

Research Article

# Adapting Through Belief: The Persistent Rituals of Phuket's Jia Cai Festival

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## Abstract

The Jia Cai Festival, commonly known as the Phuket Vegetarian Festival, has its origins in the early 19th century when Chinese immigrants from Fujian brought their religious practices to Phuket. Initially a private religious ceremony, it has since evolved into a prominent public and globally recognized event, attracting both local and international attention. This paper critically explores the historical roots and cultural significance of the Jia Cai Festival, tracing its origins to a malaria outbreak among Chinese immigrants. In seeking divine intervention, these immigrants dedicated themselves to nine days of vegetarian fasting in honor of the Nine Emperor Gods. Over time, this devotion has solidified into a deeply rooted tradition that reflects both religious faith and cultural identity. The research highlights how the Jia Cai Festival has been shaped by a synthesis of Chinese Taoist and Thai ritualistic elements, creating a unique cultural expression. The enduring belief in vegetarianism has driven adaptations in vegetarian food offerings to suit contemporary tastes while retaining the festival's core spiritual and cultural rituals. This delicate balance underscores the ongoing tension between preserving tradition and embracing modernity. However, the festival faces challenges, particularly the risk of cultural erosion due to increasing commercialization and tourism-driven modifications. By examining these dynamics, the study underscores the Jia Cai Festival's role as a symbol of cultural resilience. It demonstrates how the festival continues to foster social solidarity, cultural diversity, and economic prosperity, even amidst evolving societal contexts. Ultimately, this research contributes to broader discussions on cultural preservation, highlighting the significance of adaptive strategies in maintaining the integrity of traditional practices while ensuring their relevance in a modern, globalized world. The Jia Cai Festival stands as a testament to the enduring power of cultural heritage in promoting community identity and cohesion.

## Keywords

Phuket, Overseas Chinese, Jia Cai Festival, Vegetarian Festival, Belief, Cultural Resilience

## 1. Introduction

The Jia Cai Festival, more widely known as the Phuket Vegetarian Festival, is a vivid testament to the enduring power of belief and cultural tradition in Phuket, Thailand. Originally a modest religious observance rooted in the Chinese immigrant community, this festival has transformed into

a significant provincial event, reflecting the resilience and adaptability of its core rituals. From its origins as a household practice among Chinese Taoist immigrants, the Jia Cai Festival has evolved into a symbol of cultural continuity and adaptation, attracting both local participants and international

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attention.

This paper aims to unravel the intricate layers of the Jia Cai Festival, tracing its journey from a 19th-century Chinese immigrant ritual to a celebrated festival that embodies the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. The festival's historical backdrop is marked by the fusion of Chinese Taoist beliefs with local Thai culture, creating a unique cultural synthesis that has been preserved and transformed over time. Initially confined to private homes and neighborhood shrines, the festival now plays a central role in Phuket's cultural identity, serving as a spiritual touchstone for the local community, a major tourist attraction, and a platform for cultural exchange. This study delves into the historical evolution of the festival, exploring how deep-rooted beliefs transported across seas were reinterpreted in a new cultural landscape. It examines the integration of Chinese religious practices within Phuket's socio-cultural fabric, highlighting how these traditions were embraced and adapted to thrive on a provincial scale. The paper critically engages with the contemporary relevance of the festival, addressing the challenges and adaptations it faces in the modern era, including the pressures of globalization, commercialization, and shifting cultural dynamics.

A particular focus is placed on the evolution of vegetarian food culture within the festival. Once characterized by simple, austere dishes prepared within shrine grounds, the vegetarian offerings have progressively adapted to modern tastes, reflecting broader changes within the festival. This culinary transformation underscores the tension between maintaining traditional practices and meeting the demands of an increasingly diverse audience. By dissecting the festival's evolution, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of cultural persistence and transformation within diaspora communities, emphasizing the broader implications of such festivals in fostering social cohesion, cultural diversity, and economic development. Through this exploration, the paper provides a comprehensive narrative of how a deeply rooted belief has survived and flourished in a globalized world, evolving from a private observance into a festival of significant provincial and cultural importance. Additionally, the analysis incorporates a reflexive approach, considering the author's positionality and relationships with community members and addressing the social tensions and ambiguities that have shaped the festival's ongoing evolution.

## 2. Literature Reviews

The existing research on the Jia Cai Festival, also known as the Phuket Vegetarian Festival, primarily focuses on the historical context, significance, and traditional customs associated with the religious beliefs of Chinese immigrants in Thailand. These studies explore the socio-cultural changes the Jia Cai tradition has undergone, providing a rich backdrop for its historical evolution.

Kaewtan [14] examines the history and settlement process

of the Minnan Chinese in Thap Thieng village, Mueang district, Trang province. This research highlights the origins of the vegetarian festival, initiated by Chinese immigrants approximately 150 years ago. The festival, held at Wat Prasithichaiya temple, spans the first to the ninth day of the ninth lunar month in the traditional Chinese calendar and includes the dedication of incense burners to nine deities from China. Participants, adhering to a strict vegetarian diet and donning plain clothing, engage in spiritual practices to honor their ancestors and foster community unity [6, 20]. Despite maintaining traditional rituals, adjustments have been made over time to accommodate evolving social conditions, emphasizing physical and mental health and resulting in increased participation [19, 31].

