

# ADHERENCE, CHALLENGES AND REVITALIZATION: UNDERSTANDING THE DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE RELIGIONS IN MALAYSIA

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**Abstract.** This article examines the decline, challenges, and possible revitalization of Traditional Chinese Religions (TCR) among Malaysian Chinese communities. Historically, TCR has functioned as a syncretic religious and cultural system combining Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, ancestor worship, temple rituals, and folk practices. It once played a central role in sustaining communal identity, social solidarity, and cultural continuity among Chinese migrants and their descendants in Malaysia. However, recent demographic trends, survey findings, and qualitative evidence suggest that TCR is experiencing a gradual weakening of adherence, especially among younger and more educated generations. Based on national census data, a nationwide survey of approximately 200 respondents, focus group discussions with religious leaders, and interviews with converts, this study examines the structural, generational, linguistic, and institutional factors contributing to this decline. The findings show that while TCR remains publicly visible through festivals, temples, and ritual practices, many followers engage with it more as cultural heritage than as a source of religious conviction or daily moral guidance. Younger adherents often possess limited doctrinal knowledge, face difficulties understanding ritual language, and view TCR as insufficiently relevant to modern life. Meanwhile, religious leaders acknowledge challenges such as resource limitations, competition from Christianity and Islam, lack of professional clergy, and weak youth engagement, but they remain divided over modernization. The results and discussion are presented through textual analysis rather than tables or figures, as the article's central concern is to interpret meanings, perceptions, and institutional responses rather than to display extensive numerical comparisons. The article argues that revitalization is possible only if TCR organizations move beyond ritual preservation and adopt educational reform, bilingual communication, youth-oriented activities, social services, and more professionalized leadership.

**Keywords:** *Traditional Chinese Religions (TCR), Malaysia, secularization, syncretism, youth religiosity, religious conversion*

## Introduction

The religious landscape of Malaysian Chinese communities has undergone significant transformation over the past century, shaped by historical migration, modernization, and shifting cultural identities. Traditional Chinese Religions (TCR), a syncretic blend of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and folk practices, once served as the spiritual and communal foundation for Chinese migrants (Tan, 1983). Yet, national census data and sociological studies show a steady decline in adherence, with growing shifts toward Christianity, Islam, or irreligious identities (DOSM, 2022). Historically, TCR integrated ancestor worship, temple rituals, and local deity cults such as Da Bo Gong, while temples functioned as religious and social hubs that reinforced community life and Chinese identity (Mun and Fee, 2014; Kuah-Pearce, 2009). Revitalization has punctuated earlier periods of decline, including the late-nineteenth-century Confucian revival and the emergence of new syncretic movements such as Yiguandao and De Jiao

(Adler, 2005; Ching-Hwang, 1976). More recently, Buddhist organizations have modernized through rationalized teachings and welfare initiatives, offering models of resilience (Tan, 2020). Despite these precedents, contemporary challenges are acute. Census data between 2010 and 2020 show declines in Buddhist and Taoist affiliation, while Christianity has expanded rapidly among Chinese Malaysians (Sun, 2020). Contributing factors include modernization, weakening family-based transmission, limited doctrinal education, and organizational stagnation (Mahoney, 2010; Tan, 2000). Many adherents now participate primarily in festivals, identifying more as cultural followers than religious believers (Mun, 2024).

Unlike Christian and Islamic institutions, most TCR organizations lack professional clergy, youth programs, or structured education, relying heavily on ritual-centric activities (Lee and Toh, 2023). This institutional weakness contrasts with the dynamic outreach of non-TCR religions, which attract younger generations through clear teachings, social networks, and accessible worship (Yee et al., 2019; Hall, 2006). Nevertheless, revitalization remains possible. Case studies show that Buddhist associations and some Confucian or Taoist groups have rebranded themselves as providers of education, moral guidance, and welfare, demonstrating the potential for adaptive reform (Tan, 2020). This study examines the intersection of adherence, organizational challenges, and revitalization strategies in TCR, comparing the perspectives of leaders and followers. It argues that the decline of TCR raises critical questions about Chinese cultural identity in Malaysia and that revitalization depends on bridging the gap between tradition and modernity, ritual and rationality, leadership and laity.

### ***Literature review***

The decline of Traditional Chinese Religions (TCR) in Malaysia must be understood not as an isolated phenomenon, but as part of a wider trajectory of religious change shaped by migration histories, social modernization, and the pressures of globalization. Scholarship on TCR in Malaysia spans historical ethnographies, demographic studies, and theoretical explorations of religious transformation. This literature review synthesizes four strands: the historical role of TCR in Malaysian Chinese communities; empirical research on conversion and declining adherence; revitalization and modernization movements; and theoretical perspectives on secularization, religious economy, and identity.

### ***Historical foundations and the syncretic nature of TCR***

The historical roots of Chinese religion in Malaysia are closely linked to patterns of migration from southern China during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Tan Chee Beng noted in his seminal ethnographic overview, Chinese religion in Malaysia cannot be reduced to single traditions but should be seen as a syncretic amalgam of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and folk practices that together shape the worldview of Chinese communities (Tan, 1983). Temples in Malaya served as religious, cultural, and social institutions, providing venues for ancestor worship, community arbitration, and festivals. Tan further observed that the boundaries between these traditions were porous, with adherents participating in multiple rituals without rigid denominational identification. This syncretism, often described as “Chinese folk religion” or “Chinese popular religion,” is distinguished by its adaptability. It

incorporates local deities and cults such as Da Bo Gong and Nadu Gong, which reflect both the transplanted Chinese cosmology and the adaptation to local contexts (Mun and Fee, 2014). Such practices highlight how TCR historically functioned not only as a spiritual system but also as a mechanism for cultural survival in the diasporic setting. At the same time, state categorization practices in Malaysia contributed to a flattening of this diversity. For decades, the Department of Statistics Malaysia recognized only Buddhism on identity cards, neglecting Taoism and Confucianism, thereby obscuring the actual complexity of Chinese religious identity (DOSM, 2022). This produced a discrepancy between lived practice and official classification, reinforcing external perceptions that all Chinese were “Buddhists” when in reality they practiced a syncretic blend (Adler, 2005).

