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# Asia Pacific: *Perspectives*

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# Asia Pacific: *Perspectives*

Volume 10, Number 1 ♦ May 2011

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## Maintaining Patterns: Community Ritual and Pilgrimage in a Diasporic Taiwanese American Religious Community

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### INTRODUCTION

A local goddess religious community, popular among the recent Taiwanese American immigrants in San Francisco, has effectively linked together cultural, ethnic, and linguistic boundaries, thereby connecting Taiwan and America. This has resulted in the creation of an emerging transnational Empress of Heaven community in San Francisco's Chinatown. *Tianhou*, the Empress of Heaven, known as *Mazu* (Mother Ancestor) in Taiwan, is represented as *Meiguo Mazu* (American Mazu) and resides at the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. in San Francisco. This essay asks two main questions: How is traditional religion adjusted to meet the demands of contemporary life? What is the role of religion in the formation of a community in the diaspora?

To answer these questions, I focus on two community rituals. The first is the adaptation of the civic Chinese New Year Parade in San Francisco to accommodate the performance of an annual "inspection tour" (*raojing*) ritual by the Empress of Heaven. My second case study looks at developments in transnational pilgrimage rituals linking San Francisco to Beigang, where Taiwanese American pilgrims return with their "American Mazu." These two community rituals speak to one of the primary themes of Chinese religious expression—community harmony—and the importance of maintaining patterns of being "Chinese." The Taiwanese American Mazu cult that revolves around the ritual calendar of the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. is a diasporic Chinese American community. Their appropriation of the San Francisco Chinese New Year Parade for the performance of a religious ritual, and their periodic trans-Pacific pilgrimage are two examples of diasporic religious practices. Paul C. Johnson defines "diasporic religion" as ". . . composed on the one hand of memories about space—about places of origins, about the distances traveled from them, and physical or ritual returns imagined, already undertaken, or aspired to" (2007, p. 2). This essay explores changing religious rituals, representations, and meaning making in the Taiwanese diaspora in America.<sup>1</sup>

### THE GODDESS OF THE SEA, THE EMPRESS OF HEAVEN, AND NEW IMMIGRANT TAIWANESE AMERICAN MAZU

The sea goddess, styled "Empress of Heaven" (*Tianhou*), and popularly venerated by people from Taiwan as Mazu, meaning something akin to "Granny," began her life and career as a human. According to the lore that has been passed down, she was born to a fisher-family in the first year of the Song Dynasty (960-1127 c.e.) on the island of Meizhou located along the coast of Fujian Province.

After a pious life devoted to religious learning and service to others, she died in her twenties, but only after demonstrating exceptional powers: she was able to help fishermen, imperial envoys, and her father and brothers to survive storms at

sea. Accordingly, she is a patroness of the sea that protects all her devotees in ocean voyages, and, in general, responds to those in distress. Similar to other female divinities in China, such as the Buddhist Bodhisattva Guanyin, she is also a goddess of procreation. After receiving numerous officially sanctioned titles of divine rank, as well as Daoist and Buddhist association and recognition, today, she is the highest-ranking female deity in the vast and patriarchal celestial Chinese pantheon. Additionally, she is worshipped throughout China's coastal provinces, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and within the global Chinese diaspora.

As a result of increasing coastal trade during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, pioneers, largely from coastal Fujian, the original home of the Tianhou/Mazu cult, immigrated to the islands of Penghu and Taiwan. Consequently, the cult of the goddess was well established by the time the Qing authorities made their presence felt by 1683 c.e. Since this early period, pilgrimage from Taiwan to Meizhou was important because Mazu's "miraculous power" (*ling*) was determined by it. As the Mazu cult developed in Taiwan, a hierarchical network of temples emerged based on kin relationships: temples were either understood to be "mother-daughter" (*munü*) or "sisters" (*jiemei*). Pilgrimage is thus expressed as Mazu "returning to her natal home" (*hui niang jia*), which reflects the mother-daughter relationship and implies a hierarchical pecking order vis-à-vis the miraculous power and status of various temples' Mazus.