Beyond its spiritual dimensions, the vegetarian tradition in Trang province has also acquired significant economic value, driven by its promotion through vegetarian food stores, tourism, and the development of a plain clothing culture [21, 23]. Waranpitikul [34] notes that this tradition historically fostered solidarity within the Chinese immigrant community, helping to establish social networks, reduce conflicts, and reinforce Chinese identity. Although modern vegetarian rituals still affirm this identity, their primary objective has shifted towards personal well-being and happiness, driven by the central belief in the Nine Emperor Gods [22, 29].

Further research by Suwattanatham [31] on the September Vegetarian Festival traces its origins to about 100 years ago, linking it to the Nine Emperor Gods and the Jiujia opera tradition. The strict practices of the opera troupe members, including wearing white clothes and maintaining long hair, reflect the deep-rooted faith in these rituals. However, despite the rich mythology and history associated with the festival, much of its legendary origins remain rooted in personal beliefs rather than concrete evidence, highlighting the need for further scholarly investigation [5, 30].

Studies on the beliefs of the Thai-Chinese community, particularly concerning the Jia Cai tradition, emphasize the continued importance of faith and cultural practices in shaping community and familial relationships. Sawapa [30] explored these practices across various provinces and found that while belief systems remain strong, the levels of engagement vary across different age groups, with the elder in the local exhibiting higher belief standards and the younger generations showing greater behavioral engagement [7, 25]. These findings underscore the tradition's role in sustaining personal and community connections amidst changing social contexts [2, 3, 9, 15, 16, 36].

However, while the existing literature provides a comprehensive historical overview of the Jia Cai festival, it primarily focuses on documenting traditional practices without delving deeply into the specific transformations these rituals have undergone. In particular, the evolution of vegetarian food culture—a central aspect of the festival—has not been sufficiently analyzed regarding its cultural significance and adaptation to modern dietary trends. This gap in the literature

suggests a need for further exploration into how the festival's culinary practices have evolved and how these changes reflect broader shifts in food culture, dietary habits, and cultural exchange in contemporary society.

Considering the evolving nature of the Jia Cai Festival and the gaps identified in existing literature, this study seeks to answer the following research question: How has the adaptation of vegetarian food culture within the Jia Cai Festival reflected the deepening belief in its rituals and in what ways have these adaptations helped sustain the festival's relevance and cultural significance in the modern era? This research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how the persistence of belief has driven the transformation of the festival's culinary practices, ensuring the continuity and vibrancy of the Jia Cai Festival in a globalized world.

### 3. Historical and Cultural Contexts

The Jia Cai Festival, commonly known as the Phuket Vegetarian Festival, is deeply embedded in the history and culture of the Chinese immigrant community in Thailand. Its origins trace back to the early 19th century when Chinese laborers, primarily from the Fujian province, migrated to Thailand to work in the tin mines of Phuket Island. These immigrants brought their religious beliefs and cultural practices, laying the foundation for the Jia Cai Festival [7].

The festival's inception is attributed to a miraculous event during a malaria outbreak among the Chinese miners in the 1820s. To cleanse themselves of impurities and appease the Nine Emperor Gods, the miners adopted a strict vegetarian diet for nine days, accompanied by various religious rituals. Remarkably, the community's health improved, which they attributed to divine intervention by the gods. This event marked the beginning of the Phuket Vegetarian Festival [32]. Initially, the festival was private, confined to family homes and neighborhood temples, focusing on spiritual purification and seeking blessings from the Nine Emperor Gods. Participants adhered to strict dietary restrictions, abstaining from meat, alcohol, and other impurities. Rituals included prayers, offerings, and the lighting of incense, conducted within intimate settings [5].

As the Chinese community in Phuket grew, so did the scale and scope of the Jia Cai Festival. The transformation of Phuket from a mining hub to a tourism hotspot in the late 20th century played a significant role in this evolution. What began as a modest community observance attracted a broader audience, including local Thais and international tourists [8]. The shift from a mining-based economy to tourism profoundly changed the island's socio-economic landscape, facilitating the festival's expansion and evolution. Once a private, community-centered event, the festival transformed into a public spectacle, featuring grand processions, elaborate rituals, and a wide array of vegetarian food offerings [14].

The Jia Cai Festival is a remarkable example of cultural integration and adaptation. At its core, Chinese Taoist prac-

tices seamlessly blended with local Thai customs, creating a unique cultural fusion. Over time, the festival incorporated elements of Thai culture, such as traditional Thai music and dance in processions, and adopted the Thai language in rituals and announcements [1]. The diversification of the festival's activities reflects its adaptive nature. Traditional rituals like the piercing of cheeks with sharp objects, fire-walking, and other acts of self-mortification are performed by devotees to demonstrate their faith and seek protection from evil spirits. While rooted in Chinese Taoist practices, these acts have taken on a distinct local flavor, influenced by Thai spiritual and cultural elements [31].