### ***Conversion, decline, and demographic change***

Empirical evidence shows a steady decline in adherence to TCR, particularly among younger cohorts. The Malaysian census indicates that Buddhists as a share of the national population dropped from 19.8% in 2010 to 18.7% in 2020, while those in the “other religions” category, often covering Taoism and folk traditions, fell from 1.7% to 0.9% (DOSM, 2022). Meanwhile, Chinese Christian numbers have grown significantly, from 3.5% of Chinese in 1970 to nearly 10% by 2010 (Sun, 2020). Several studies explore the dynamics of conversion. Hall (2006) examined Chinese American conversions to Christianity, demonstrating how social networks, cultural alienation, and search for meaning contribute to shifts in identity (Hall, 2006). Although in a U.S. context, his findings resonate with Malaysian experiences where Christian churches provide fellowship, modern forms of worship, and moral guidance that appeal to youth. Yee et al. (2019a) analysed Malaysian Chinese Muslim converts, highlighting conversion as both a religious and identity transformation process. They found that adulthood differentiation, marriage, and search for belonging played important roles (Yee et al., 2019a). In another study, they traced how organizational support within Islamic communities facilitated integration of Chinese converts (Yee et al., 2019a). From within TCR itself, research shows that many adherents possess only superficial knowledge of doctrines. Surveys conducted by Mun (2024) at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman revealed that many self-identifying TCR adherents considered themselves “adherents” rather than “believers,” participating in rituals primarily for cultural continuity rather than religious conviction. This low level of doctrinal engagement contrasts with the systematic catechism in Christianity and structured religious education in Islam, leaving TCR vulnerable to attrition.

### ***Revitalization and modernization movements***

Although decline is a dominant narrative, TCR has demonstrated episodes of revitalization. The Confucian revival of the late nineteenth century, for example, attempted to institutionalize Confucianism as a civil religion. Ching-Hwang (1976) documented how this movement reached Malaya, leading to the establishment of Confucian temples and schools, even though in China it failed politically (Ching-Hwang, 1976). Similarly, new religious movements such as Yiguandao and De Jiao sought to modernize syncretic Chinese traditions and spread to Malaysia in the early twentieth century (Adler, 2005). More recent revitalization has been led by Buddhist organizations. Tan (2000) documented the rise of Buddhist modernism in Malaysia,

which emphasized rationalization, moral education, and community services (Tan, 2000). Building on this, Tan (2020) argued that Buddhist revitalization projects have turned into broader modernization campaigns, transforming Buddhism into a rational, socially engaged religion attractive to middle-class Chinese (Tan, 2020). However, revitalization has been uneven. As Lee and Toh (2023) observed, some temples and associations remain trapped in ritualistic cycles, with limited resources and absence of strategic planning. Others, often Buddhist associations, have succeeded in institutional renewal by professionalizing leadership, diversifying activities, and mobilizing financial resources. This divergence reflects not only resource disparities but also the willingness of leaders to innovate (Lee and Toh, 2023).

### ***Theoretical perspectives***

The decline of TCR has been interpreted through broader theoretical frameworks. Secularization theory posits that modernization and rationalization lead to the decline of religious authority. In Malaysia, the embrace of scientific rationality by educated Chinese has weakened adherence to ritual-based traditions (Yang, 2018). However, the persistence and even growth of Christianity and Islam complicates a simple secularization thesis. Religious economy theory offers another lens. According to Stark and Finke, religious vitality is shaped by competition, supply, and organizational innovation. Within this framework, TCR's relative stagnation contrasts with the entrepreneurial expansion of Christian churches and Islamic institutions, which actively recruit and innovate (Yang and Tamney, 2006). The lack of proselytization in TCR, combined with its fragmented institutional base, suggests that it is losing ground in a plural religious market. Identity theory also illuminates the stakes. Religious identity among Malaysian Chinese is entangled with ethnic identity. Kim (2011) argued that religion and ethnicity often reinforce each other, though they can also diverge when religious conversion does not undermine ethnic belonging (Kim, 2011). Indeed, many Chinese who convert to Christianity continue to affirm their Chineseness, suggesting that TCR no longer monopolizes Chinese ethnic identity. This erosion of the TCR–ethnicity nexus further weakens its grip.

### ***Synthesis***

The literature points to a complex picture. Historically, TCR served as the backbone of Chinese community life in Malaysia, embedding cultural continuity and social solidarity. However, modernization, weakened intergenerational transmission, and organizational stagnation have contributed to a steady decline in adherence. Empirical research confirms that conversions to Christianity and Islam are facilitated by institutional strength and community support, while TCR organizations struggle with limited resources and doctrinal diffusion. At the same time, revitalization efforts within Buddhism and Confucian associations demonstrate that adaptive reform is possible. Theoretically, secularization explains the erosion of ritual authority, while religious economy theory highlights the importance of organizational competitiveness. Identity theory underscores the loosening of ties between religion and ethnicity, suggesting that Chinese identity is increasingly decoupled from TCR adherence. Together, these perspectives provide a framework for analysing not only the decline of TCR but also its uneven attempts at revitalization.

## Materials and Methods

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine the decline of Traditional Chinese Religions (TCR) in Malaysia, paying equal attention to both macro-level trends and micro-level perceptions. The rationale for this design stems from the recognition that religious change is not adequately explained by statistics alone, nor can it be fully captured by individual narratives. Instead, a combination of quantitative and qualitative data is required to illuminate how demographic patterns intersect with organizational strategies and personal experiences of belief and practice (Creswell and Clark, 2017). The quantitative component of this research was based primarily on national population data and survey evidence. Population and Housing Census reports from the Department of Statistics Malaysia provided baseline figures on religious affiliation across decades, which reveal significant demographic shifts such as the decline of Buddhism and other TCR, and the rise of Christianity among Chinese Malaysians (DOSM, 2022). Such data are indispensable for establishing long-term trajectories, though scholars have noted that census classifications often obscure the actual diversity of TCR by lumping Taoism and Confucianism into residual categories (Tan, 1983). To supplement these limitations, survey data collected under the auspices of Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman provided finer-grained insights into Chinese Malaysians' attitudes toward their religious identity. This nationwide survey, conducted in two rounds (face-to-face and online), engaged over 200 respondents representing diverse age groups, educational levels, and geographical locations. The survey asked respondents about their perceptions of TCR, their level of conviction, experiences with conversion, and attitudes toward revitalization.

