

Faith and rights in the smart city: Preserving the significance of the Chao Mae Tuptim shrine amidst gentrification of the Sam Yan neighborhood of Bangkok

Xi Tang¹

Gil Turingan²

¹ Thai Studies Center, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University

² Faculty of History, University of Warsaw

Corresponding Author:

Gil Turingan

Faculty of History, University of Warsaw

Krakowskie Przedmiescie 26/28, Warsaw 00-927, Poland

E-mail: g.turingan@uw.edu.pl

Received: July 14, 2024

Revised: October 18, 2024

Accepted: November 15, 2024

Faith and rights in the smart city: Preserving the significance of the Chao Mae Tuptim shrine amidst gentrification of the Sam Yan neighborhood of Bangkok

Abstract

The Chao Mae Tuptim shrine in the Sam Yan neighborhood of Bangkok has profound spiritual and symbolic significance for Thai Chinese people and the Sam Yan community. It is at risk of being demolished as part of the Sam Yan Smart City project by the Property Management of Chulalongkorn University (PMCU). PMCU plans to use the land to build a retail mall and a 1,800-unit residential building for university staff and student dormitories under a mixed-use project, Block 33. This qualitative case study highlights the spiritual and symbolic significance of the Chao Mae Tuptim shrine. It addresses the impact of gentrification on the shrine's Thai Chinese cultural and spiritual aspects. The study emphasizes the role of the Sam Yan community in preserving the shrine's cultural, spiritual, and symbolic significance in the face of gentrification. Data is gathered from news articles, online interviews, and observations of the extant and new Chao Tuptim Mae shrine installations. Data is analysed thematically in the context of Henri Lefebvre's Right to the City concept to underline the community's ongoing faith and commitment to safeguarding the shrine despite the advancing Smart City project.

Keywords: Chao Mae Tuptim shrine, right to the city, gentrification, Sam Yan, smart city

1. Introduction

The Sam Yan Smart City project, one of the 15 smart cities launched by the Thai government in 2021, is a crucial driver of the gentrification process in Sam Yan, Bangkok. With the support of the private and public sectors, the government envisions developing smart cities anchored to its Thailand 4.0 strategy, which aims to reduce inequality and create prosperity, security, and sustainability. The Sam Yan Smart City, in particular, seeks to combine the historical charm of the Suan Luang and Sam Yan neighborhoods with innovations and technologies. However, this vision has constructed significant implications for the cultural and spiritual heritage of the place (Nation Thailand, 2021; Property Management of Chulalongkorn University, 2024).

Sam Yan is located in the Bang Rak District of Bangkok, adjacent to the Sathorn and Samphanthawong districts. It comprises commercial land, high-quality large-size buildings, and leading educational institutions like Chulalongkorn University. Its accessibility to the train systems, such as MRT and BTS, and its location near the Rama IV Road make this area efficient and economical for the people. The Sam Yan area houses a variety of local food stores along Banthat Thong Road, making it one of Bangkok's popular gastronomic destinations (Lempoolsub, 2018, pp. 1-2). This strategic and conducive location of Sam Yan explains why this area is palatable for gentrification and commercial and development projects.

The concept of gentrification, coined by sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964, pertains to the transformation process happening in a neighborhood. Gentrification occurs when affluent residents and investments move into a neighborhood and the low-income population moves out. It changes the urban landscape of a particular area for the benefit of new middle- and upper-income residents, as well as the developers and investors of the project. This concept emphasizes the displacement of low-income households in the area in exchange for urban development (Yeom & Mikelbank, 2013, pp. 79-80).

Gentrification is a global concern, not just in Thailand. However, it is important to note that despite the transformation of certain areas due to gentrification, there are cases where the spiritual and cultural symbols have been carefully preserved. Even as these locations transition into commercial spaces, spiritual and cultural symbols such as temples and shrines remain untouched and integral to urbanization.

In China, pagodas were traditionally considered containers of Buddhist relics, ubiquitous in Shanghai's landscape. Even at the beginning of the 21st century, pagodas are

the omnipresence of globalized Shanghai's architectural landscape. As the city entered a phase of gentrification, communities around the Jing An Temple moved out. They resettled in the places designated by the government. Nowadays, the Jing An Temple's spiritual and symbolic significance remains. Its dazzling facade is adorned with shops, a vast shopping mall dwarfs the main hall, and makeshift shops are set up in front of it, selling everything. Under the temple lies a large subway station with a complex network of subway lines (Tarocco, 2015, p. 38).

Kyoto, Japan, is also an example of how a city can be resilient to gentrification through the partnership of the government, the civic society, and the private sector. Its temples and shrines have been preserved amidst urban development and through sustainable tourism. Instead of the conventional approach, Kyoto designed a comprehensive development system that included the participation and cooperation of its households (World Bank Group, 2018, pp. 1-2). Unfortunately, these two cases differ from Sam Yan, Bangkok, and the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine.

The Sam Yan Smart City project, operated by the Property Management of Chulalongkorn University (PMCU), manifests gentrification. The rapid commercial and building development in Suan Luang and Sam Yan has transformed these neighborhoods into numerous development projects, resulting in the eviction of their residents and communities. However, amidst this rapid transformation, the Sam Yan community has shown remarkable resilience and resistance to the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine's demolition, thereby asserting their right to the city (Lempoolsub, 2018, pp. 2-3). This rapid transformation has profoundly impacted the shrine, posing a severe threat to its existence and the symbolic and spiritual significance it represents.

Since 1941, Sam Yan has been the home of Chinese immigrants with timber houses. Later, investors rented some areas of Sam Yan, but when the fire broke out around Soi Chula 15, it destroyed the timber houses and forced the people to move out. Soi Chula 16 continued to thrive due to the restaurants and stores built in this area. The Suan Luang and Sam Yan communities turned into a place for different auto parts manufacturers and drew attraction from various investors to start their businesses in these areas. To pay respect to the prosperity that they gained within the place, the Thai Chinese community formed in this area constructed the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine (see Figure 1), a testament to their deep-rooted cultural and spiritual traditions based on the Chinese influence (Lempoolsub, 2018, pp. 2-3).