The festival has faced the dual challenges of modernization and commercialization in recent decades. The rise of global tourism has turned the Jia Cai Festival into a major tourist attraction, bringing economic benefits to Phuket while raising concerns about the dilution of its cultural and spiritual essence. Once simple and austere, traditional vegetarian food offerings have evolved to include a variety of dishes, incorporating innovative flavors and plant-based meat substitutes to cater to modern tastes [18]. The commercialization of the festival has sparked debate within the community. While many welcome the changes as necessary for the festival's survival and growth, others fear that the core values and spiritual significance of the Jia Cai Tradition are being compromised. This tension highlights the ongoing struggle to balance cultural preservation with the demands of a modern, globalized world [6].

The historical and cultural context of the Jia Cai Festival underscores its significance as a living tradition that has evolved from a communal response to illness into a vibrant celebration of cultural identity and spiritual devotion. The festival's ability to adapt while maintaining its core values is a testament to the resilience and creativity of the Chinese community in Phuket [31]. As it continues to navigate the challenges of modernization and globalization, the Jia Cai Festival remains a powerful symbol of cultural continuity and transformation.

### 4. Methodology

This study utilizes a multidisciplinary approach, combining anthropology, cultural studies, and food culture analysis to examine the evolution of the Jia Cai Festival and the enduring belief in the Nine Emperor Gods within Phuket's Chinese community. The methodology integrates immersive ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and historical analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of how these traditions have adapted, mainly focusing on the transformation of vegetarian food culture.

Inspired by Malinowski [17] and Geertz [10], ethnographic fieldwork involved participant observation during the festival, offering firsthand insights into the rituals and evolving food practices. This approach allowed the researcher to experience the cultural dynamics directly, capturing the inter-

section of tradition and modernity.

Semi-structured interviews with local community members, cultural custodians, and festival participants were conducted, following the interpretive frameworks of Geertz [10] and Rosaldo [27]. These interviews explored personal narratives and perceptions of the ongoing adaptations in the festival, particularly concerning vegetarian food practices, providing rich qualitative data that complemented the field observations.

A historical analysis, guided by the principles of historical anthropology [28, 35], contextualized the festival's current practices within its historical development. This approach traced the festival's evolution and rituals, explicitly focusing on the changes in vegetarian food culture.

Data from these methods were analyzed using thematic analysis within a grounded theory framework [11], allowing for the identification of key themes that elucidate the cultural and historical significance of the festival's adaptations. This methodological approach ensures a rigorous and nuanced exploration of how the Jia Cai Festival continues to evolve while maintaining its core beliefs and practices.

## 5. Main Findings

### 5.1. The Socio-Cultural Evolution of Phuket's Jia Cai Festival

The Jia Cai Festival has undergone a complex transformation process, reflecting a spirit of adaptability in naming rituals and specific practices. Through fieldwork and interviews with residents, significant changes and developments in the festival, such as its historical background and cultural shifts, have been identified as symbolic transformations. These changes highlight the festival's adaptation and response to internal and external pressures, illustrating how the Chinese community in Phuket reinforces its cultural identity and maintains the continuity of its cultural heritage amidst globalization.

#### 5.1.1. Historical and Cultural Changes in the Jia Cai Tradition

In Phuket, Thailand, Chinese immigrant cultural traditions have thrived and integrated with local culture. The Jia Cai Festival, preserved through family ties and community interactions, exemplifies this cultural resilience. This heritage persists due to cultural similarities that facilitate integration. The evolution of Chinese culture in Phuket maintains adherence to ancestral identity while adapting to the local environment. Despite differences with local Thai traditions, the Chinese community preserves many cultural symbols. Cultural exchange between Thai Buddhists and the Chinese community has led to mutual acceptance and adaptation of each other's practices, fostering progress and well-being. Cultural integration has brought changes, yet the Chinese

community in Phuket remains influential in political, social, and cultural realms, contributing significantly to Phuket's social capital and tourism industry. Phuket stands out as a model of multicultural integration, preserving and developing Chinese immigrant traditions more effectively than other regions. The influence of the Jia Cai Festival varies across countries. Historical factors in China have led to its decline, while modernization has weakened its observance in Singapore and Hong Kong. In predominantly Muslim Malaysia and Indonesia, religious dietary restrictions limit its practice.

Conversely, the festival thrives in Thailand, attributed to the Thai people's acceptance of other cultures and adaptability, fostering a harmonious cultural atmosphere. Thailand's openness has enabled the Jia Cai Festival's survival, showcasing cultural diversity. The festival's existence and development are influenced by cultural, religious, and political factors, with each region's unique background shaping its trajectory. Thailand's cultural inclusiveness has provided a conducive environment for the flourishing of the Jia Cai Festival.