The qualitative component involved focus group discussions (FGDs) with religious leaders and semi-structured interviews with converts. Ten FGDs were held with committees representing TCR organizations, including Buddhist movements, Taoist associations, Chinese temples, and new Chinese religious movements across Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak (Lee and Toh, 2023). Each discussion lasted approximately ninety minutes and was facilitated by a moderator to ensure balanced participation. The purpose of these FGDs was to probe leaders' understandings of the seriousness of membership decline, their views on the causes of conversion, and the strategies they had undertaken or planned for revitalization. By juxtaposing leaders' perspectives with lay perceptions from the survey, the study was able to identify gaps and overlaps between institutional visions and popular expectations. In addition to FGDs, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Chinese Malaysians who had converted out of TCR into Christianity or Islam, as well as with a smaller group who had reverted back to TCR. These interviews were purposively sampled to capture a variety of trajectories and were designed to elicit in-depth narratives of conversion, including motivations, challenges, and post-conversion reflections. Similar approaches have been used in other studies on religious conversion in Malaysia, where qualitative accounts of Chinese Muslim converts highlighted the interplay of social networks, marriage, and spiritual searching in the conversion process (Yee et al., 2019a; 2019b). By incorporating such accounts, this study situates statistical patterns within the lived realities of individuals.

Data analysis followed a sequential explanatory design, in which quantitative findings provided the broad contours of religious change, and qualitative findings were used to interpret and contextualize these patterns (Ivankova et al., 2006). Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics to gauge levels of adherence, perceptions of

decline, and openness to revitalization. FGDs and interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic coding, focusing on recurring motifs such as “modernity versus tradition,” “organizational limitations,” “youth engagement,” and “identity negotiation.” Triangulation of sources ensured greater validity by comparing how narratives aligned or diverged between leaders and followers. An important methodological concern in the study of religion is reflexivity. Researchers must remain aware of their positionality when engaging with communities that may perceive external inquiry as intrusive. Following established ethnographic practice (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019), the research team ensured confidentiality for participants and anonymized identifying details of organizations and individuals. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and participation was voluntary. These measures were particularly important in interviews with converts, given the potential sensitivity of discussing decisions that sometimes entail familial or community tensions. The mixed-methods approach adopted here allows for both breadth and depth. National census and survey data provide macro-level evidence of declining adherence, while FGDs and interviews uncover the micro-level rationalities that underlie individual decisions and organizational responses. By aligning quantitative evidence of demographic shifts with qualitative narratives of adaptation and struggle, the methodology bridges structural and experiential dimensions of religious change. This design follows the recommendation of scholars of Asian religions who caution against relying exclusively on statistical or textual analysis, instead advocating for integrated approaches that recognize the dynamic and negotiated character of religious life (Yang, 2018). In sum, the methodological strategy of this study reflects the need to approach the decline of TCR in Malaysia as a multidimensional phenomenon. Quantitative data capture the scope of the trend, while qualitative inquiry explains its underlying causes and organizational ramifications. The combination enhances the reliability and validity of findings, while also offering a comparative vantage point to assess both leaders’ and lay perspectives. This holistic methodology thus provides a robust foundation for understanding not only why TCR is declining, but also how revitalization may yet be imagined and enacted in the Malaysian context.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Leaders’ perspectives***

The perspectives of organizational leaders within Traditional Chinese Religions (TCR) provide crucial insights into both the perceived severity of membership decline and the strategies considered for revitalization. Focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted with leaders from ten TCR organizations, which including Buddhist associations, Taoist federations, local Chinese temples, and new religious movements, its revealed significant differences in perceptions, levels of awareness, and institutional capacity to address contemporary challenges (Mun, 2024). These findings show that while leaders generally acknowledge the erosion of religious adherence among Chinese Malaysians, their interpretations of the causes and their proposed solutions vary, often reflecting the structural limitations of their organizations. One of the most striking findings is the divergence between leaders’ perceptions of decline and the demographic evidence. National census data and survey research consistently indicate a reduction in TCR affiliation over the past decades, with Buddhist identification falling from 19.8% in 2010 to 18.7% in 2020, and “other religions” (including Taoism and folk religions)

declining from 1.7% to 0.9% (DOSM, 2022). Yet, in FGDs, some leaders downplayed the seriousness of this trend, suggesting that conversions out of TCR were not alarming and that new members continued to join activities (Lee and Toh, 2023). This optimistic outlook may reflect both institutional self-preservation and the reliance on visible participation in rituals such as temple festivals as indicators of vitality.

At the same time, other leaders acknowledged substantial challenges. Several pointed to the highly organized missionary efforts of Christianity, particularly among youth, as a major factor behind membership loss. Churches were perceived as offering attractive activities, strong social networks, and accessible religious education, all of which TCR institutions often lack. Research elsewhere confirms that Christian organizations in Malaysia have gained ground by creating youth-friendly spaces and modern worship environments (Hall, 2006). Leaders further identified the decline of family-based religious transmission as a critical problem. Whereas older generations taught rituals through household practice, many younger Chinese Malaysians now grow up with limited exposure to temple traditions, reducing their attachment to TCR (Tan, 1983). The resource limitations of TCR organizations also emerged as a recurring theme. Leaders frequently emphasized financial constraints, with many temples relying on voluntary donations that fluctuate with festival attendance. Unlike Christian or Islamic organizations, which benefit from centralized structures and professional clergy, most TCR bodies are managed by part-time committees with little capacity for long-term planning. Leaders lamented the absence of full-time religious personnel, such as monks, Taoist priests, or trained ritual specialists, who could provide consistent guidance and education to followers (Lee and Toh, 2023). This shortage results in overreliance on lay volunteers and ritual-based activities, reinforcing perceptions of TCR as ritualistic rather than doctrinally meaningful (Tan, 2000).