Figure 1 The Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine in Sam Yan.

Source: Author

Chao Mae Tub Tim, as a sea deity, was initially worshipped by early Chinese immigrants from the southeastern coast of China, especially Hokkiens and Hainanese. The Hokkiens worshipped Ma Zu, also known as Tian Hou Sheng Mu (Holy Mother and Empress of Heaven), while the Hainanese worshipped Shui Wei Sheng Niang (Goddess of the Lower Stream). When they reached Thailand, the people adopted the same Thai name, Chao Mae Tub Tim, referring to Ma Zu and Shui Wei Sheng Niang. Current literature cannot explain why people named Ma Zu and Shui Wei Sheng Niang as Chao Mae Tub Tim. It could be a result of the re-negotiated ethnic identity of the Hokkiens and Hainanese in Thailand and the modification of deity features brought by localization. The localized names of Ma Zu and Shui Wei Sheng Niang only prove the close relation between the immigrant identity of the Chinese and the influence of Siam (Tarkulwaranont et al., 2001, pp. 266-267).

The Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine is situated at 325, Soi Chula 30, Wang Mai Sub-district, Pathum Wan District, Bangkok. Initially, the small structure of the shrine was erected in the 1880s and rebuilt around 1970. An altar for Tian Di Fu Mu (Heaven and Earth) and a pagoda-shaped paper-burning stove can be found in the compound of the shrine building, which is currently surrounded by barriers from the ongoing construction of condominiums (see Figure 2).



Figure 2 The Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine in the middle of ongoing construction.

Source: Author

The shrine's main building was built from a reinforced concrete cluster, which replicated the wood structure of the Teochiu architectural style. A circular relief on each side of the gate depicts the legend of the Ba Xian (Eight Immortals). Plaques and couplets convey auspicious meanings in Chinese calligraphy. The Chao Mae Tub Tim is enshrined and dedicated on the main altar and sandwiched by Hok Tek Ye (Teochiu Land Guardian) on the left altar and Qing Long Ye (Emerald Dragon) on the right altar. Ba Xian, Hok Tek Ye, and Qing Long Ye are worshipped by Teochius and Hakkas in South China. These features, including architectural style, deity dedication, offerings, and activities in the shrine, symbolize the Chineseness erected on Thai soil.

Due to commercial development, houses were slowly removed in this area. Chulalongkorn University, which owns the land, built shophouses for rent and conducted tenure agreements with renters in 1990. However, the university ended the said contracts in 2013 to gain back the land and redevelop the area, which forced the local markets, such as the Sam Yan Market, Suan Luang Market, and Saphan Lueang Market, to move out (Lempoolsub, 2018, p. 3). The plan, unveiled as early as 2007 by PMCU, aimed to turn the areas of Soi Chula 26-32 into commercial and residential space (Boonlert, 2023).

Moreover, the PMCU planned to demolish the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine and use the land to build a retail mall and a 1,800-unit residential building for university staff and students' dormitories

under the mixed-use project Block 33. Community residents gradually moved out in 2015, then on May 27, 2020, PMCU issued a final eviction notice to Khun Nok or Penprapa Ployseesuy, the caretaker of the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine (Kongrut, 2020; Rojanaphruk, 2020; Boonlert, 2023). In 2022, the property management office of the university built a replica Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine at the corner of Chulalongkorn University Centenary Park to replace the existing shrine (see Figure 3) (Khaosod English, 2020; Boonlert, 2023; Crosbie-Jones, 2023).

As of this writing, the construction of the building continues. The demolition of the shrine has been delayed due to opposition from the community and student sectors. The shrine community is currently facing a legal battle against PMCU. As they resist the eviction, the property arm of the university is seeking to evict the shrine's caretaker for 25 years, asking for damages worth 122 million Baht. They are still waiting for the court ruling, supposedly due last August 31, 2023 (Ratcliffe, 2023).

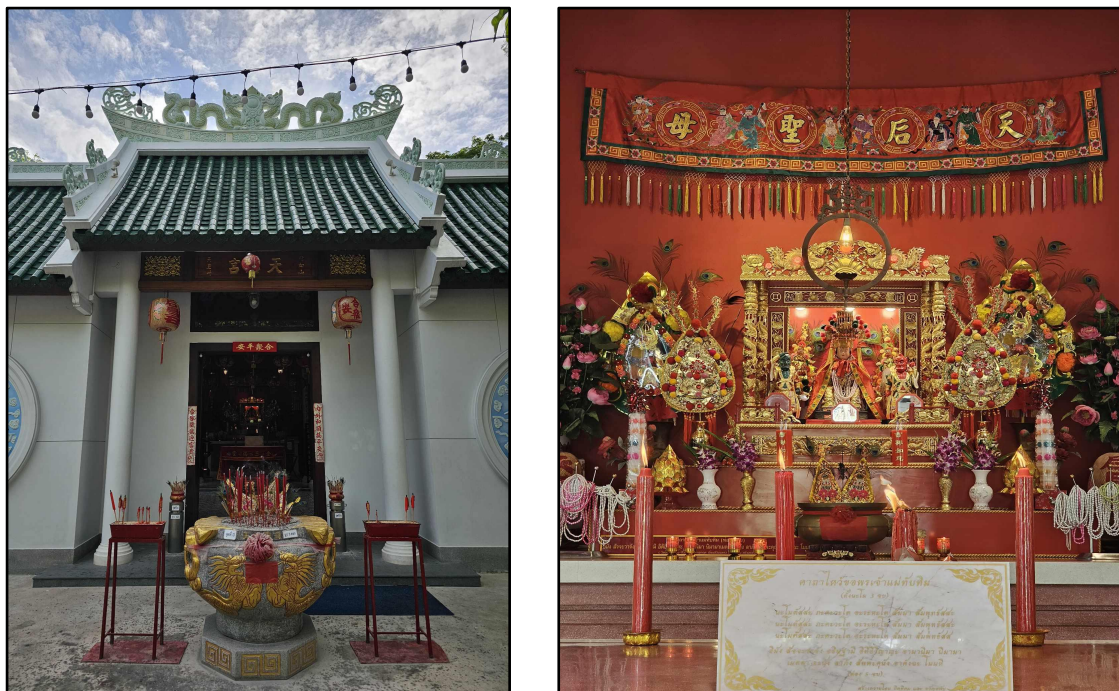


Figure 3 The new Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine.