#### **THE SOURCE: CHAOTIAN TEMPLE IN BEIGANG, TAIWAN**

The rural township of Beigang, located in Yunlin western Taiwan, is one of the principle Mazu cultic site on the island. It is home to one of Taiwan's oldest and in the mind of a good number of Taiwanese people the most miraculously responsive (*lingying*) Mazu temple—Beigang Chaotian Temple. The primary economy of the town revolves around the pilgrimage festival season of Chaotian Temple. Each year, beginning on Chinese Lunar New Year (first lunar month) until sometime in April (third lunar month) Beigang is transformed from a sleepy township to the site of a lively carnivalesque pilgrimage center. Hence, religious tourism and other tourism related businesses is its foundational economic source of revenue (Hsu, D., 2008). The vernacular dialect of Beigang is Minnan Hokklo, colloquially known as Taiwanese. We can observe a great sense of local identity from residents who live within Beigang's boundaries, who follow the ritual calendar of Chaotian Temple, and who refer to themselves using local Taiwanese as "people of Beigang" (*Pakkang lang*).

The chief community cult ritual in Beigang is Mazu's annual inspection tour (*raojing*), held for two full consecutive days during the third lunar month. At this time, six of Chaotian Temple's principle Mazu images (together with other temple gods) are taken on a ritual procession around the town's perimeter. This procession originally marked Mazu's return from an annual pilgrimage across the sea to her natal temple in Meizhou, Fujian. This cross strait pilgrimage from Beigang to Meizhou became sporadic after Japanese colonial rule began in 1895 and ceased completely after 1949. Yet, the inspection tour ritual continues to be held and is by far the most important ritual event of the year in Beigang. Through the physical act of inspecting the town in a ritual procession its streets, alleyways, and thoroughfares are confirmed as under the religious territorial sovereignty of the god-



FIGURE 1: MA-TSU TEMPLE U.S.A. IN SAN FRANCISCO'S CHINATOWN.

ness and her temple. By extension, through participating in temple ritual activities Beigang's residents are authenticated as members of Beigang Mazu's community. People who identify themselves as Pakkang lang (Beigang people) therefore, live within the ritual territory of Beigang, the spatial area which Mazu traverses on her inspection tour. On a more macro level, Mazu's procession throughout the island authenticates Mazu as Taiwanese and Taiwan as her sovereign territory. By extension, the group of American Mazu pilgrims, by participating in the pilgrimage, authenticate themselves as members of Beigang Mazu's community.

### **EMERGING LANDSCAPE OF TRANSNATIONAL TAIWANESE AMERICAN RELIGION**

A large number of Taiwanese immigrants arrived in the U.S. armed with well-developed technological sophistication and wealth, markedly changing the immigrant experience in America. Kwong and Miscevic (2007) describe them as high-tech transnationals of today's booming Chinese American "ethnoburbs." They reflect what Aihwa Ong categorizes as "flexible citizens" who are able to utilize their political, educational, and economic capital to circumvent bureaucratic red-tape. This capital enables them to benefit from different nation-state regimes by selecting multiple sites for investments, work, and family relocation (1999, pp. 18–19). Ong emphasized that their success is not a quality exclusive to being Chinese, but rather, is the expression of a habitus that is finely tuned to the turbulence and logic of late capitalism (pp.1–8). They also resemble what Maria Chee calls "Taiwanese American transnationally split families" (2003, 2005). Chee's ethnographic study examined non-working class subjects, whereby the wives and children are dispatched to the U.S. with the objective of providing educational opportunities for their children.

The subjects described by these scholars are from an elite class of economically privileged groups of new "transnational subjects" with "flexible citizenship" living between and/or among several nation-state boundaries. I emphasize this because, although wealthy Taiwanese-transnational subjects represent a considerable portion of the new Taiwanese American community, they do not reflect the community that worships at Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. Its patrons are not the "so-called Hong Kong money elites" who reside in the exclusive communities in San Francisco's Peninsula Peak (Ong, 1999, p. 87). Further, temple participation does not reflect the profiles of the pilgrims I accompanied in their return to Beigang in 2006, escorting Meiguo Mazu. Instead, the pilgrims and worshippers at the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. are working-class families, retired seniors, widows, and widowers who live on a fixed income. Moreover, several of the pilgrims I know well live in low-income housing units across the Bay in Oakland, or in low rent rooms on the fourth floor of the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. They do not possess the educational, economic, or social capital that Kwong and Miscevic's, Ong's, and Chee's elite transnational subjects are privileged to have. As such, their ability to gather the resources necessary to establish a temple is all the more remarkable, and communicates the importance of Mazu in their American experience.