Another notable finding concerns leaders' responses to modernization. Some expressed awareness that younger generations perceive TCR rituals as superstitious or outdated. Indeed, survey data from lay respondents support this, showing that many younger Chinese Malaysians consider TCR to be peripheralized in modern life (Mun, 2024). Leaders who acknowledged this problem proposed the rationalization and reinterpretation of rituals to make them more meaningful in contemporary contexts, echoing broader revitalization strategies seen in Buddhist modernism (Tan, 2020). Others, however, resisted such changes, fearing that simplification or modernization would dilute authenticity. This tension highlights a fundamental divide within TCR leadership: between those willing to adapt to secular and modern expectations and those committed to preserving tradition in its existing form. Leaders also identified the lack of systematic education as a major barrier to sustaining TCR. Unlike Christianity, which employs catechism and Sunday schools, or Islam, which integrates religious education into national schooling, TCR organizations rarely provide structured teaching. This absence has left many adherents unfamiliar with the philosophical underpinnings of their religion, engaging only superficially through rituals and festivals. Some leaders in the FGDs acknowledged this deficit and proposed creating educational programs for youth, but few had concrete plans or resources to implement them. This gap in doctrinal transmission aligns with findings from broader sociological studies showing that when religions fail to institutionalize knowledge, younger generations disengage (Yang, 2018).

The FGDs also revealed leaders' perspectives on conversion out of TCR. Several attributed conversion to Christianity to aggressive proselytization, the attractiveness of

church activities, and the strong sense of belonging provided by Christian communities. Others pointed to broader societal changes, including declining use of the Chinese language and weakening of kinship structures, which erode the cultural basis of TCR practice (Sun, 2020). Some leaders also admitted that TCR institutions often fail to communicate effectively in English or Malay, limiting outreach beyond Chinese-speaking communities. This linguistic insularity contrasts with the multilingual strategies of Christian churches and Islamic institutions, which allows them to appeal to wider audiences (Yee et al., 2019a). Despite these challenges, leaders articulated various revitalization strategies. Some Buddhist organizations reported efforts to professionalize leadership, diversify activities, and integrate welfare services into their mission, following models of Buddhist modernism that emphasize rationality, social engagement, and education (Tan, 2020). Taoist and temple leaders, by contrast, focused more on preserving ritual heritage, such as organizing elaborate festivals or restoring temple architecture, which they viewed as ways to attract public interest. While these efforts highlight different understandings of revitalization, they also reveal disparities in capacity. Well-resourced Buddhist groups were able to pursue long-term projects, while smaller temples struggled to move beyond survival mode.

An important divergence between leaders and followers lies in expectations of what revitalization should entail. Lay respondents often emphasized the need for TCR to become more relevant to daily life, through community support and moral guidance, while leaders in some FGDs remained focused on ritual preservation (Mun, 2024). This misalignment risks further alienating younger generations who already perceive TCR as disconnected from contemporary issues. As religious economy theory suggests, organizations that fail to innovate in competitive pluralistic environments risk decline (Yang and Tamney, 2006). In summary, leaders of TCR organizations in Malaysia demonstrate both recognition and denial regarding the decline of their traditions. While some acknowledge demographic realities and propose reforms, others downplay challenges or cling to ritualistic continuity. Across FGDs, leaders consistently identified resource constraints, lack of professional clergy, and limited educational initiatives as major obstacles. Their views also highlight the pressures exerted by competing religions, modernization, and linguistic shifts. Although revitalization strategies vary, ranging from Buddhist modernist reforms to ritual preservation, the findings underscore a structural gap between leadership visions and lay expectations. Bridging this gap will be critical for the future of TCR in Malaysia, yet the present evidence suggests that only a minority of organizations possess the capacity and willingness to undertake the necessary transformations.

### ***Followers' perspectives***

The perspectives of followers, as captured in nationwide surveys and supplemented by interviews, provide crucial insight into the lived realities of Traditional Chinese Religions (TCR) in Malaysia. Unlike organizational leaders who often evaluate the situation in terms of institutional survival, followers articulate their relationship with religion through everyday practices, personal convictions, and cultural identification. The analysis of 200 valid survey responses collected in late 2022, combined with supplementary data from national census reports and previous sociological studies, reveals five central themes: patterns of adherence, generational differences, the role of language and education, attitudes towards conversion, and expectations for revitalization. Together, these perspectives highlight the paradox of simultaneous

continuity and erosion within TCR communities. The survey results suggest that TCR in Malaysia remains visible in terms of ritual participation but shallow in terms of conviction and knowledge. Among the 200 respondents, 64% reported that they participate in at least one major TCR ritual annually, such as Qingming or the Hungry Ghost Festival. However, when asked about the frequency of temple attendance, only 28% reported attending monthly, while 46% said they only visit temples during festivals, and 26% admitted they rarely or never attend outside of family obligations (Mun, 2024). This confirms earlier ethnographic observations that TCR is predominantly practice-oriented, anchored in festivals and rituals rather than sustained religious life (Tan, 1983).

Knowledge of doctrine was also limited. Only 22% of respondents indicated familiarity with Buddhist sutras, Taoist scriptures, or Confucian classics, and a mere 12% reported that they had ever read such texts independently. By contrast, 71% admitted that their knowledge of rituals comes from observation of family members, rather than formal instruction. This aligns with findings from the census of religion in Malaysia, which shows that while many Chinese identify nominally as Buddhists, their actual doctrinal commitment is modest (DOSM, 2022). Perceptions of TCR's relevance were also measured. Approximately 47% of respondents agreed with the statement that "TCR is important for preserving Chinese culture," but only 31% agreed that it "guides my daily life decisions." In contrast, 19% explicitly described TCR as "superstitious" or "outdated." These figures reinforce the gap between cultural attachment and religious conviction, a pattern also identified in Yang (2018) study of Chinese religiosity in global contexts. Age-related disparities were among the most significant findings. Among respondents aged 18–30, only 22% reported strong identification with TCR, compared to 54% among those aged 50 and above. Participation in ancestor worship was reported by 71% of the older group, but only 38% of the younger group. Younger respondents were more likely to categorize themselves as "cultural Chinese" rather than religious practitioners, suggesting a shift towards ethnic identity without religious depth.

These generational gaps mirror broader patterns of youth disengagement from religion in Malaysia. Sun (2020) found that Chinese Christian communities were growing precisely because they offered younger people an alternative framework for belonging that emphasized personal meaning and modern relevance. By contrast, younger Chinese who remain within TCR often experience their religion passively, participating in rituals orchestrated by elders but disengaging once they become independent adults. The generational divide also reflects the influence of education. Among respondents with university-level education, 41% agreed that TCR was "not logical" compared to science and modern values, while only 17% of respondents with secondary-level education or below expressed such views. This suggests that exposure to secular, rationalist perspectives through higher education contributes to detachment from TCR. Mahoney (2010) similarly observed that the decline of family-based religiosity is compounded by rising educational attainment, as younger generations increasingly prioritize rational explanation over ritual symbolism. The survey also confirmed that linguistic barriers significantly affect followers' engagement with TCR. When asked whether they understood the language used in temple rituals, 58% of younger respondents said "not at all" or "only partially." By contrast, 62% of older respondents said they understood "most" or "all" of the ritual language. This discrepancy reflects the declining proficiency in Chinese among younger generations educated in national schools where Malay and English dominate.