Source: Author

2. Research Objectives and Questions

Based on the points mentioned above, this paper discusses the role of the Sam Yan community in keeping the spiritual and symbolic significance of the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine despite the gentrification of the place. It also examines the impact of gentrification on

the shrine's Thai Chinese cultural and spiritual aspects. This paper seeks to answer the following questions: 1) What is the spiritual and symbolic significance of the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine for the Thai Chinese people and the Sam Yan community? and 2) How does the gentrification of Sam Yan affect the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine's significance? By answering these questions, this study unlocks the importance of Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine for the Thai Chinese cultural and spiritual heritage and the people of the Sam Yan community.

3. Research Methods

This paper is a qualitative case study that uses written works, multiple news articles, public interviews available online, and personal observations of the existing and new Chao Mae Tub Tim shrines to explain the community's importance in keeping the spiritual and symbolic significance of the shrine amidst the gentrification of Sam Yan.

The authors employ thematic analysis to analyze the collected data and explain the community's role and the effects of gentrification on the spiritual and symbolic significance of the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine. In addition to gentrification, this study uses Henri Lefebvre's "The Right to the City" concept to explain the community's role in keeping the shrine's significance.

4. Theoretical Framework

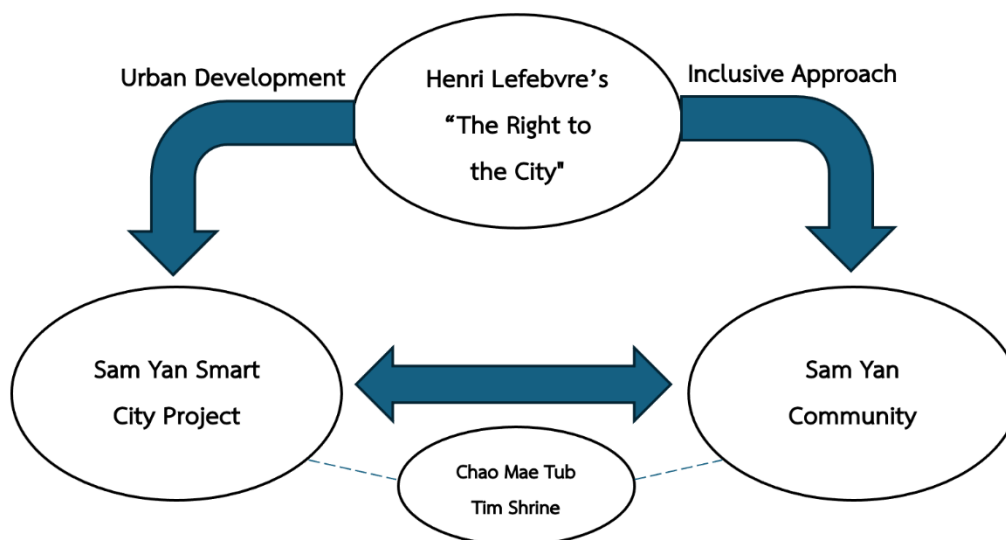


Figure 4 Theoretical Framework

Source: Author

Based on the concept of “The Right to the City” (see Figure 4), Henri Lefebvre emphasizes the need for people to participate in urban spaces, whether in planning or development, because capitalist interests manipulate people’s needs and desires to live in the city or their “right to urban life.” In understanding the urban environment, property developers, planners, and architects must go beyond traditional planning and not disregard urban life’s social, cultural, and symbolic dimensions alongside functionalism, formalism, and structuralism ideologies. Lefebvre points out that urban structures and cities are mainly designed based on functionality, visual form or aesthetics, and economic and social structures and often neglect urban life’s social and cultural aspects. Thus, he argues the importance of having an inclusive approach to living in the cities or what he coined as the “Right to the City” (Lefebvre, 1996).

With the construction of the Sam Yan Smart City and the demolition plan of the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine, the community and student sectors assert the social and cultural aspects of urban life, particularly the shrine’s spiritual and symbolic significance to the Thai Chinese people and Sam Yan community. They argue the importance of an inclusive approach and their right to the Smart City, significantly affecting the people living nearby and the students studying at Chulalongkorn University. These points from Lefebvre’s concept are evident and valuable in understanding the Sam Yan Smart City project’s case and its impact on the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine.

5. Result and Discussion

The Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine, more than just a place of worship, is a living museum that vividly demonstrates the Thai Chinese’s rich history and spiritual culture. It serves as a testament to the Chinese migration to Bangkok and the warm embrace and assimilation by the Thai people, particularly those in Sam Yan.

Chao Mae Tub Tim, a figure of immense historical and spiritual significance, was a patron of the Chinese who immigrated to Siam (the former name of Bangkok) via sailing. She later became a protector of the Sam Yan community. Her syncretism of Tian Hou Sheng Mu and Shui Wei Sheng Niang, two deities closely connected by rivers, sea, and sailing, further underscores her unique role. Initially, she was worshipped by sea traders, boatmen, boat builders, and overseas immigrants, a role that sets her apart in the history of Chinese migration and cultural assimilation and makes her an intriguing figure in the cultural history of Bangkok.

Tian Hou Sheng Mu, also known as Mazu, is a prominent figure in Chinese history. According to belief, she was the sixth daughter of Lin Yuan, the inspector of Hokkien Province during the Five Dynasties period (907-979). The Hokkiens and Hakkas considered her the seventh family member and called her Chi Sia Ma (Seventh Holy Mother). In Bangkok, Chi Sia Ma Shrine, also known as Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine, is located at 448 Maitri Chit Road, Pom Prap Sub-district, Pom Prap Sattru Phai District. Legends surrounding Mazu's birth include miraculous events, such as the ground turning purple, the appearance of holy light in the sky, and a spreading fragrance, all signifying her destined extraordinary life. As a child, she demonstrated a precocious understanding of religious scriptures, the ability to predict the future, and healing skills. As she grew, she performed daring rescues, such as floating on a straw mat in rapids to save people. She passed away at around thirty, transcended to a deity, and flew to the sea. Initially a local folk belief, the emperors incorporated Mazu into the national memorial ceremony, elevating her from a local to a national patron.