Taiwanese American religious life in contemporary America is distinctive because of the forces of globalization and modernization, particularly due to immigration. The shifting composition and trend in Chinese immigration to the U.S., coupled with advances in telecommunication and transportation has resulted in the production of a uniquely transnational religious Mazu community. Moreover, these transnational connections are not necessarily monopolized by wealthy Taiwanese subjects (e.g., technocrats or successful businesspersons). We see similar connections being forged by transnational subjects of lower socio-economic status in other diasporic communities as well. For example, Roger Rouse's (2002) documented how many Aguilillans living in the U.S. invest considerable amounts of money in an attempt to obtain their legal "papers," but without the ultimate goal of obtaining permanent naturalized citizenship because it is as "Mexican citizens

with right to 'permanent residence' that they will be best equipped to move back and forth between the two countries" (*ibid.*, p. 163). Rouse also cited the increasing importance of telephone access, especially in Aguililla, as a medium for cementing "spatially extended relationships" that will allow Aguilillans in both the U.S. and Mexico to not only keep in touch, but manage to contribute and participate in the decision-making process of daily familial events (*ibid.*, p. 162).

Although the Taiwanese American community in this discussion is working-class, people frequently return to Taiwan. For instance, the majority of the pilgrims informed me that they return to Taiwan annually, some for a couple of weeks, others for several months. Slightly more than half the pilgrims returned to Taiwan before the actual pilgrimage and convened as a group in Beigang. And after the pilgrimage only a small fraction actually returned to San Francisco while the majority stayed in Taiwan or traveled over to mainland China to visit with family. Similar to the Aguilillans who have benefited from low-cost telecommunications, these working-class Taiwanese Americans are dependent on it as well. However, it should be clarified that, although the majority of people I directly encountered in my research experience are working class and/or on a fixed income, it does not imply that wealthier Taiwanese Americans do not also make their presence felt.

The Taiwanese American community is complex in that there are many wealthy transnational members, just as there are financially robust transnational religious organizations, both of which are able to deploy their wealth to augment their transnational connections. From a religious perspective, consider the Taiwanese Buddhist organizations and temples that have benefited from extensive global growth since 1945 as a result of increasing wealth and social mobility in the post-WWII era (Jordan, 1994, p. 138). One example is the Hsi Lai Temple, which is ranked as the largest Buddhist monastery in North America. This temple was completed in 1988 at a cost of \$26 million dollars. It is situated on fifteen acres of a hillside at Hacienda Heights in Los Angeles County, near "Little Taipei," a rapidly growing community composed primarily of new Taiwanese Americans. Hsi Lai is a satellite community of the mother temple, Foguangshan, located at Kaohsiung in southern Taiwan. Foguangshan has established branches across the U.S., in Denver, New York, San Francisco, and San Diego, as well as in other major cities worldwide. Another example is Tzu Chi Compassion Relief Society, a worldwide network of actively engaged Buddhist social and medical outreach, founded in 1966 in rural Taiwan by a nun, Dharma Master Cheng Yen. Today it has centers throughout Europe, Latin America, Southeast Asia, North America, and even in South Africa. Tzu Chi's American headquarters is in San Dimas, California (within greater Los Angeles County), with chapters throughout the U.S.

As can be seen, Taiwanese American identity and religion have become increasingly global and transnational in scope, utilizing the latest technology in telecommunications and travel to establish imagined communities across borders and oceans. Therefore, upon arrival on American soil, Taiwanese Americans are capable of creatively adapting to their new surroundings and transplanting their religious rituals and lifeways, especially in the pluralistic religious landscape of San Francisco.