#### 5.1.2. The Name's Transformation

The ritual and symbolic transformations of the Jia Cai Festival are evident in its evolving names, reflecting changes in cultural and religious significance. Initially, "Jia Cai" denoted the practice of eating vegetarian food dedicated to the Nine Emperor Gods, observed from the first to the ninth day of the ninth lunar month. The Shui Dui Dou Mu shrine historically referred to this festival as "Jia Cai." However, between 1988 and 2000, the shrine changed its name to the "Vegetarian Festival," while the Phuket Cultural Committee continued to use "Jia Cai." In 2001, the shrine reverted to "Jia Cai," but by 2003, it was renamed the "Vegetarian Festival" or the "Nine Emperor Gods' Festival," which is still used today. Despite these changes, "Jia Cai" remains widely used in spoken Chinese. The Shui Dui Dou Mu shrine has sought terms that accurately convey the traditional meaning of the festival. The term "Vegetarian Festival" aligns with Mahayana Buddhism's strict vegetarian precepts, which do not fully capture the festival's practices. The term "Jia Cai" accurately reflects the traditional meaning but lacks emphasis on precepts or taboos observed by those eating the Nine Emperor Gods' food. The transition from the "Jia Cai Festival" to the "Vegetarian Festival" and then to the "Nine Emperor Gods' Festival" illustrates varying community interpretations and acceptance of the tradition. These name changes are not merely redefinitions but result from the interplay between community cultural identity and external influences. This evolution highlights how rituals adapt to changes in social perception and cultural policies.

The festival, initially rooted in Chinese Taoist practices, has incorporated elements of Thai culture. This includes using traditional Thai music and dance in processions and adopting the Thai language in rituals and announcements. This blending of cultures has allowed the festival to resonate



with a broader audience, enhancing its appeal and accessibility. Initially a private observance confined to family homes and neighborhood temples, the Jia Cai Festival has transformed into a large-scale public event. This change was driven mainly by Phuket's shift from a mining economy to a tourism hub, which attracted local and international visitors. As a result, the festival expanded in scope and visibility, becoming a major attraction on the island. The rise of global tourism has turned the festival into a significant tourist attraction, contributing to the local economy. This commercialization has led to modern elements, such as innovative vegetarian food catering to contemporary tastes. While these changes have increased the festival's economic benefits, they also raise concerns about diluting its cultural and spiritual essence. Traditional rituals, such as piercing cheeks with sharp objects, fire-walking, and other acts of self-mortification, have been maintained but are now performed with a distinct local flavor influenced by Thai cultural elements. This diversification reflects the festival's adaptive nature, allowing it to remain relevant in a changing cultural landscape. Despite these changes, the festival continues to serve as a vital means of preserving and expressing the cultural identity of the Chinese community in Phuket. It reinforces cultural heritage and provides a sense of continuity amid globalization. The festival's ability to adapt while maintaining its core values is a testament to the resilience and creativity of the community. The changing names of the festival—from "Jia Cai" to "Vegetarian Festival" to "Nine Emperor Gods' Festival"—reflect shifts in cultural and religious significance. These changes illustrate the community's attempts to convey the festival's traditional meaning while adapting to evolving social perceptions and cultural policies. These socio-cultural changes demonstrate the festival's dynamic nature, highlighting its role as a living tradition that continues to evolve while preserving its cultural roots. The Jia Cai Festival remains a powerful symbol of cultural continuity and transformation, navigating the challenges of modernization and globalization.

## 5.2. Drivers of Change in Phuket's Jia Cai Tradition

The Jia Cai Festival in Phuket is deeply embedded in the belief system of the Chinese community living on the island. This blend of devotion and tradition underscores the festival's significance in maintaining cultural heritage and religious practices. However, the festival has evolved due to various internal and external factors.

### 5.2.1. Internal Factors of Cultural Change in Phuket's Jia Cai Tradition

The Jia Cai Festival has been preserved and passed down through generations, with descendants of the Chinese community in Phuket actively developing, modifying, and changing it to adapt to economic, social, and cultural shifts.

These changes have been driven primarily by the increasing number of participants. The festival's style has become more elaborate, with grand decorations and ceremonial patterns to attract a wider audience, reflecting modern beliefs and perspectives.

The shift in Phuket's economic structure from tin mining to tourism has significantly transformed the festival. Today, increasing numbers of Thais and foreigners flock to the island, with the Jia Cai Festival being a major attraction supported by government agencies. These external influences have necessitated adaptations in the festival. Internally, community leaders and the evolution of cultural practices have driven changes. Historically, various temples in Phuket hosted the Jia Cai Festival, with local communities actively participating in traditional activities. Despite modern adaptations, the tradition retains its core principles, particularly the reverence for the Nine Emperor Gods. Changes in the festival have developed alongside economic, social, and cultural shifts supported by government and local organizations.