On the other hand, Shui Wei Sheng Niang is a deity in Hainanese spiritual traditions. She was worshipped by most Hainanese Sea traders, boatmen, and boat builders. The Hainanese people have this legend about a fisherman from Wenchang County, Hainan Island, who went fishing in the sea. He cast nets but failed to catch a fish. However, there was a piece of wood in the fishing net. He threw the piece of timber upstream. The next day, he pulled the net, and the wood was still in the net; he threw the piece of timber downstream, pulled the net, and the wood was in the net again. The fisherman felt strange and secretly prayed: "Wood, if you have supernatural powers, please bless me to catch a full net of fish and a full boat of fish. I will carve you into an image to worship." After praying, the fisherman cast several nets, and countless fish were in the net. After that, the fisherman fulfilled his promise and asked the engraver to carve this piece of wood into an image and build a shrine to enshrine and dedicate her.

When the Chinese settled in Bangkok, the Thai people began using the name Chao Mae to refer to these Chinese female deities. The Chinese deity Shui Wei Sheng Niang was given the Thai name Chao Mae Tub Tim, which is the same as Ma Zu. Some older-generation Hainanese people believed that the first image of Shui Wei Sheng Niang was made from red stone in Bangkok. As a result, residents started calling her Chao Mae Tub Tim, which means Ruby Deity. In addition, Tub Tim refers to pomegranate trees. Therefore, it is the firm belief of the worshippers that the name Chao Mae Tub Tim originated from people who have an affinity

for pomegranate trees. In Chinese culture, pomegranate trees are seen as auspicious and blessed (Tarkulwaranont et al., 2001, pp. 266-267).

Interestingly, Shui Wei Sheng Niang has a similar and localized version in Thailand. A Sam Yan resident collected a feminine deity image floating on the Bang Rak Canal more than a hundred years ago. The Sam Yan community built a simple altar to dedicate the image and further developed it for the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine (The People Co. Official, 2020). From the Wenchang River in Hainan to the Bang Rak Canal in Bangkok, the influence of Chao Mae Tub Tim extended. Chao Mae Tub Tim's localization highlights the syncretic elements of Chinese and Thai Buddhism that greatly benefit the spread of her influence to the Thai people. As a result, the Sam Yan residents started to venerate Chao Mae Tub Tim and share the blessings they received from her.

The legendary stories from Hainan and Sam Yan above legitimized the shrine establishment and Chinese people's settlement in the area. Chao Mae Tub Tim inspired the establishment of the shrine in Sam Yan because of the person who picked up the Chinese deity image in the port near Sam Yan. At that time, Yaowarat, or Chinatown, was already full of Chinese, and some Chinese and new immigrants had to re-settle. They chose Sam Yan and justified their right to reside in the area because, as a protector of the Chinese, Chao Mae Tub Tim appeared in a canal near Sam Yan.

At first, Chao Mae Tub Tim was a protector of sea shippers and responsible for safe sailing. Then, after the Second World War, the plague swept through the Sam Yan, killing many poultry. However, the ducks kept in the shrine did not get infected. People believed it was attributed to Chao Mae Tub Tim's power. Since then, the residents have started worshipping her for health reasons. Now, she blesses the businesses in the Sam Yan marketplace for prosperity, a testament to her enduring influence and the hope and inspiration she brings to the community (The People Co. Official, 2020).

The Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine is a space for the Sam Yan community to worship ancestors, celebrate Chinese festivals, and hold religious activities, thereby strengthening community members' relationships. The shrine's role in commemorating Chinese festivals is particularly significant, underscoring the community's cultural diversity. The *Thanks to Chao Mae Ritual* and *Chinese Ghost Festival* celebrations, along with Teochiu opera performances, all ignite worshippers' enthusiasm. Believers prepare offerings, decorate the shrine, raise funds, and invite Teochiu opera troupes. These rituals and activities foster a sense of unity among

the people of Sam Yan, who, through their faith in Chao Mae Tub Tim, act together and become more aware of each other's actions and feelings (Tang, 2024, p. 10).

The rituals and activities at the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine have stood the test of time, maintaining their consistency over the years. This unchanging nature is evident in the procedures of offerings, regular festival celebrations, and temple fairs. It is a testament to the shrine's historical continuity and its role as the spiritual space of the Sam Yan community, which has also remained unchanged.

Aside from being a historic, sacred, and spiritual space, the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine symbolizes different facets of the Sam Yan community. The government's Fine Arts Department does not consider the shrine of historical value and the community ancient because they are less than the arbitrary age of a century. The shrine was only rebuilt to replace an older structure that was burnt down. However, for the people in the community, the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine is a nostalgic space for the Sam Yan community, and tearing this down destroys the stories in the sacred structure. It contains materials with sentimental value and memories of the community. For example, the censer boasting King Chulalongkorn's royal cipher, which King Vajiravudh gave to the guardian family after his father's funeral in 1911, can be found in the shrine. Aside from the censer, a sought-after talisman is attached to its wall. This talisman was from Sian Pae Rong Si, a merchant who became well-versed in ritual and *feng shui* (Boonlert, 2023; Cornwel-Smith, 2023).

The Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine was a haven for the Teochiu communities that once lived in the Sam Yan district. However, due to the high rent costs in the area, most have moved out or been evicted (Chotiphathaisai, 2020). Aside from being the haven of the Teochiu communities, the shrine features the vanishing craft of Thai artisans with Teochiu Chinese heritage, such as its fine calligraphy, murals, and bas-reliefs in every corner (Suchaya 2020; Crosbie-Jones, 2023; Whispering Incense, 2024).