**MA-TSU TEMPLE U.S.A.: HISTORY AND COMMUNITY FORMATION**

On March 12, 1986 two immigrant Taiwanese Americans, Mr. Gao and Mr. Zhen, founded the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. On this day, a divination and blessing ceremony was performed at the Chaotain Temple in Beigang, Taiwan, inviting an image of Mazu to move to America. Mazu arrived on March 14, and her temple was established as a branch and/or daughter temple in San Francisco. Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. officially opened its doors on September 13, 1986. It has its beginnings in a small rented apartment located at 554 Vienna Street, near the predominately Latin@ Mission District of San Francisco. They relocated on November 22 that same year to a larger site on 562 Grant Avenue, a thoroughfare of San Francisco's touristy Chinatown. Then on January 12, 1996 the temple relocated once again, when the new immigrant community purchased property at 30 Beckett Street, on a small alley between Jackson Street and Pacifica Avenue. The community was able to finance this endeavor not only with donations from the Taiwanese American community, but from other patrons of different ethnic Chinese American backgrounds (e.g., Indo-Chinese immigrant-Americans).

The temple's stated mission is to advocate the virtues of Mazu and Guanyin, teach benevolence, uphold the Buddhist Dharma, teach the principles of human kindness, and promote personal and social morality *viz* harmony. As such, they regularly sponsor Buddhist *dharma* lessons, seminars on Mazu and Guanyin, *qigong*, and Chinese medicine, as well as offer social services such as health care referrals, legal aid, and immigration assistance. Additionally, the temple conducts services and ceremonies for all major and minor Chinese religious holidays (e.g., Guanyin's birthday, Guandi's birthday, Mid-Autumn festival, among others). Moreover, they participate in many civic events in the San Francisco area (e.g., Taiwan Cultural Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Chinese New Year Parade, Sunset District's Autumn Moon Festival) as a way to establish their presence in America. The temple does not have a head priest, Daoist or Buddhist. Instead, there is a temple caretaker who maintains the temple's incense and daily ritual activities. The temple caretaker also interprets divination readings for devotees of the goddess.

Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. does not keep detailed demographic data. However, Mr. Zhang, a board member estimated that, as of 2010, there are approximately 1,500 fee-paying lifetime members and perhaps 800 non-fee paying registered members. About 60 percent are multilingual Mandarin Chinese and Taiwanese speakers; roughly 30 percent speak only Mandarin Chinese; and 10 percent are Cantonese-speaking ethnic Chinese. Nevertheless, the majority have limited, if any, English-speaking skills. Asian patrons of other ethnicities and languages often visit the temple as well (e.g., Vietnamese). The distribution of age range is as follows: 60 percent are older than 50; 35 percent are between 30 and 49; and 5 percent are 29 or younger.

Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. reflects the changing geography and demographics of Chinese America in the wake of the *Immigration Reform Act of 1965* while heralding something new: the appearance of a transnational identity with ties to both Taiwan and the U.S. and both the mortal and divine. For instance, during the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections in Taiwan, many Taiwanese Americans traveled back to the island to vote because absentee voting is not allowed (Lee, F., 2004; Kent, 2008). While approximately 2,000 Taiwanese-New Yorkers returned to vote in 2004 (Lee,

F, 2004), nearly 10,000 Taiwanese Americans from California returned to Taiwan in 2008 to vote (Kent, 2008).<sup>2</sup> Lien (2006) calls this phenomenon "political transnationalism," whereby Chinese Americans from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan actively participate in the politics of their native countries, especially with regard to U.S. foreign policy.

Beyond politics, the Taiwanese and Taiwanese American unification in a transnational community is signified by the establishment of Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. Mazu becomes a transcontinental deity in the deterritorialized space of this new community composed of diverse individual devotees sharing not only a common Chinese heritage, but a new American identity as well. Meiguo Mazu's identities—cultural, linguistic, and national—mirror the multiple identities of her devotees, simultaneously Chinese, Taiwanese, and American.

The Mazu enshrined at Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. is referred to as Meiguo Mazu (American Mazu) in all religious rituals. Her official Chinese name is Fuzhenma. In the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A., Beigang Mazu's honorary shrine is placed in front of Meiguo Mazu's main shrine, indicating Meiguo Mazu's origins and connection to Taiwan, the source of its power, as well as its implicit subordination to Beigang. As daughter temple to the original Beigang Mazu temple in Taiwan, all images of Mazu housed in Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. are from the Beigang Temple, including the ones donated by Taiwanese American devotees. This, however, was not planned, but rather serendipitous, and was understood by many as Mazu's will. Mrs. A-Hua, a widow and a pious Mazu devotee, and the Wangs invited Mazu to immigrate with them when they relocated to America in the late 1970s early 1980s respectively. Consequently, the goddess lived in their homes, until the founding of Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. in 1986.