The unity and collaboration of community members have been crucial in preserving and maintaining the Jia Cai Festival. For instance, the Shui Dui Dou Mu shrine and nearby villagers have significantly contributed to temple affairs by actively participating with their resources and labor, sustaining the temple's activities over generations. Community decisions to adapt to external trends have been key in changing the Jia Cai Festival at the shrine. The community collaborated with government agencies to make the festival a major tourism highlight. This shift was driven by the recognition of tourism income benefits, leading to the modernization of the festival to adapt to social structures and growing diversity. While promoted as a government-supported vegetarian festival, the rituals remained largely unchanged. As traditional cultural preservation trends rose and understanding of fasting and vegetarianism grew, temples in Phuket established relevant associations. As the community's role diminished, participation in the festival at the Shui Dui Dou Mu shrine increased, resulting in the shrine's leaders holding decision-making power, leading to specific changes in the festival.

Government agencies and local organizations have played crucial roles in developing and promoting the Jia Cai Festival. Community leaders' ideas and decisions have significantly impacted the tradition. These changes result from various factors that shape the overall situation of the Jia Cai Festival in Phuket. Over time, the festival will continue adapting to economic, social, and cultural changes, maintaining its unique charm and vitality.

### 5.2.2. External Factors of Cultural Change in Phuket's Jia Cai Tradition

Centuries ago, the Jia Cai Festival was exclusive to the ancestors of the Fujian Chinese in Phuket. Over time, Phuket's economic, social, and cultural structures have evolved. Many Fujian Chinese associations gradually disappeared, leaving the next generation of Thai Chinese to inherit and

strive to preserve these traditions. They work diligently to maintain their ancestors' culture, upholding traditions within the extended family structure. However, Phuket's beautiful natural resources have attracted tourists, transforming it into a major tourism hub in Thailand.

As Phuket became a tourist city attracting global visitors, the traditional Thai Chinese community had to adapt. The once simple lifestyle transformed into competition within a capitalist environment. The extended family structure is gradually disappearing and being replaced by nuclear families, affecting family relationships and the transmission of traditional Chinese beliefs to the next generation. Even traditional Chinese vocabulary used within families has been forgotten and diluted. Phuket's community comprises diverse individuals, including investors and foreign tourists, who have gathered to make a living. Complex social structures shape relationships, with people adapting to new environments by participating in local traditions. These traditions draw more participants to the Jia Cai Festival, with some believing their wishes are fulfilled by shrine deities, deepening their faith. Government departments have played a crucial role in guiding and adapting the tradition, turning the Jia Cai Festival into a primary source of income for Phuket.

The COVID-19 pandemic further emphasized the government's role in educating society on public health measures to curb the virus's spread. The government discouraged rituals involving self-harm by mediums, leading to the cancellation of the fire-walking ceremony for the first time in all Phuket temples. This highlights the significant role of government and local organizations in shaping changes in Phuket's Jia Cai Festival.

The drivers of change in Phuket's Jia Cai Festival highlight a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity, community and commerce, and cultural preservation and adaptation. Internal drivers, such as community leadership and decision-making, cultural adaptation, and community participation, have been crucial in navigating these changes. Community leaders have played a pivotal role in promoting the festival as a tourist attraction while balancing economic benefits with maintaining traditional values. However, this approach may reflect tensions between commercial interests and cultural authenticity, as centralization of decision-making power could lead to potential conflicts and issues of representation within the community. Although necessary for attracting younger generations and tourists, modernization efforts risk diluting the festival's original spiritual and cultural significance.

Externally, economic transition and tourism development have transformed the Jia Cai Festival into a major tourist attraction, creating both opportunities and vulnerabilities. The commercialization of the festival may lead to a loss of cultural depth and authenticity, causing divisions within the community over economic versus traditional priorities. Government involvement has been instrumental in promoting the festival, but policies can impose changes that may not align with tradi-

tional practices. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has underscored this dynamic, with regulations impacting traditional rituals for public health reasons. Globalization has facilitated cultural exchange, enriching the festival's cultural tapestry while posing challenges in maintaining its distinct identity.

By critically analyzing these factors, we can better understand the festival's ongoing evolution and its challenges in balancing cultural integrity with contemporary demands. This analysis underscores the importance of reflexivity in ethnographic research, recognizing the diverse perspectives and tensions that shape cultural traditions in a globalized context.

### 5.3. Adaptations in Tradition and Modernity: An Example of Vegetarian Food Culture

The intersection of tradition and modernity often results in unique adaptations that reflect historical continuity alongside contemporary innovation. Modern dietary trends, environmental concerns, and economic factors have influenced traditional dietary customs, creating a dynamic interplay between the old and the new.

This analysis explores adaptations in vegetarian food culture through the case study of the Jia Cai Festival in Phuket, Thailand. Rooted in the practices of the Fujian Chinese community, the Jia Cai Festival has historically emphasized vegetarian food consumption as a form of religious observance and community solidarity. Over time, this tradition has transformed significantly, influenced by Phuket's shift from a mining economy to a tourism-driven one, alongside broader socio-cultural changes. The festival highlights the importance of maintaining cultural heritage while embracing innovation and inclusivity to meet the needs of a modern, diverse society. Examining the specific example of vegetarian food services offers insights into how traditional customs can be revitalized and sustained in contemporary contexts, ensuring their relevance and vitality for future generations.