The Chao Mae Tub Time Shrine serves as a space to preserve Thai Chinese traditions and pass them on to future generations through its architecture and structure. It symbolizes the Chineseness of the Sam Yan community and reflects strong ethnic customs from Chinese culture through its architectural style, calligraphy, decorations, and offerings. The shrine features unique Teochiu opera figures sculpted on the eaves, and the overhanging eaves are adorned with two dragons playing with pearl sculptures, distinguishing it from other Teochiu shrines in Bangkok. The preservation of this shrine is critical as it represents an architectural

legacy, Chinese history, and Chinese memory incorporated into the Sam Yan community. The shrine holds the community's shared history and memory, linking the past Chinese history and present-day Bangkok. Using the work of Lefebvre (1991, p. 37), it applies that the Chao Mae Tub Tim shrine is a place of transition between past and present Bangkok semantics.

The shrine in the Sam Yan area is a symbol of community and a communal space. In the 1970s, the shrine survived a fire, and the community came together to raise funds and rebuild it (Boonlert, 2023). People visit the shrine for religious worship, reflection, and to get food. It also serves as a place where impoverished people line up for food and other essentials (Boonlert, 2023; Whispering Incense, 2024). During the Second World War, the shrine provided shelter for the people. The surrounding area was traditionally a center for the Chinese community and was known for its mechanic shops and food (Ratcliffe, 2023).

The abovementioned points only illustrate that the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine is more than just a place of worship. It also symbolizes the Thai Chinese's rich history and spiritual culture. However, due to urban development and changes in the Sam Yan community, it has become apparent that the once vibrant and historically rich Sam Yan community has diminished its significance. This transformation, in line with Henri Lefebvre's "The Right to the City," demonstrates how the Sam Yan Smart City project has turned the Sam Yan community into commodities for consumption and aesthetic pleasure, especially in the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine case. The intention of the Property Management of Chulalongkorn University (PMCU) to demolish the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine to make way for a retail mall and residential building aligns with Lefebvre's assertion that planners prioritizing consumption, commerce, and profit often overlook the historical, spiritual, and symbolic significance of urban spaces like the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine and the Sam Yan community.

Alongside the re-emergence of Thai student activism in 2020, the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine became a symbol of protest against the gentrification of Sam Yan. The shrine, which had been a haven for the Thai Chinese communities for generations and a communal space for the people, was now under threat. It turned into a site for the students to uphold their right to the city. The young people, whom the adults always scolded for not being interested in religion and the local culture, rallied together to stop the shrine's destruction (Chotiphatphaisal, 2020).

For the student activists, the shrine is more than a sacred place. It is a poignant symbol of the community's life and their struggle against capitalists and gentrification (Whispering

Incense, 2024). Surrounded by construction sites, tower blocks, and metal panels earmarked for commercial and residential use, the shrine stands as an ideological symbol against the gentrification of Sam Yan (Crosbie-Jones, 2023). It represents the community's fading past and ethnic heritage in the face of gentrification. As the 2023 documentary titled "The Last Breath of Sam Yan" eloquently states, the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine is the last gasp of the Sam Yan community.

The Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine, a place of worship and blessings for believers and visitors, has become a symbol of unity in the face of controversy. The threat of its demolition has sparked widespread attention from all sectors of Thai society. Chao Mae Tub Tim's worship has expanded its reach and woven into the tapestry of popular religion, attracting university students and the young generation.

The Sam Yan Smart City case is a stark reminder that development and economic progress can come at a cost. Despite the potential benefits, such projects can disrupt communities and threaten cultural and spiritual significance spaces, such as the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine. However, in the face of this threat, the community and student sectors have emerged as crucial players. Their actions are not just about preserving a physical structure but about safeguarding spiritual traditions, preserving history and culture, and passing it on to future generations.

Due to the demolition plan and final eviction notice of the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine, the community, specifically the Chulalongkorn University students, served as the people's voice regarding the negative impacts of gentrification. They conducted a series of protests, emphasizing their right to the Smart City and the significance of history and spiritual traditions.

On June 15, 2020, current and former students of Chulalongkorn University, residents of Saphan Lueang, and other Thai and foreign believers of Chao Mae expressed their objections against the demolition of the shrine. Banners with words opposing the demolition were placed in front of the shrine. The protesters offered proposals to the PMCU, such as the coexistence of the shrine with the new buildings they were planning to construct. Moreover, they requested that the people living in the area and Chulalongkorn University students participate in the shrine's relocation. They suggested forming a panel of representatives from various groups, including Chinese architecture and history experts, to participate in the project (Kongrut, 2020).

On August 31, 2020, a group of about two dozen students from Chulalongkorn University, united by their determination, formed a human chain in front of the shrine. This symbolic act was a testament to their unwavering commitment to protect the sea deity from demolition. They then marched to the PMCU office, and their voices raised in protest against the plan to dismantle the shrine (Marukatrat, 2020).

When the news broke out about the final eviction notice, people actively engaged and campaigned on social media to support the sea goddess. Various posts and messages containing the *#save san chao mae tub tim* (save Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine) surfaced online, particularly on Twitter, currently known as X, and Facebook. This hashtag resurfaced online when the new shrine was built entirely in 2022 (Itthipongmaetee, 2022).

On January 5, 2022, the student activists from Chulalongkorn University protested during the dedication ceremony of the new shrine built near the CU Centenary Park. Led by the university student president, Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal, they raised placards to protest the demolition of the old shrine, but the few security guards manning the shrine did not welcome them at the ceremony (Itthipongmaetee, 2022).

The defenders of the Chao Mae employed artistic activism. In August 2020, a photo exhibition at the shrine was held to protest the relocation plan. Thai artists also gathered and conducted an art exhibition from August 20 to 26, 2023, to protest PMCU's plan and rally support for protecting the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine. Organized by artists such as Wasitpon Tunsatapornpan and Pitchapa Wangprasertkul, the exhibition, titled "*Exile-bition: sratttha lae kantotan* (Faith and Resistance)," included different artists like Hefei, Lukso Jiang, and Glazmenzoo Collective. These artists joined hands to raise public awareness and protect the historical value of the shrine (Marukatrat, 2020; Wangprasertkul, 2023; Boonlert, 2023).