### **DIASPORIC COMMUNITY RITUAL: MAINTAINING PATTERNS AND CREATING COMMUNITY**

In the process of transplanting their religious tradition in America, this emerging transnational community made a significant accommodation to their ritual calendar and sphere. It revolves around the principal festival at Taiwan's Mazu temples, which generally takes place on her birthday in April, when, as mentioned earlier, she is escorted on an inspection tour known as *raojing*. Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. made temporal accommodations by usurping the Southwest Airlines Chinese New Year Parade in February, which questions the parameters of the civil and religious spheres in Chinese America. The temple's publications represent this activity, first and foremost, as Meiguo Mazu's inspection tour and, secondarily, as a civic parade and/or cultural exchange. This accommodation reveals the mechanics of a new form of Chinese American culture work, the process that merges Arjun Appadurai's (1996) "production of locality" in flexible "ethnoscapes" of modernity with Elana Chipman's (2007) "culture work" that accounts for the production of local cultural, community, ethnic, and religious identities.

By ethnoscapes, Appadurai refers to the fluid landscape of the transnational public sphere, as well as to the people who comprise the shifting world in which we live—the tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other mobile groups and individuals (*ibid.*, p. 33). In the process of producing localities, agents within the ethnoscapes are able to invent new identities and new alterna-

tives not nested in the nation-state. The production of locality results from the performance of a community ritual, such as Meiguo Mazu's annual inspection tour in San Francisco, which is a "social technique" for the "inscription of locality onto bodies" (*ibid.*, p. 179).

The principal festival at most Mazu temples takes place on her birthday when she is escorted out of her temple for an inspection tour. During the inspection tour, Mazu inspects the condition of the world and the territory in which she is religiously sovereign. In addition, she is believed to drive out evil forces, ensuring peace and security for her believers. In Beigang, Mazu's inspection tour affirms the identity of the participants as "people of Beigang" (*Bakkang lang*), who are members of Beigang Mazu's religious community (Chipman, 2007). Similarly, other Mazu communities reconfirm their local identities as well as their Mazu's territorial sovereignty (Lu, 2005). Therefore, the inspection tour is a community ritual. For Taiwanese Americans in San Francisco, participation in the inspection tour affirms their membership in Meiguo Mazu's religious community, and local, ethnic, and national identities. As such, it produces a Taiwanese American religious community in San Francisco.

Each spring, in April, the people of Taiwan prepare a large birthday celebration for the goddess. It is the 23rd day of the 3rd month in the Chinese lunar calendar. Over time, Mazu's birthday became a special cultural characteristic of Taiwanese culture and the focus of religious tourism by devotees of Mazu. As described above, in attempting to find a way for Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. to perform the goddess' inspection tour in America, it made accommodations by utilizing the Southwest Airlines Chinese New Year Parade in February's as a vehicle for the goddess' inspection tour, instead of her actual birthday in April. The temple's publications represent this activity, first and foremost, as Meiguo Mazu's inspection tour and, secondarily, as a form of cultural exchange. Meiguo Mazu has resided in America for more than twenty-two years, and has participated in the annual San Francisco Chinese New Parade since 1992.

Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A.'s participation in the San Francisco's Chinese New Year Parade showcases how a religious community transplants itself on foreign soil. In addition, it showcases how sacred space, the role of rituals, and new representations of a Chinese deity are produced. Emphasizing how Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A.'s ritual accommodation and community formation is part of a larger process of Chinese American culture work—which is the calculated production of local culture and multiple cultural identities (Chinese, Taiwanese, and American)—this unfolding phenomena provides a rare opportunity for understanding the dynamics of how religion functions, in particular, how it is transplanted and transmitted in a diasporic society.