#### 5.3.1. From Bland to More Variety

As participation in the Jia Cai Festival increases, the logistics of providing vegetarian food have grown more complex. The Shui Dui Dou Mu shrine, traditionally the festival's focal point, can no longer meet the growing demand for vegetarian food alone. This has led to the emergence of numerous external vendors and stores offering diverse vegetarian options to festival-goers, transforming the festival's culinary landscape.

The influx of these vendors has diversified the range of vegetarian dishes available, moving away from previously bland options to more enticing and varied offerings. This culinary evolution is illustrated by an interview with Huatchai, who described the changes in the Nine Emperor Gods' food: "In the past, the Nine Emperor Gods' food at the Shui Dui Dou Mu shrine was bland, typically using the same vegetables for cooking. For example, if cucumbers were used,

only cucumbers would be stir-fried without mixing with other vegetables, unlike now where mixed vegetables are stir-fried with sweet and sour seasoning” [12].

This evolution has made the festival more appealing to a broader audience, including tourists and locals who might not have otherwise participated. Moreover, some restaurants now offer agricultural protein foods and plant-based meat substitutes, such as vegetarian pork, shrimp, fish, chicken, and duck. These products, made to resemble meat in shape and texture, have become popular even among those not observing the Nine Emperor Gods’ food. This situation has sparked different views on suitability, highlighting the festival’s cultural core while marking a significant departure from the past.

### 5.3.2. Increasing Demand and Supply

Previously, vegetarian food was consumed exclusively within the shrine during the festival, but it has since become a commercial endeavor. During the Jia Cai Festival, every street in Phuket hosts stalls selling vegetarian food, with Ranong Road being a prominent area where the Shui Dui Dou Mu shrine provides rental spaces for vendors. Many shops opposite the temple have switched to selling vegetarian food and Jia Cai-related items.

In an interview with Pranom, a member of the stall arrangement committee at Wat Kuan Doem Temple, she stated, “There are over 100 shops and stalls along Ranong Road between the walls of Kachonglang Temple, managed and rented out by the temple. This street is often bustling with people, especially in the evenings. Many people dressed in white move back and forth under the night lights, buying vegetarian food and other items, meeting and talking with each other, making the entire street vibrant and lively” [24].

Interviews with villagers participating in the Jia Cai Festival reveal that many prefer to dine outside the shrine, finding the food there more colorful and appealing. However, many elders insist on eating the Nine Emperor Gods’ food within the temple, believing these foods are made through sacred rituals and bring auspicious significance. For them, eating the Nine Emperor Gods’ food is an act of faith and religious devotion, a means of communicating with deities and receiving blessings. Despite societal changes in dietary habits, elders steadfastly uphold this tradition, reflecting their commitment to cultural heritage and religious beliefs. Most elders do not favor agricultural protein foods and plant-based products as meat substitutes, which conflict with the rules and taboos they observe when eating Nine Emperor Gods’ food. According to these rules, they cannot consider or recall meat consumption, as it suggests they have not relinquished their craving for meat.

### 5.3.3. Plant-based Meat and the Essence of the Jia Cai Festival’s Food Culture

The trend toward health consciousness and the increasing number of vegetarians worldwide have significantly boosted

the production and sale of plant-based meat products during the Jia Cai Festival in Phuket. This festival is crucial for showcasing vegetarian culture and offering various plant-based meat options. Teerawut observed, “In recent years, the Jia Cai Tradition has become increasingly popular, closely linked to people’s health, with modern individuals more concerned about their physical well-being and tending to increase their vegetable intake while reducing meat consumption. It is worth mentioning that Phuket now has dozens of vegetarian restaurants. No matter where you are, finding a vegetarian restaurant has become much easier than when there were few vegetarian food options available” [33]. As attention to healthy eating and environmental concerns grows, vegetarianism has become more common at dining tables in Phuket. Both residents and tourists enjoy a wide variety of vegetarian dishes during the Jia Cai Festival, contributing to the prosperity of Phuket’s vegetarian food industry.

However, vendors have discovered new ways to attract customers during the Jia Cai Festival, using plant-based meat to prepare vegetarian dishes catering to diverse customer preferences. While some restaurants use plant-based meat, most are not run by local Phuket residents and may not be familiar with the principles of Phuket’s traditional Jia Cai rituals. Conversely, restaurants operated by traditional residents have adopted these practices, recognizing their significant customer interest and profitability. These changes have sparked conflicts among those who uphold the Jia Cai Festival’s traditional Nine Emperor Gods’ food ritual. Vendors focused on trade have overlooked essential rules of the Nine Emperor Gods’ food ritual, affecting the essence of the Jia Cai Festival’s food culture.