The students who helped campaign for the shrine also created a documentary titled "The Last Breath of Sam Yan." To help raise awareness of the problem of gentrification in Thai society and to show their struggles in campaigning for the shrine, this documentary shown in 2023 was directed by Prempapat Plittapolkranpim and produced by youth activists, Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal and Settanant Thanakitkoses (Ratcliffe, 2023). Recently, this documentary won the prestigious Suphannahong National Film Award for Best Documentary in 2023 despite its low budget (Nattanicha, 2024). This recognition underscores the significance of its story and the youth movement's stance against gentrification.

Even in the face of potential censorship from Chulalongkorn University, the students did not waver in their advocacy for the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine. This was evident during the famous football match between Chulalongkorn University and Thammasat University students on March 31, 2024, when Thammasat University students creatively presented the issue of the shrine's demolition (Chotiphatphaisal, 2024).

The actions and response of the Sam Yan community, particularly the students, towards the relocation of the shrine only show how they asserted their right to the Smart City project and inclusion in this PMCU plan. Chulalongkorn University students will significantly benefit from this construction plan because the condominium units and stores cater to their needs. Yet, noticing how they thought of this project's negative impact on the shrine and Sam Yan community is admirable. This activism continuously shown by the students emphasizes Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city, especially having an inclusive approach to urban development. Despite being part of the young generation, it is commendable to see how they keep fighting for the shrine's historical and spiritual significance and guarding Chao Mae Tub Tim against gentrification.

The Chulalongkorn University students' initiative to champion the causes of the Sam Yan community amidst gentrification, especially the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine case, reflects Lefebvre's argument about the essential role of the working class in daily urban life and urban development. While representing the masses, the university students continuously emphasize the concept of "Right to the City" by asserting their rights beyond simply preserving the traditional landscape of the community or reclaiming urban spaces. They strongly stress the importance of involving the working class through proper democratic consultation in shaping the Sam Yan community due to their deep understanding of daily urban life.

Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine carries the fear of demolition in the Sam Yan community through its ghosts. The *Real Ghosts*, a TV program, produced an episode about the many ghosts and spirits found in the shrine (The Real Ghosts, 2020). Ghosts exist in the shrine as a way to express urban anxiety. The decline of the formal religious spheres brought by the gentrification as the sole location of the unearthly has led to the release of ghosts into the realm of everyday life (Dolar, 1991, p. 7). With the demolition of the residences in the Sam Yan community, the ghosts, which are also interpreted as fear, are released into the area. This urban legend resonates with people's anxiety about losing their homes due to gentrification. Chao Mae Tub Tim, a sea deity, is now endowed with the meaning of being

the land protector of the Sam Yan people amidst the Smart City project, and the shrine serves as the last spiritual and symbolic pillar for neighbors, students, and community worshippers.

The worship of Chao Mae Tub Tim at Sam Yan's Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine is becoming more prevalent in Thai popular religions due to gentrification. Chinese deities are closely associated with capitalism. Bangkok's Chinatown, the earliest settlement of Chinese people in Thailand, features various goods and densely populated shophouses that house Chinese deities. However, the worship of Chinese deities is overlooked in Thai popular religions among the younger generations. The gentrification of the area and the student protests have made the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine at Sam Yan more appealing for people to worship, particularly among the younger generation due to the issue and intriguing popularity.

The gentrification narratives and the active engagement of the Chulalongkorn University students on social media promote Chao Mae Tub Tim worship and turn the shrine into a sacred place where *sai mu*, a Thai belief among young people, is being observed. It pertains to worshipping sacred things and believing in supernatural powers to grant their wishes, particularly in money. In the post-pandemic era, the demolition plan of the shrine in Sam Yan, the worsening economic situation, and the increasing unemployment attract more worshippers from the community and university students. It is also related to Thai people's belief that political and economic issues involve spiritual and supernatural signs (Johnson, 2013, p. 305). Thus, it explains why most people who worship and go to the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine ask for blessings of wealth, business prosperity, and academic achievement.

In his concept of "The Right to the City," Lefebvre (1996, p. 64) argues that the pseudo-right perceives this as a cry and demand due to their assertion of the right to nature, allowing them to exploit the area for commercial and industrial purposes, consequently undermining the people's right to the city. This mirrors the situation with the Sam Yan Smart City project, where the Property Management of Chulalongkorn University (PMCU) holds complete discretion over the land, granting them the authority to utilize it as they deem appropriate. Critiques would argue that these social realities, as presented by the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine case, make "The Right to the City" concept too idealistic, utopian, and complicated to achieve in the context of capitalist societies.

Several scholars have further developed Lefebvre's concept of "The Right to the City". For instance, David Harvey, a Marxist geographer, placed more emphasis on collective rights rather than individual rights. He highlighted that collective power can influence and shape

urbanization, which is often associated with capitalism and neoliberalism. According to Harvey (2008, pp. 23-25), through collective action, democratic control, and the assertion of “The Right to the City,” cities can be both made and re-made or constructed and reconstructed. This was exemplified by the student movement led by Chulalongkorn University students in 2020, who persistently campaigned against the demolition of the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine.

The students’ collective action and public involvement ultimately saved the shrine for now and sparked unprecedented and widespread attention. The media has flocked to the shrine, reporting on its historical background, role, and significance to the community. Searches related to the shrine have been trending on social media. Students and activists have displayed banners and chanted slogans to defend the shrine’s survival.

This collective action not only garnered public attention but kept the faith of the community residents and believers and contributed to popular religion. This can be seen in their frequent visits to the old shrine out of fear of demolition. Despite the shrine’s relocation and being overshadowed by the construction, the people have maintained their faith in its original location. But despite the new shrine’s existence, the people still visit the old shrine. The new shrine near the CU Centenary Park also attracts worshippers. However, it is also important to note that in Thai culture, it is customary to pay respects at any sacred site encountered. This clarifies why the recently constructed shrine also has drawn worshippers despite its controversies.

