



BLAST FROM THE PAST

How Swordsman III, Tsui Hark's unexpected wuxia sequel, reflects its disjointed production > **FILM B11**



NO OPEN AND SHUT CASE

Some of the bigger global hotel operators are gingerly beginning to reopen their Asian properties > **TRAVEL B10**

Actors performing scenes from Chinese opera inside the forecourt of the shrine. Photos: Tibor Krausz



A question of heritage

A shrine in the heart of Bangkok is under threat from the university that owns the land it occupies, but local worshippers and students have vowed to protect the structure

Tibor Krausz
life@scmp.com

Three large Chinese characters painted in gold over the entrance declare that the shrine of Chao Mae Thap Thim in central Bangkok is the "Palace of the Queen of Heaven". The sea goddess Mazu, to whom the temple's name refers, is believed to inhabit the premises, but that may not be true for much longer.

Also known to locals as A-Ma – mother or grandma in Chinese – the deity does not seem keen on having her place of worship moved from its current location in a gravelly expanse that serves as a car park.

"A-Ma doesn't want to go," says Wanphen Ploysisuay, an ethnic Chinese Thai woman whose family has been tending the shrine for generations. "She wants to stay. She has told us."

The goddess communicated via crescent-shaped wooden *jiao-bei* blocks used for divination. Asked if she agreed to relocate, Mazu answered emphatically "no", Wanphen says.

However, the Queen of



A-Ma doesn't want to go. She wants to stay. She has told us

WANPHEN PLOYSISUAY, WHOSE FAMILY HAS TENDED THE THREATENED SHRINE FOR GENERATIONS

The altar of the shrine features statues and effigies of Mazu and various other divine beings.

Heaven may need to move just the same.

Her imposing and exquisite sanctuary was built by immigrants from southern China in a Hokkien style. It once stood in a quaint century-old Chinese-Thai community of shopkeepers, famed for their street food and for running small businesses. But a

few years ago entire blocks of their shophouses were demolished so the area could be redeveloped. Only their historic shrine remains and its days could be numbered.

"This shrine is A-Ma's property," insists Wanphen, 58, a diminutive woman who sells insurance. "It belongs to her."

Legally, the plot of land the temple occupies belongs to

Chulalongkorn University, which still wants to build high-rises on it.

When Chinese immigrants began settling there in the late 19th century, the area was still outlying wetland. It has since become prime real estate in the heart of Bangkok beside the university's sprawling campus. In May, the institution's property management office sent an eviction notice to the shrine's caretakers with the date of demolition set for June 15. It has offered to build a smaller shrine nearby.

When Penprapa Suansom received the letter, she despaired. Penprapa, 42, who was married to one of Wanphen's brothers, now deceased, is the primary caretaker of the shrine. She has lived for more than two decades in a modest residence adjoining it. "I've been with A-Ma for so long. I don't know what I'd do without her," she says. "She's like our grandmother and has looked after us."

In return, Penprapa has looked after the goddess. She rises early and spends her days dusting, disposing of spent incense sticks, lighting candles and arranging food offerings. Periodically she clothes the statues of Mazu in

chiffons of pink, red or gold and bedecks them with trinkets. She maintains the shrine with donations from worshippers.

The fateful date in June came and went, but the shrine is still standing – for now. That's thanks to a group of students at Chulalongkorn University, nicknamed Chula, who have launched a campaign to save the sanctuary. Taking on their institution, they have been staging protests and kicking up a storm on social media.

"Officials at Chula are very concerned about bad publicity. They're afraid of a backlash," says Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal, a student activist who has been leading the campaign. "They've backed off temporarily," the 24-year-old adds. "If they keep pushing, we'll step up our campaign."

Netiwit, the son of Chinese-Thai shopkeepers who is majoring in political science, has been a thorn in the side of university administrators for years. He first rubbed them up the wrong way as a first-year student in 2016 by defying tradition and refusing to prostrate himself before a bronze statue of the institution's namesake, King Chulalongkorn, a revered 19th-century monarch.

His campaign on behalf of the historic shrine has made him more enemies at his university. "People at the property management office don't want to speak to me, but that won't stop me," he says. "It's wrong to destroy this shrine. It's part of Bangkok's cultural heritage and the living memory of its Chinese community."

The temple has long served as a home for a sacred statue of Mazu that has pride of place on an altar among various other deities and divine guardians.

It was a brother of Wanphen's great-grandfather who chanced upon the idol over a century ago. A migrant in search of better prospects, he arrived in Bangkok by boat from China. One day, family lore has it, he spotted a wooden object in a canal seemingly floating against the current. He fished it out and realised it was a woodcarving of Mazu, a guardian deity of Chinese seafarers credited with performing miracles at her devotees' behest.

"We believe A-Ma came here from China," Wanphen says. "Or maybe from heaven."



Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal (right) holds a sign with a student activist in support of the historic shrine.

Either way, the statue soon passed to her great-grandfather, who was raising ducks in what was still a rural area of Bangkok. The Chinese immigrant prospered and attributed his success to the goddess's benevolence.

He built a small wooden shrine for her effigy, which became an object of veneration in a poor immigrant community of workmen, handymen and craftsmen. "People could come to her and she would grant their wishes," Wanphen says. A century on, supplicants still flock to the goddess daily. Twice a year grateful worshippers sponsor lavish Chinese opera performances at the shrine to entertain her.

It's a special building. It was once the heart and soul of a community that no longer exists

AMPANTEP THARNWANITCHAKARN

This isn't the original shrine, though. That one was vacated after a fire – possibly set on purpose to clear the area of squatters – destroyed much of the shanty town. A larger wooden shrine was built nearby, but in time it was torn down to make way for new buildings. Locals donated generously for a third shrine, which was built out of concrete and completed in 1970.

"This building is an architectural time capsule as an imitation in concrete of an elaborate wooden shrine," says Vipoo Vongjyong,

an artisan who specialises in temple art and prays here regularly.

"It's a special building," agrees Ampantep Tharnwanitchakarn, a graduate of Chulalongkorn University who designs jewellery and also visits frequently. "It was once the heart and soul of a community that no longer exists. This shrine is the last vestige of it."

Ampantep, 24, whose grandparents all came from China, has spent countless hours at the ageing edifice, and not just in prayer. He has been studying its architectural and artistic elements down to their smallest details.

The roof boasts bamboo-shaped green tiles and the porcelain figurines on its four corners are from Chinese opera. The concrete door frame has been fashioned to look like teak, while the eight supporting columns are topped with floral bas reliefs. Four stylised bats form a rectangle on the stone floor. The altar's wooden posts have been carved with dragons and carp.

Ampantep indicates an orange and yellow tiger painted on a wall above a little pond with live black turtles. It faces a green dragon on the opposite wall and is perpendicular to strutting phoenixes painted on another. "It's the White Tiger of the West and one of the four auspicious beasts that represent the cardinal directions," he says.

During some touch-up work, local craftsmen repainted the fading image in the wrong colours. "A lot of old knowledge is getting lost," Ampantep says.

For the shrine's caretakers, much more could be lost. "I grew up here and have many fond memories," says Wanphen, whose father was a previous custodian of the shrine.

"My mother died here years ago," she adds. "A medium told me her spirit is still here. A-Ma brought her back from heaven."

Any day, Wanphen and Penprapa fret, a demolition crew could arrive and erase their beloved sanctuary. A matronly woman arrives at the temple. Suffering from knee problems, Jaekeng Seakau, 67, shuffles slowly, a cane in each hand, wincing with pain. "I can hardly walk, but I've come," she says, panting. "I want to pray to A-Ma and ask her to stay."