Conversations with elders reveal their opposition to using plant-based meat in vegetarian dishes, arguing it undermines the tradition’s core principles. The tradition emphasizes relinquishing gluttony, greed, and violence, and even if the food is plant-based, it suggests an attachment to desires. This indicates a continued craving for meat, contradicting the essence of the Jia Cai Festival’s food culture. As Punyawee noted, “Looking back over 20 years ago, I remember how this festival started to change. Originally, people were supposed to enjoy the Nine Emperor Gods’ food at the temple. However, vegetarian shops have now come in to do business, selling various vegetarian foods and forming a cluster of vegetarian stalls. Believers should come to the temple to get the Nine Emperor Gods’ food and consume it to pursue physical and mental purity. However, it has now turned into buying food, making this festival a commercialized vegetarian event rather than the meaning of the Nine Emperor Gods’ food ritual in Phuket” [26]. Elders believe that plant-based meat consumption should be abolished during the Jia Cai Festival to preserve its true essence and avoid commercial exploitation.

Jira echoed this sentiment: “Although changes in healthy eating habits are not a concern for us, we should still consume vegetables like pumpkin and cucumber when eating the



Nine Emperor Gods' food. My personal understanding is that I eat the Nine Emperor Gods' food to give up all gluttony and greed, not to kill animals, and to cleanse and purify my body. This is the right approach, isn't it? However, now you see people using artificial pork, salted fish, roasted vegetarian duck, and vegetarian red meat in vegetarian dishes. I believe these things should not be consumed" [13].

Interviews with elders and villagers near the temple align with Chai Yut's observations regarding selling plant-based meat products at festival stalls. He recounted, "Decades ago, a medium frequently patrolled the shops and stalls around the shrine. When the deity possessing the medium discovered a shop using plant-based meat, he immediately warned the shop owner and quickly demanded the removal of these plant-based meat products from the area around the shrine. This was because such practices violated the ritual principles of the Jia Cai Tradition of the Chinese community in Phuket. Eventually, when the medium grew old and passed away, the deity that had possessed him never possessed another medium. Since then, without anyone issuing warnings, the shops have continued to use plant-based meat in their cooking to this day" [4].

#### 5.3.4. Adaptations During Crisis

Despite the ongoing pandemic in 2021, the Jia Cai Festival adapted to ensure the tradition continued. The shrine implemented various food service methods, allowing people to bring containers to collect food, use delivery platforms like GrabFood, or collect bags of food from designated points. Health and safety protocols were strictly followed, including regular sanitation, mandatory mask-wearing for staff and volunteers, and social distancing measures during food collection.

Multiple collection points were established to avoid crowding, and community volunteers organized delivery services for those unable to leave their homes, ensuring everyone could participate in the tradition. Digital platforms were utilized to inform the community about food distribution methods and schedules, ensuring seamless communication and coordination. These adaptations highlighted the community's resilience and flexibility in maintaining cultural practices amid challenging circumstances. The successful blend of tradition and modernity ensured that the Nine Emperor Gods' food reached everyone who wished to participate.

With evolving socio-economic conditions and personal beliefs influencing the Jia Cai Festival, safeguarding the tradition's true essence is crucial. Prioritizing cultural integrity over commercial interests will preserve and promote the Jia Cai Festival's meaning and value for future generations.

#### 5.3.5. Community Responses to Changes in Vegetarian Food Culture

The evolution of the Jia Cai tradition in Phuket, particu-

larly regarding vegetarian food culture, has elicited various responses from the community. These responses reflect the community's efforts to balance the preservation of cultural heritage with the need to adapt to modern influences and demands. This section explores these responses and provides insights into how the community navigates the intersection of tradition and modernity.

As the Jia Cai Festival has grown popular, vegetarian options have expanded significantly. The community has generally welcomed the introduction of new and flavorful vegetarian dishes, viewing this as an opportunity to attract more participants, including tourists. Many locals appreciate the shift from bland, repetitive dishes to more diverse and enticing offerings. This culinary innovation has made the festival more inclusive and accessible, appealing to a broader audience while maintaining its core religious and cultural significance. Despite embracing culinary innovation, a strong contingent within the community, particularly among elders, remains committed to preserving traditional practices. These individuals stress the importance of consuming vegetarian food prepared within the temple, which they believe has been blessed through sacred rituals. For them, eating the Nine Emperor Gods' food is an act of faith and devotion, deeply connected to their spiritual beliefs and cultural heritage. This group generally opposes the commercialization of the festival and the use of plant-based meat substitutes, viewing them as a departure from the true essence of the tradition.

The shift from a mining-based economy to a tourism-driven one has brought opportunities and challenges for the Jia Cai Festival. The increased demand for vegetarian food during the festival has spurred economic activity, providing a livelihood for many local vendors. However, it has also led to rising vegetable prices and commercializing what was once a purely religious event. The community is divided on this issue, with some viewing the economic benefits as a positive development while others fear it undermines the festival's spiritual integrity. The global health consciousness and environmental sustainability trend has influenced the Jia Cai Festival in Phuket. The rise of vegetarianism and the introduction of plant-based meat alternatives are seen by many as positive developments aligning with contemporary values. These changes are trendy among younger generations and health-conscious individuals. However, traditionalists argue that these new food options dilute the festival's cultural and spiritual significance. The community continues to navigate these differing perspectives, seeking a balance between embracing modern dietary trends and preserving traditional practices.