In addition, it must be pointed out that whether a new shrine is built to replace the old one, the collective action shown by the youth movement and their emphasis on the “Right to the City” highlighted the crucial role of the Sam Yan community in preserving and defending the shrine’s cultural, spiritual, and symbolic significance in the face of gentrification.

The depth of one’s faith is influenced by both physical presence and emotional connections. The Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine is a space experienced through people’s authentic presence and social interactions (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33, pp. 38-40). The shrine carries the history and memories of Chinese immigrants, which is evident in its architecture, deity housing, decorations, and symbolic items. Additionally, the community residents’ bodily behaviors and social interactions manifest in various Chinese performances, celebrations of Chinese festivals, and practices of deity and ancestral worship foster unity among community members. This unity leads to heightened awareness of each other’s actions and emotions as they come together based on shared beliefs and act in harmony (Tang, 2024, p. 10), maintaining

the faith of everyone in Chao Mae Tub Tim, keeping the spiritual and symbolic significance of the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine, and fighting for their rights to the city.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

The Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine holds an immense spiritual and symbolic significance as it signifies the rich Thai Chinese history, religion, and culture. Originally the patron of Chinese immigrants to Siam, Chao Mae Tub Tim has evolved to become a protector of the Sam Yan community. The shrine is where the community venerates their ancestors, celebrates Chinese festivals, conducts religious rituals, and passes down spiritual traditions to future generations. It is where believers and visitors can worship Chao Mae Tub Tim and seek her blessings, fostering a profound sense of connection and respect.

The shrine symbolizes different facets of the Sam Yan community. It serves as a nostalgic space for people through materials with sentimental value and memories attached to them. The shrine features the vanishing craft of Thai artisans with Teochiu heritage, marking the Thai Chineseness of the Sam Yan community. The shrine functioned as a haven for the Teochiu communities who once lived in the Sam Yan district and continues to function as a communal space for the community.

Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's "The Right to the City," it becomes evident that the once vibrant and historically rich Sam Yan community has diminished its significance. Implementing the Sam Yan Smart City project has turned the community into commodities for consumption and aesthetic pleasure, including the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine. The Property Management of Chulalongkorn University's (PMCU) intention to demolish the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine to construct a retail mall and residential building aligns with Lefebvre's assertion that planners prioritizing consumption, commerce, and profit often overlook the historical, spiritual, and symbolic significance of urban spaces like the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine and the Sam Yan community.

Alongside the re-emergence of Thai student activism in 2020, the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine became an ideological symbol against the gentrification of Sam Yan. The issue of the shrine's demolition and the gentrification of Sam Yan contributed to its popularity and made it attractive for university students and young generations to worship. The plan to tear it down to pave the way for the Sam Yan Smart City project will destroy the shrine's symbolic and spiritual significance, and gentrification will remove the last piece of the Sam Yan community's past and ethnic local heritage.

In response to the threat of the shrine's demolition, the community and student sectors emerged as crucial players in safeguarding the shrine and its historical, symbolic, and spiritual significance. The Chulalongkorn University students, in particular, served as the people's voice regarding the negative impacts of gentrification. Guided by Lefebvre's concept, they emphasized the importance of an inclusive approach and their right to the Smart City, significantly affecting the people living nearby and the students studying at the university. The student activists' efforts highlighted the importance of an inclusive approach. They demonstrated that even faith in Chao Mae Tub Tim has its right to the Sam Yan Smart City project, inspiring hope for the shrine's preservation.

The Chulalongkorn University students' initiative to advocate for the Sam Yan community underscores Lefebvre's argument about the significance of the working class in urban life. The "Right to the City" concept stresses that claiming rights extends beyond returning or preserving the traditional landscape. It involves the active participation of the working class in shaping urban spaces, as they possess a deep understanding of daily urban life. They are recognized as key players, requiring social support and political backing to be genuinely effective. In the case of the Chao Mae Tub Tim Shrine, this aspect needed to be more evident and should have been addressed as the planners constructed the Smart City project.

As Lefebvre (1996, p. 64) argues in his "The Right to the City" concept, the pseudo-right views this as a cry and demand because of their claim to the right to nature, which enables them to exploit the area for commercial and industrial purposes, thereby undermining the people's right to the city. This is reminiscent of the Sam Yan Smart City project situation, where the Property Management of Chulalongkorn University (PMCU) has complete discretion over the land, granting them the authority to use it as they see fit.

It is hoped that, despite this discretion, the new administration of Chulalongkorn University will reconsider the plans of the Sam Yan Smart City project and examine the practices of other sustainable cities that have successfully engaged residents and local neighborhoods in the development of urban communities and preservation of spiritual and cultural heritage.

This study can be further developed by examining the events that will occur once the shrine is demolished. Another continuation that can be done from this paper is studying the newly constructed shrine near Chulalongkorn University Centenary Park and how the demolition of the old shrine affects the Chao Mae Tub Tim worship and practices.