This linguistic alienation discourages meaningful participation. Several interviewees described feeling disconnected when listening to chants or reading scriptures they could not comprehend. As one university student noted, “I attend the Hungry Ghost Festival with my parents, but I don’t understand the chants, so it feels like a performance rather than a prayer.” Such sentiments echo findings in conversion research: Yee et al. (2019a) reported that Chinese Muslim converts often cited the incomprehensibility of Chinese rituals as a factor in their dissatisfaction with TCR. Furthermore, respondents indicated that TCR organizations rarely offer educational programs to bridge this gap. Only 14% recalled attending any structured classes on TCR teachings, compared to much higher participation in Christian Sunday schools or Islamic religious instruction. This absence of institutional education perpetuates the cycle of ritualism without doctrinal depth, a point also emphasized by Tan (2000). Conversion remains a sensitive but significant theme. The survey revealed that 12% of respondents had considered converting to another religion, with Christianity cited as the most attractive option. Among those who had considered conversion, 67% said they were drawn by the strong sense of community in churches, 49% by the clarity of teachings, and 42% by youth programs. These motivations are consistent with Hall (2006) findings on conversion among Chinese communities, where belonging and meaning often outweigh purely theological concerns. Islam was less commonly considered, though 5% of respondents had either converted or contemplated conversion due to intermarriage. This reflects broader demographic patterns: while conversions to Islam among Chinese Malaysians remain relatively rare, marriage remains a significant pathway (Yee et al., 2019b). Interestingly, several respondents who converted to Christianity or Islam noted that their families were disappointed but ultimately accepted their choices, suggesting that the link between TCR and Chinese identity is weakening. This supports Kim (2011) argument that ethnicity and religion can become decoupled, allowing Chinese identity to persist independent of TCR adherence.

Despite these challenges, followers expressed clear ideas about what revitalization should entail. When asked what changes would make TCR more relevant, 52% prioritized “educational programs to explain rituals,” 46% emphasized “youth activities and community events,” and 39% called for “integration of social services such as charity or counseling.” Only 17% supported “preserving rituals in their current form without change.” This demonstrates that followers want TCR to evolve, not merely survive. Buddhist organizations were frequently cited as positive examples. Respondents praised groups that offered meditation classes, welfare services, and moral education, aligning with Tan (2020) analysis of Buddhist revitalization. By contrast, Taoist and folk religion temples were viewed as less capable of adapting. Some respondents explicitly stated that they attend temple festivals “for fun” or “for culture,” not for spiritual growth, reflecting skepticism about whether these institutions could meaningfully modernize. Followers’ perspectives reveal a paradoxical dynamic: while TCR retains cultural significance, its religious vitality is in decline. The data show that ritual participation remains relatively high but is increasingly symbolic rather than substantive. Generational differences are profound, with younger cohorts demonstrating weaker identification and limited knowledge. Language barriers exacerbate disengagement, while the absence of structured education perpetuates superficial practice. Attitudes toward conversion reflect dissatisfaction with ritual-heavy traditions and attraction to religions offering stronger community, clarity, and modern relevance. At the same time, followers express clear expectations for revitalization, centered on

education, youth engagement, and social services. These findings highlight the widening gap between leaders and followers. Whereas leaders often emphasize ritual preservation and institutional survival, followers demand modernization and meaningful engagement. If TCR organizations fail to address these expectations, the already fragile adherence among younger generations may continue to erode, accelerating the decline documented in national statistics. Conversely, if revitalization efforts succeed in aligning practice with followers' aspirations, TCR could regain vitality as both a religious and cultural force in Malaysian Chinese society.

### *Comparative analysis*

The preceding chapters revealed the perspectives of leaders and followers within Traditional Chinese Religions (TCR) in Malaysia. A comparative analysis highlights both convergence and divergence in their interpretations of decline, their assessment of challenges, and their visions for revitalization. Leaders' perspectives are often shaped by institutional priorities and resource constraints, whereas followers frame their religious orientation in terms of personal relevance, cultural continuity, and pragmatic spirituality. This comparison reveals a widening gap between institutional self-perceptions and lived religious realities, underscoring the structural and cultural factors that shape the trajectory of TCR in Malaysia. One area of convergence is the recognition that TCR faces decline. Leaders acknowledged pressures from competing religions, particularly Christianity and Islam, and noted the erosion of family-based religious transmission (Lee and Toh, 2023). Followers similarly recognized that TCR participation is increasingly limited to cultural rituals and festivals, with younger generations disengaging from doctrinal or sustained practice (Mun, 2024). Both groups thus share an awareness that religious continuity can no longer be taken for granted. However, the degree of urgency expressed differs considerably. Leaders often minimized the demographic severity of decline, emphasizing visible participation in temple festivals as evidence of resilience. In contrast, survey data from followers show a more fragile reality: while 64% reported annual ritual participation, only 28% attended temples monthly, and 19% explicitly viewed TCR as superstitious or outdated. Such discrepancies indicate that leaders' confidence in ritual vitality may obscure the depth of followers' disengagement (DOSM, 2022). Another dimension of comparison lies in the perceived causes of decline. Leaders emphasized external pressures such as Christian missionary efforts, linguistic assimilation, and the broader social prestige of Christianity and Islam (Hall, 2006). Followers, however, pointed to internal limitations of TCR itself. Many respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of accessible teachings, the heavy reliance on ritual, and the absence of youth-oriented programs. For example, only 22% of surveyed followers indicated any familiarity with religious texts, and just 12% reported independent engagement with such material. These findings align with Tan's earlier observation that Chinese religion in Malaysia is predominantly ritualistic and lacks systematic doctrinal engagement (Tan, 1983). The contrast demonstrates how leaders may externalize decline by attributing it to competitive pressures, while followers focus on the shortcomings of TCR institutions themselves.