### **MEIGUO MAZU'S RITUAL INSPECTION OF SAN FRANCISCO**

In 1992 Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. began to participate in the San Francisco Chinese New Year Parade as a means to perform her inspection tour. Just as the inspection tour in Beigang reconfirms her devotees' membership in a religious community, and their local identity as "people of Beigang," Meiguo Mazu's devotees reinforce their local and religious identities. The opening and closing ritual invocation bespeaks this point as the language establishes Meiguo Mazu as an American goddess.

During the opening invocation, the community of *Meiguo Mazu* devotees and parade volunteers invite Meiguo Mazu out of her temple to participate in the parade. Mr. Gao, co-founder and presiding president of the temple, presents incense to the goddess on behalf of the community of devotees and visitors. He was instructed to kneel and kowtow three times by the ritual announcer, after which everyone in the temple was instructed to place both palms together and kowtow consecutively three times in unison. Several mothers with toddlers hovered over them, held their small hands together and kowtowed with them. Last, but not least, they all raised their right arms and repeated in a chorus-like synchronization:

"In America's Great State of California,  
At the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A.,  
At the Heavenly Chao Sheng Palace,  
Dedicated to the Heavenly Mother in the Heaven Above,  
During the Year of the Sheep, on the fifteenth day of the first month,  
During the celestial inspection of the vicinity and grand parade,  
We earnestly pray for favorable weather,  
Security for the State and peace for the people,  
An abundant harvest of grains,  
And four auspicious seasons,  
Jin-lo! Jin-lo! Jin-lo!"<sup>3</sup>

This ritual invocation is collectively repeated by participants in the parade as she is placed back on her altar.

The adaptation of the San Francisco Chinese New Year Parade for Meiguo Mazu's inception tour reflects a common tradition in Chinese religion which emphasizes social relations and ethical practices. This tendency does not follow the pattern established by the European Enlightenment of separating religious from profane or the secular from the sacred. In other words, Meiguo Mazu's ritual inspection is taking place within a community that does not distinguish between sacred and secular. For the Taiwanese American community, the predominantly secular space of the San Francisco Chinese New Year Parade would not seem an unnatural site for religious rituals to take place.

### **MA-TSU TEMPLE U.S.A. PILGRIMAGE-TOUR**

Since its founding, the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. community has worked to maintain transnational temple relationships through the performance of pilgrimage. Each year, around April, Taiwan's religious sphere is dominated by Mazu pilgrimage activities: Pilgrims from villages, towns, and cities throughout Taiwan escort their Mazu (daughters) back home to visit the mother temple (*zumiao*). The primary religious goal is the rejuvenation of Mazu's miraculous power, but it also reinforces and re-affirms community, economic, political and kin relations. Since its founding in 1986 in San Francisco, the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. community has returned to Beigang only five times: in 1988, 1994, 2002, 2006, and 2009 for various reasons—primarily limitations in money and resources. In 1988 only Mr. and Mrs. Gao returned to Beigang with Meiguo Mazu. In 1994 and 2002, however, there were nearly a dozen Taiwanese American pilgrims in attendance, due to serendipitous timing as several pilgrims were already back in Taiwan visiting family.

The pilgrimage in 2006 was ground breaking for this small transnational religious community: it was attended by the largest group of pilgrims, roughly sixty at the height of the pilgrimage. They commissioned a float with images of San Francisco's landmarks for Meiguo Mazu's inspection tour and they had unprecedented media coverage by the Taiwan press. The trans-Pacific pilgrimage involves actively linking the home country to the new host country, cementing relationships through a transnational pilgrimage and the representation of Meiguo Mazu as a transnational Taiwanese American goddess.

### **Days One and Two: San Francisco to Beigang**

Meiguo Mazu, along with her pilgrims, landed punctually at CKS airport in Taipei, Taiwan. In a scattered manner and with passports in hand, they marched toward the customs gate, passing several last-chance duty-free shops. Every pilgrim waited in the "non-citizen" line to have their U.S. passports checked and visas stamped, along with Meiguo Mazu. Like her devotees, the goddess was no longer a national of Taiwan. As Meiguo Mazu cleared the customs gate, she drew attention from other travelers returning to Taiwan, entering the country via the "citizens" gates. The pilgrims headed next toward the baggage claim area, placing the images of Meiguo Mazu on their baggage carts and freeing their hands to retrieve their luggage. The customs agent stopped two of the pilgrims and pointed out that they had too many duty-free cigarettes. Picking up his walky-talky to consult with another agent, he noticed the image of Meiguo Mazu nestled on the cart; with that, he made a slight prostration and then waved them through. As they exited baggage claim, they headed toward their tour guides, one of whom is Mr. Gao's nephew, holding a banner that read "Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. 2006 Return to Taiwan, Pilgrimage Tour." Then they gathered together for their first group photo holding a similar banner that read "Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. 2006 Return to Taiwan, Pilgrimage Group."