References

- Boonlert, T. (2023, August 23). Artists rally to save the Chao Mae Thap Thim Shrine. *Bangkok Post*. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/arts-and-entertainment/2634353/artists-rally-to-save-the-chao-mae-thap-thim-shrine>
- Boonlert, T. (2023, July 10). A vanishing heritage. *Bangkok Post*. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/travel/2609048/a-vanishing-heritage>
- Chotiphatphaisal, N. (2020, August 31). *Opinion: By destroying the Chao Mae Tuptim Shrine, Chulalongkorn University will be destroying the last traces of a community*. Thai Enquirer. <https://www.thaienquirer.com/17725/opinion-by-destroying-the-chao-mae-tub-tum-shrine-chulalongkorn-university-will-be-destroying-the-last-traces-of-a-community/>
- Chotiphatphaisal, N. [@NetiwitC]. (2024, March 31). ขอขอบคุณ กลุ่มอิสระลี้ภัยการเมือง มหาวิทยาลัยธรรมศาสตร์ที่กำลังพูดถึงจุฬาฯ พูดถึงศาลเจ้าแม่ทับทิม ซึ่งทางจุฬาฯ ไม่กล่าวพูด. [Tweet]. X. <https://x.com/NetiwitC/status/1774377299984720341?s=07>
- Cornwel-Smith, P. (2023, September 25). *Bangkok's Alamo: Samyan shrine defenders fight to save community*. Koktail Media. <https://www.koktailmagazine.com/content-detail/Samyan+shrine+>
- Crosbie-Jones, M. (2023, August 18). *The Fight for Sam Yan Shrine*. Design Anthology. Design Anthology. <https://design-anthology.com/story/the-fight-for-sam-yan-shrine>
- Crosbie-Jones, M. (2023, August 23). *How a Bangkok shrine became a gentrification battlefield*. Nikkei Asia. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/Tea-Leaves/How-a-Bangkok-shrine-became-a-gentrification-battlefront>
- Dolar, M. (1991). "I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night": Lacan and the Uncanny. *October*, 58, 5–23. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778795>
- Harvey, D. (2008, October). *The Right to the City*. New Left Review. <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii53/articles/david-harvey-the-right-to-the-city>
- Itthipongmaetee, C. (2022, January 6). *Endangered Bangkok shrine's caretaker, supporters unimpressed by replacement*. Coconuts Bangkok. <https://coconuts.co/bangkok/features/endangered-bangkok-shrines-caretaker-supporters-unimpressed-by-replacement/>
- Johnson, A. A. (2013). Progress and its Ruins: Ghosts, Migrants, and the Uncanny in Thailand. *Cultural Anthropology*, 28(2), 299-319.

- Khaosod English. (2020, June 12). Chulalongkorn says relocated shrine will adhere to tradition, aesthetics.
<https://www.khaosodenglish.com/news/crimecourts calamity/2020/06/12/chulalongkorn-says-relocated-shrine-will-adhere-to-tradition-aesthetics/>
- Kongrut, A. (2020, June 15). Chula students rip shrine demolition. *Bangkok Post*.
<https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1935228/chula-students-rip-shrine-demolition>
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Blackwell.
- Lefebvre, H. (1996). *The Right to the City*. The Anarchist Library.
<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/henri-lefebvre-right-to-the-city>
- Lempoolsub, N. (2018). *Behavior and Perception of the Urban Redevelopment in Suanluang - Samyan Neighbourhood, Bangkok* [Thesis in Master of Urban Design, Faculty of Architectural and Planning]. Thammasat University.
https://digital.library.tu.ac.th/tu_dc/frontend/Info/item/dc:164275
- Marukatat, S. (2020, August 31). Chulalongkorn students struggle to save old shrine. *Bangkok Post*. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1977579/chulalongkorn-students-struggle-to-save-old-shrine>
- Nation Thailand. (2021, December 26). *Thailands 15 smart cities unveiled*.
<https://www.nationthailand.com/business/40010424>
- Nattanicha, P. (2024, October 2). Low-budget student documentary wins Thailand's top prize. *The Nation*. www.nationthailand.com/life/entertainment/40042006
- Property Management of Chulalongkorn University. (2024). *Our City*. Samyan Smart City.
<https://www.samyansmartcity.com/en/about?tab=our-city>
- Ratcliffe, R. (2023, June 27). 'Here is the history, the life': the shrine holding out against the gentrification of Bangkok. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/27/here-is-the-history-the-life-the-shrine-holding-out-against-the-gentrification-of-bangkok>
- Rojanaphruk, P. (2020, June 11). Historic shrine faces eviction by Chulalongkorn University. *Khaosod English*. <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/life/2020/06/11/historic-shrine-faces-eviction-by-chulalongkorn-university/>
- Suchaya, S. (2020, September 15). *คอนโดฯ มา อาม่าจร. วารสารเมืองโบราณ*.
<https://muangboranjournall.com/post/chao-mae-tub-tim-saphan-luang>

- Tang, X. (2024). The Sacred Place in Thai Urban Space: Chinese Shrines and Communities in Bangkok. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4759970>
- Tarkulwaranont, P., Chan, K.-B., & Tong, C.-K. (2001). Wang Thong: Civic Identity and Ethnicity in a Thai Market Town. In C. K. Tong & K. B. Chan (Eds.), *Alternate Identities: The Chinese of Contemporary Thailand* (pp. 227-270). Times Academic Press.
- Tarocco, F. (2015). 2. The City and the Pagoda: Buddhist Spatial Tactics in Shanghai. In P. van der Veer (Ed.), *Handbook of Religion and the Asian City: Aspiration and Urbanization in the Twenty-First Century* (pp. 37-51). University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520961081-004>
- The People Co. Official. (2020, June 13). ความศรัทธา ประวัติศาสตร์ ไม่อาจต้านความเปลี่ยนแปลง : สะพานเหลือง. The People. <https://www.thepeople.co/read/23926>
- The Real Ghosts. (2020, June 26). Episode 55, “ล่องผี Live EP.55 | ศาลเจ้าแม่ทับทิมสะพานเหลือง [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/ZZPNaLK1VBc>
- Wangprasertkul, P. (2023, August 3). Art Exhibition/Exile-bition: ศรัทธาและการต่อต้าน [Image attached] [Status update]. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/story.php/?story_fbid=296974332841324&id=100075862782839&_rdr
- Whispering Incense. (2024, May 2). *Where Gentrification Comes For a Goddess*. This Is Southeast Asia. <https://www.thisissoutheastasia.com/chao-mae-thap-thim-shrine-student-gentrification-fight/>
- World Bank Group. (2018). *Cultural Heritage, Sustainable Tourism and Urban Regeneration: Capturing Lessons and Experience from Japan with a focus on Kyoto*. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/ar/938741531140109250/pdf/128058-WP-Kyoto-CHSTUR-postTDD-final-PUBLIC.pdf>
- Yeom, M., & Mikelbank, B. (2013). Gentrification: An Introduction, Overview, and Application. In W. A. Kellogg & D. Swetkis (Eds.), *The 21st Century American City: Race Ethnicity and Multicultural Urban Life* (pp. 79-96). Kendall Hunt Publishing Company.