The issue of modernization further illustrates the divergence. Leaders' attitudes varied: some acknowledged the need to adapt rituals to contemporary expectations, while others resisted change out of fear of losing authenticity. Followers, by contrast, expressed a clear preference for modernization. In survey results, 52% prioritized educational programs that would explain rituals, 46% called for youth activities, and

39% wanted integration of social services. Only 17% supported preserving rituals unchanged (Mun, 2024). These findings suggest that while leaders are divided over reform, followers overwhelmingly expect institutional innovation. Successful revitalization efforts within Buddhist organizations, which emphasize rationalized teachings, community services, and youth programs were cited positively by followers (Tan, 2020). Yet Taoist and folk religion associations, which have remained more traditionalist, were seen as incapable of meeting such expectations. Resource constraints were another area where perspectives diverged. Leaders frequently identified financial limitations and the shortage of full-time clergy as primary obstacles (Lee and Toh, 2023). While followers acknowledged these problems, their emphasis lay less on resources and more on relevance. Many respondents said they would return to more active participation if TCR organizations offered educational workshops, community events, or welfare services. In this sense, while leaders perceive revitalization through the lens of institutional capacity, followers interpret revitalization in terms of personal benefit and social relevance. Religious economy theory suggests that in pluralistic contexts, organizations that fail to adapt to consumer demand lose adherents (Yang and Tamney, 2006). The data indicate that TCR risks such decline because leaders' strategies are not sufficiently aligned with followers' expectations. The issue of conversion illustrates both alignment and disjuncture. Leaders acknowledged that conversion to Christianity and Islam is occurring, though some minimized its scale. Followers, however, described conversion as a real option, with 12% considering leaving TCR and 67% of that group citing church community as the main attraction. Christianity's appeal was particularly strong among younger respondents, who valued its structured teachings, social networks, and youth programs. Leaders often attributed conversion to "external proselytization," but followers described their dissatisfaction with TCR's ritualism and lack of personal meaning as equally important motivations. This resonates with broader literature showing that conversion is rarely just about external pressure; it often reflects internal dissatisfaction with existing traditions (Yee et al., 2019a).

Language emerged as another important comparative theme. Leaders often noted the importance of preserving Chinese language as a vehicle for TCR continuity. Followers, however, emphasized that linguistic exclusivity alienated younger generations educated primarily in Malay or English. Nearly 60% of younger respondents said they did not understand the language of rituals, and several associated this incomprehension with disengagement. While leaders framed language as cultural preservation, followers framed it as a barrier. This disjuncture suggests that revitalization may require bilingual or trilingual approaches, a model already adopted by some Christian churches and Islamic organizations (Yee et al., 2019b). Despite these divergences, there were points of convergence in expectations for TCR's future. Both leaders and followers emphasized the importance of TCR for preserving Chinese identity. Leaders often articulated this through the maintenance of rituals and festivals, while followers saw it as symbolic cultural heritage. Both groups agreed that TCR institutions lacked the organizational capacity of Christian and Islamic counterparts. However, while leaders viewed the issue primarily as financial and structural, followers interpreted it as cultural and existential. The comparative analysis thus reveals a widening gap between the institutional self-perceptions of leaders and the lived experiences of followers. Leaders often externalize decline, emphasizing external pressures and resource shortages, while followers internalize dissatisfaction, highlighting TCR's lack of relevance, accessibility,

and education. Leaders remain divided over modernization, while followers overwhelmingly demand it. Both acknowledge the decline, but their interpretations of causes and solutions diverge. Unless this gap is bridged, TCR risks continuing demographic decline, as followers increasingly disengage or convert to alternative traditions that better align with their aspirations. This analysis contributes to broader theoretical debates. Secularization theory helps explain followers' rationalist critiques of ritual (Yang, 2018), while religious economy theory highlights the organizational weaknesses noted by leaders. Identity theory explains why both leaders and followers continue to value TCR as a marker of Chinese identity, even as conversion becomes more acceptable (Kim, 2011). Together, these frameworks underscore that the decline of TCR in Malaysia is not simply a demographic trend but a complex negotiation between institutional strategies, personal convictions, and broader cultural transformations.

The findings presented in the preceding chapters underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of Traditional Chinese Religions (TCR) in Malaysia. Leaders and followers share a recognition of decline, yet their interpretations diverge significantly. Leaders frequently frame challenges in institutional terms, focusing on resource shortages, competition from other religions, and the preservation of rituals, while followers interpret their religious lives through personal relevance, cultural meaning, and pragmatic spirituality. This discussion situates these findings within broader theoretical debates on secularization, religious economy, and identity, while also considering the implications for the future of TCR and Malaysia's plural religious landscape. The first point of discussion concerns the tension between continuity and decline. From the perspective of leaders, the endurance of ritual participation in temple festivals is interpreted as evidence of resilience. Indeed, festivals such as Qingming and the Hungry Ghost Festival continue to attract large crowds, sustaining the visibility of TCR in public life (Tan, 1983). Yet, survey evidence suggests that this participation is increasingly symbolic rather than substantive. Followers often engage in rituals as cultural heritage rather than as religious obligation, with only 28% attending temples monthly and nearly one-fifth describing TCR as outdated or superstitious (Mun, 2024). This divergence highlights the risk of conflating visibility with vitality: while rituals maintain cultural prominence, they may no longer translate into robust adherence. Yang (2018) similarly observed in the Chinese mainland that ritual persistence can coexist with declining conviction, reflecting a broader global pattern of "cultural religion."

Secularization theory provides one useful framework to interpret this trend. Classic formulations of secularization suggest that modernization, education, and rationalization reduce the plausibility of religious worldviews. The Malaysian case partly confirms this thesis: younger and more educated respondents were more likely to dismiss TCR as illogical compared to scientific rationality. Approximately 41% of university-educated respondents in the survey agreed that TCR rituals lacked rational basis, compared to only 17% among those with lower levels of education. This correlation resonates with Mahoney (2010) broader observation that family-based religiosity is eroded by rising education and individualism. Yet, the persistence and growth of Christianity and Islam among Malaysian Chinese complicates a simplistic secularization narrative. Rather than religion declining universally, it is TCR specifically that is losing ground. This suggests that secularization in Malaysia operates selectively, disfavoring traditions perceived as ritualistic and unsystematic, while leaving space for "modern" religions with strong institutional support. Religious economy theory thus offers a complementary lens. Stark

and Finke's model of religious markets argues that religious vitality depends on competition, supply-side innovation, and organizational responsiveness to demand. Within this framework, TCR's decline can be seen as the result of institutional stagnation in a competitive religious environment. Christian churches in Malaysia are highly proactive, offering youth fellowships, structured catechism, and modernized worship styles (Hall, 2006). Islamic institutions enjoy state support, educational integration, and community solidarity, enhancing their attractiveness to converts (Yee et al., 2019b). By contrast, TCR organizations lack professional clergy, systematic education, and innovative outreach. Leaders themselves recognized these deficiencies but often attributed decline primarily to external competition rather than internal weaknesses (Lee and Toh, 2023). Followers, however, consistently emphasized dissatisfaction with the lack of doctrinal clarity and relevance. This indicates a mismatch between supply and demand: TCR organizations supply rituals, while followers demand education, moral guidance, and social engagement. As Yang and Tamney (2006) argued, traditions that fail to adapt their "religious goods" risk losing adherents in pluralistic environments.

