and potehi remain frequent, with many performers now being of Javanese ethnicity (Olivia 2010). This reflects how the Chinese culture in Indonesia has been simplified and adapted over time. Temples play a crucial role in preserving and promoting these arts to the wider public, while also adjusting them to fit Indonesia's political, religious, and social environment.

Language is a key marker of ethnic identity, and the Chinese community in Pasuruan reflects this through the daily use of kinship terms like "mama" and "papa," as well as sibling terms in Hokkien. Even after the Soeharto era, Chinese nicknames continued to be used in temple documents, despite official Indonesian names on birth certificates for those born after 1970. These Hokkien names remain in use, although they may be difficult for outsiders to pronounce or recognize. The community mixes Javanese, Indonesian, and some Hokkien terms in daily interactions. Older members tend to speak Chinese more freely within their circle, viewing the language as a source of intimacy and security—a response to past fears of expressing their cultural identity openly. Rituals also retain key Chinese terms, such as *pai* (bowing), *kui* (kneeling), and phrases like *uun* (allow) and *bo uun* (not allow) during divination practices, distinguishing them from other ethnic rituals.

This multilingual practice is not unique to Pasuruan but resonates with broader Chinese temple traditions in Indonesia. For example, during the Kwan Kong birthday celebration at Kwan Sing Bio, Tuban on July 29, 2024, prayers were recited in Chinese when skilled readers were present. Interviews with Pasuruan residents reveal that older generations still prefer using Hokkien and Chinese in ritual contexts,

while the younger generations often shift to Indonesian or Javanese, indicating both continuity and adaptation. This finding reflects cultural resilience through the preservation of ancestral languages while simultaneously accommodating evolving identities in a multilingual environment. Similar dynamics have been observed in other diaspora settings, where language serves as a marker of identity negotiation (Kuah-Pearce & Davidson 2008) and sustains collective memory and belonging (Zhang 2021). Thus, the Pasuruan case exemplifies how multilingual practices within ritual spaces embody both heritage preservation and adaptive strategies of identity formation.

Conclusion

This study reveals that the dynamics of Mazu worship cannot be separated from the relationships among the various actors involved. The roles played by the temple committee, volunteers, devotees, other ethnic and religious communities, media, and government institutions demonstrate that ritual change results from internal belief systems and a response to external sociopolitical and cultural pressures. These relationships, both collaborative and negotiated, shape how rituals are preserved, adapted, or reinvented over time. This research found that the Chinese Indonesian community expresses its evolving identity through worshipping Mazu in ways that demonstrate adaptability to contemporary circumstances. While maintaining core elements of tradition, the ritual also incorporates modern influences, such as new terms, visual styles, and organizational strategies, to resonate with younger generations and broader society. For instance, shifts in translation practices and symbolic interpretation (e.g., the use of "Earth Angel" is better than using God of Earth) reflect a hybrid cultural logic shaped by both Chinese heritage and local-global influences.

The Temple functions as a site of cultural negotiation, where ritual practice, education, heritage preservation, and community building converge. It serves as a religious center and a space where interethnic cooperation and identity reinforcement occur. Ritual innovations, including youth, collaborations with non-Chinese volunteers, and adjusted procession formats, reflect strategic responses to the changing cultural landscape. One of the central contributions of this study is showing how ritual actors collectively respond to historical trauma, state regulations, and generational shifts by reinterpreting Mazu worship in inclusive and flexible ways. These dynamics show that tradition is not static but continuously co-produced through actor relationships.

Future studies may examine how formal education, temple documentation practices, and media representation affect cultural-religious knowledge transmission. Further inquiry is encouraged into how interethnic cooperation within ritual spaces shapes perceptions of Chinese identity in plural societies. Lastly, the role of language — especially Hokkien and its intersection with Indonesian and Javanese — should be more deeply analyzed in the context of identity preservation and ritual communication.

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