Community involvement is crucial in maintaining the vitality of the Jia Cai tradition. Residents participate in organizing and implementing festival activities, ensuring that the event remains a community-driven endeavor. Educational initiatives, such as incorporating Jia Cai-related courses in schools and hosting community lectures, are essential in passing down knowledge and appreciation of the tradition to



younger generations. Additionally, media outreach and volunteer programs help broaden public awareness and engagement, fostering a sense of community cohesion and cultural pride. The role of government and institutions is pivotal in supporting the Jia Cai tradition. Policies and resources are vital to preserve cultural heritage, promote sustainable practices, and support local economies. Collaboration between the government, local businesses, and community organizations can provide the necessary infrastructure and funding to ensure the festival's continued success and relevance. Community forums and decision-making processes that involve residents can also help align development efforts with the community's values and needs. Ultimately, the community's response to changes in the Jia Cai tradition involves a continuous negotiation between tradition and modernity. By embracing culinary innovation, promoting health and environmental sustainability, and ensuring active community participation, the people of Phuket strive to keep the Jia Cai Festival relevant and vibrant. At the same time, they remain committed to preserving the spiritual and cultural essence of the tradition, recognizing that its actual value lies in its ability to connect the past with the present and future generations. The community's responses to changes in the Jia Cai tradition in vegetarian food service reflect a dynamic interplay of preservation and adaptation. By valuing both innovation and heritage, the community ensures that the Jia Cai Festival remains a living, evolving tradition that continues to enrich the cultural landscape of Phuket.

The adaptations in vegetarian food culture within the Jia Cai Festival illustrate the complex interplay between tradition and modernity. While introducing diverse and flavorful vegetarian dishes has broadened the festival's appeal and inclusivity, it also challenges the preservation of cultural heritage. The community must balance culinary innovation with maintaining spiritual significance. Economic transitions have transformed the festival, offering economic benefits but also creating tensions around commercialization. The global trend toward health consciousness has popularized vegetarianism, resonating with younger generations but raising concerns among traditionalists about cultural dilution. Community and government roles are vital in navigating these changes. Active participation and institutional support help preserve cultural heritage while promoting modern practices. Ultimately, the festival's evolution reflects the ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity, highlighting the resilience and adaptability of the community in maintaining the Jia Cai Festival's relevance and vibrancy. The festival continues enriching Phuket's cultural landscape by valuing innovation and heritage.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has explored the evolving nature of the Jia Cai Festival within the Chinese community of Phuket, Thailand, focusing on the persistent belief in its rituals and the adapta-

tion of vegetarian food culture. The research highlights how internal and external factors, such as Phuket's economic shift from tin mining to tourism, have influenced the festival's development, underscoring the dynamic interplay between cultural preservation and modernization.

One of the most significant transformations observed is in the festival's vegetarian food culture. Traditionally, the festival's vegetarian offerings were simple and austere, reflecting the spiritual and ritualistic nature of the event. However, as Phuket's economy became increasingly tourism-driven, these culinary practices adapted to meet the expectations of a broader audience. The once-modest dishes have evolved into more diverse and innovative offerings, incorporating new flavors and ingredients to appeal to locals and tourists. This evolution has enhanced the festival's inclusivity and appeal and sparked debates about maintaining the authenticity and spiritual purity of the tradition.

Introducing plant-based meat substitutes and a wider variety of dishes represents both an opportunity and a challenge for the festival. While these innovations align with modern health and environmental trends, they have raised concerns about deviating from the festival's traditional roots. The community's response to these changes has been mixed, reflecting the ongoing tension between innovation and preservation. This tension illustrates the complexities of cultural adaptation, where the need for contemporary relevance must be balanced with the desire to maintain historical and spiritual integrity.

The study emphasizes the importance of strategic initiatives to safeguard and promote this cultural heritage. These initiatives include incorporating relevant education, leveraging media for promotion, supporting community-led cultural activities, and fostering partnerships with the private sector. Such efforts are crucial for ensuring that the Jia Cai Festival upholds its traditional values while adapting to attract a global audience.

In conclusion, the Jia Cai Festival remains a vital cultural touchstone for the residents of Phuket and a unique cultural experience for visitors. The adaptive changes in vegetarian food practices highlight the broader challenges and opportunities of balancing tradition with modernity. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how cultural traditions can evolve and thrive in a globalized world, demonstrating the festival's ongoing significance in maintaining cultural resilience and adaptation.

## Abbreviations

COVID-19    Coronavirus Disease 2019

## Author Contributions

Jularat Kamnoi is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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## Research Fields

**Jularat Kamnoi:** Chinese Culture, Overseas Chinese Studies, Religion, Ritual, Phuket's Jia Cai Festival