The gap between leaders and followers also illustrates the dynamics of institutional inertia. Leaders' tendency to equate ritual visibility with vitality reflects an organizational bias towards preservation. Temples and associations, often managed by part-time committees, prioritize maintaining festivals and rituals, which are visible markers of continuity and generate financial donations. Followers, however, evaluate relevance in more personal terms, emphasizing whether religion offers meaning in daily life, youth engagement, or community services. This divergence creates a feedback loop: leaders continue investing in ritual maintenance, while followers disengage from traditions that fail to meet their needs. The result is a widening disconnect that accelerates generational decline. Identity theory provides an additional dimension of analysis. Historically, TCR served as a cornerstone of Chinese cultural identity in Malaysia, linking diasporic communities to ancestral traditions and differentiating them within a plural society (Tan, 2000). Yet contemporary findings suggest that this link is weakening. Younger respondents frequently identified as culturally Chinese but not religiously committed to TCR. Some who converted to Christianity or Islam even argued that their Chinese identity remained intact, affirming Kim (2011) contention that ethnicity and religion, while interconnected, can be decoupled. This decoupling has profound implications: if TCR no longer monopolizes Chinese identity, its decline may not necessarily entail a crisis of ethnic belonging. Instead, Chinese Malaysians may increasingly locate their identity in language, cultural practices, or secularized traditions, while embracing alternative religions. Another significant theme is the role of language in shaping religious participation. Leaders frequently emphasized the importance of preserving Chinese language as a vehicle of cultural continuity. Yet, followers, especially younger ones educated in Malay or English, often described language as a barrier. Nearly 60% reported difficulty understanding ritual language, which contributed to disengagement. This linguistic disconnect underscores how TCR's cultural strength, its rootedness in Chinese scripts and rituals, and also constitutes a barrier in a multi-lingual society. By contrast, Christian and Islamic organizations have successfully expanded by adopting bilingual or trilingual strategies, reaching across linguistic divides (Yee et al., 2019a). The inability of TCR to adapt linguistically further exacerbates generational decline.

Revitalization emerges as both a possibility and a challenge. Followers expressed clear expectations: 52% prioritized educational programs, 46% wanted youth activities, and 39% emphasized social services (Mun, 2024). These demands align closely with successful Buddhist revitalization projects, which have rationalized teachings and integrated welfare services to attract middle-class adherents (Tan, 2020). Yet, Taoist and folk religion organizations often lack the resources, leadership, or willingness to pursue such reforms. Leaders' ambivalence towards modernization, some fearing the loss of authenticity, and further hampers innovation. Unless institutions embrace reform, revitalization may remain confined to a few well-resourced Buddhist organizations, leaving the broader field of TCR vulnerable. These findings carry important policy implications. First, the state's categorization practices have historically marginalized the diversity of TCR. The Department of Statistics often lumps Taoism and Confucianism under "other religions," erasing their visibility in official discourse (DOSM, 2022). This invisibility reinforces the perception that TCR is peripheral. More inclusive categorization could enhance recognition and resource allocation. Second, the lack of structured religious education suggests opportunities for partnerships between TCR organizations and cultural or educational institutions. Government support for cultural education, similar to existing subsidies for Islamic education could strengthen TCR's intergenerational transmission. Third, the linguistic barrier indicates the need for TCR organizations to adopt bilingual strategies, making rituals and teachings accessible to younger generations. At a broader level, the decline of TCR in Malaysia reflects a global trend of shifting religious landscapes under conditions of modernization and pluralism. Comparative studies indicate that traditional religions often struggle to adapt in contexts where newer, more organized religions thrive (Yang, 2018). Yet, decline is not inevitable. Historical precedents show that revitalization is possible when leaders embrace innovation, as seen in the Confucian revival of the nineteenth century (Ching-Hwang, 1976) and the modernization of Buddhist organizations in the twentieth century. The key question for TCR in Malaysia is whether leaders can overcome institutional inertia and align with the aspirations of followers.

In overall, the comparative analysis of leaders and followers reveals that the decline of TCR is shaped less by external competition alone than by the internal disconnect between institutional preservation and personal relevance. Secularization theory explains the rationalist critiques of younger followers, religious economy theory highlights the organizational weaknesses and mismatched supply-demand dynamics, and identity theory illuminates the decoupling of religion and ethnicity. Together, these frameworks point to a precarious future for TCR in Malaysia: revitalization is possible but contingent upon leaders embracing reform, linguistic adaptation, and educational initiatives that resonate with contemporary society. Without such transformation, the erosion of conviction and generational disengagement documented in this study will likely continue, leaving TCR as a cultural residue rather than a living religious force.

## Conclusion

The decline of Traditional Chinese Religions (TCR) in Malaysia represents both a sociological reality and a cultural paradox. While temples, festivals, and rituals remain visible features of Chinese communal life, survey data and interviews reveal diminishing conviction, generational disengagement, and organizational stagnation. Leaders and followers alike recognize that TCR faces serious challenges, but their

interpretations of causes and solutions diverge. Leaders tend to externalize decline, citing financial constraints and religious competition, while followers focus on internal deficiencies such as the lack of doctrinal clarity, educational engagement, and modern relevance. This study has traced these perspectives across quantitative data, qualitative narratives, and comparative frameworks, situating the Malaysian case within broader debates in religious studies. One of the clearest conclusions is that visibility should not be equated with vitality. Leaders often highlighted crowded festivals and temple donations as indicators of resilience. Yet, survey results showed that only 28% of respondents attend temples monthly, while nearly one-fifth openly describe TCR as outdated or superstitious (Mun, 2024). This supports Yang (2018) argument that rituals can persist as cultural practices even as religious conviction wanes, producing a form of “cultural religion.” The persistence of festivals thus masks deeper erosion, raising the possibility that TCR may survive primarily as heritage rather than as a robust religious system. Another conclusion concerns the selective operation of secularization. While secularization theory predicts a decline in religiosity with modernization, the Malaysian Chinese case shows that religion per se is not in decline; rather, specific traditions such as TCR are disproportionately affected. Younger and more educated respondents were more likely to perceive TCR rituals as illogical compared to scientific rationality, with 41% of university graduates expressing this view versus only 17% of less-educated respondents. Yet at the same time, Christianity has grown significantly among Chinese Malaysians, rising from 3.5% in 1970 to nearly 10% by 2010 (Sun, 2020). Islam, while less frequently chosen voluntarily, also gains adherents through marriage and integration pathways (Yee et al., 2019b). These dynamics demonstrate that modernization does not diminish all religion equally. Instead, traditions that fail to modernize institutionally, linguistically, and educationally are most vulnerable.

Religious economy theory helps explain why Christianity and Islam grow while TCR declines. Christian churches in Malaysia actively provide youth programs, structured catechism, and modernized worship experiences (Hall, 2006). Islamic organizations benefit from state support, integrated education, and community solidarity. By contrast, TCR organizations lack professional clergy, structured teaching, and institutional innovation. Leaders themselves acknowledged these limitations, yet often minimized their impact by emphasizing continuity of rituals (Lee and Toh, 2023). Followers, however, articulated dissatisfaction with this ritualistic emphasis, with 52% calling for educational programs and 46% desiring youth activities. This mismatch between institutional supply and adherents’ demand reflects Stark and Finke’s insight that religious vitality depends on organizational responsiveness (Yang and Tamney, 2006). Without supply-side adaptation, TCR is disadvantaged in Malaysia’s plural religious marketplace. A third conclusion is the decoupling of religion and ethnicity. Historically, TCR anchored Chinese identity in Malaysia, reinforcing cultural continuity in the diaspora (Tan, 2000; 1983). Today, however, followers increasingly assert that Chinese identity can survive independent of TCR. Interviews revealed that converts to Christianity and Islam often maintained their sense of “Chineseness” through language, cultural practices, and values such as filial piety. This confirms Kim (2011) thesis that religion and ethnicity, though historically linked, can be disentangled. While this decoupling reduces the existential threat posed by TCR decline to Chinese identity, it also means that the religion loses one of its most significant historical functions as the cultural anchor of the diaspora. The role of language emerged as a critical factor. For leaders, maintaining Chinese language in rituals is integral to cultural preservation. For

younger followers, however, Chinese-language rituals are often incomprehensible, contributing to disengagement. Nearly 60% of younger respondents reported difficulty understanding ritual language. This linguistic disconnect not only weakens intergenerational transmission but also limits accessibility in a multilingual society. By contrast, Christian churches and Islamic organizations frequently use Malay and English alongside Chinese, enhancing inclusivity (Yee et al., 2019a). Unless TCR adopts bilingual strategies, it risks alienating the very cohorts needed for its survival.

Revitalization remains possible, but its prospects are uneven. Buddhist organizations have demonstrated successful models by rationalizing teachings, professionalizing leadership, and integrating social services (Tan, 2020). Followers consistently cited these groups as positive examples. Taoist and folk religion organizations, however, face greater challenges, lacking resources, leadership, and strategic vision. Leaders' ambivalence towards modernization, some fearing the loss of authenticity and further inhibits reform. Without institutional innovation, revitalization may remain confined to a subset of TCR, leaving much of the tradition vulnerable to erosion. From a policy perspective, three implications emerge. First, the state's religious categorization practices marginalize TCR by subsuming Taoism and Confucianism under "other religions" in census reports (DOSM, 2022). This invisibility hinders recognition and resource allocation. Reforming these categories to reflect the diversity of Chinese religion would enhance legitimacy and visibility. Second, the lack of structured religious education within TCR highlights the need for partnerships with cultural and educational institutions. Just as Islamic education receives state support, TCR organizations could benefit from cultural education programs that transmit values and knowledge beyond rituals. Third, linguistic adaptation is essential: offering rituals, explanations, and teachings in Malay and English alongside Chinese would enhance accessibility for younger generations and for those outside Chinese-speaking circles. More broadly, the Malaysian case contributes to comparative scholarship on religious transformation in Asia. The decline of TCR mirrors trends in Singapore, Taiwan, and urban China, where folk practices have diminished in favor of institutionalized religions or secular orientations (Yang, 2018). At the same time, historical precedents demonstrate that revitalization is possible. The Confucian revival in the late nineteenth century (Ching-Hwang, 1976) and the modernization of Buddhist organizations in the twentieth century show that traditions once deemed declining can reinvent themselves. The future of TCR in Malaysia thus depends less on the inevitability of secularization and more on the willingness of leaders to innovate and align with followers' expectations.

Finally, this study highlights avenues for future research. First, longitudinal studies are needed to track generational changes in TCR adherence over time, providing clearer evidence of cohort replacement versus life-cycle effects. Second, comparative studies across Southeast Asia could illuminate whether Malaysian patterns are unique or part of a regional trend. Third, further research into the role of digital media in shaping religious attitudes may prove crucial, as younger cohorts increasingly access spirituality and community through online platforms. Addressing these questions will not only enrich understanding of TCR but also contribute to broader debates on religion, culture, and identity in plural societies. In conclusion, the decline of TCR in Malaysia cannot be reduced to a simple narrative of erosion. Rather, it reflects a complex interplay of modernization, organizational limitations, and shifting cultural identities. Leaders emphasize preservation, while followers demand modernization. Rituals persist as

cultural heritage, but conviction weakens. Ethnic identity continues, but religion decouples. Secularization pressures erode plausibility, yet alternative religions thrive. Revitalization is possible, but only if leaders embrace reform, linguistic adaptation, and educational initiatives. Without such transformation, TCR risks becoming a cultural residue rather than a living religious tradition. With it, however, TCR may still reinvent itself as a meaningful force in Malaysian Chinese society.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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