Their tour guides, Mr. Liu and Mr. Yang, directed them outside to the bus loading station. Before boarding their chartered air-conditioned tour bus, equipped with spacious leather seats and several television monitors, the three images of Meiguo Mazu were first placed vigilantly on the dashboard of the bus. Once they were in place, incense was relit and the pilgrims were on the road.

The first stop was a Taiwanese breakfast restaurant, then Shilin Presidential Gardens. Afterwards they visited the National Palace Museum, which has the world's best collection of Chinese imperial art. Several pilgrims were approached by *Falun Gong* protestors and asked to make contributions and sign petitions. By mid-afternoon, they arrived at a four-star hotel in Taipei, near the main metro-train station. The images of Meiguo Mazu were carried off the bus by three male incense masters<sup>4</sup> and escorted into the hotel's banquet hall. The hotel staff hastily fetched a plate of fruit and a bouquet of tropical flowers to present to the goddess at her ad hoc shrine. The manager of the hotel lit some incense and kneeled in front of the goddess, prostrated himself three times and presented incense. Several female employees followed suit when everyone else left. Later that evening, several pilgrims reunited with their families who live in Taipei. Those without relatives were invited on a night tour of Taipei 101, the world's tallest building, as well as several night markets for Taiwanese appetizers.



**FIGURE 2: MEIGUO MAZU AND PILGRIMS AT BUDDHIST TZU CHI RELIEF FOUNDATION HEADQUARTERS AT HUALIEN.**

### Day Three: Going to Hualien

The next morning, the pilgrims gathered in the lobby, waiting for Meigu Mazu's incense masters to invite her out for our day's journey to Hualien. They hurried to the train depot to catch an express train. Although the three images of Meigu Mazu did not have individual seats on the flight to Taipei, they did have them on the train. Upon seeing the images of Meigu Mazu on the platform, several locals placed their hands together and bowed. Some went as far as prostrating themselves fully, with out-stretched arms and face touching the floor. The smell of incense slowly filled the empty space of the train cabin, mixed with the smell of tiger balm and citrus peel.

Three hours later, the pilgrims arrived at Hualien. Meigu Mazu was placed on the dashboard of the tour bus. Several local residents walked by the bus and their lips motioned the utterance "Meigu Mazu" with a look of interest. A few older ladies stopped walking, placed their hands together and watched as the bus drove by. The first stop was a visit to the international Buddhist Tzu Chi Compassion Relief Foundation's headquarters. The pilgrims were greeted by a novice nun, their Tzu Chi tour guide, who asked if they were familiar with the organization and received a collective "yes" in response. She highlighted Tzu Chi's founder, Dharma Master Cheng Yen, and the charitable relief that Tzu Chi chapters worldwide are involved in. Walking past the Still Thoughts Abode, A-Hua remarked, "It looks just like it is on television." Our tour of the Tzu Chi complex ended at the gift shop, where the pilgrims busily purchased many Tzu Chi books and paraphernalia, the most popular of which was a pair of reusable traveling chopsticks, which according to the guide, "Will save the earth."

#### **Day Four: Holland Land and Huadong**

The next day, pilgrims left the hotel in their usual manner. First, they invited the goddess onto the bus, lit incense, and then drove off. The first destination this day was a specialty foods factory. Even though most pilgrims had just eaten breakfast, it did not stop them from sampling every item that was on display: various pastries, dried fruits, teas, jams, and jerkies. As the bus pulled out of the parking lot, another tour group, with its Mazu sitting on the dashboard pulled in, and they waved to each other joyfully. Meiguo Mazu and her pilgrims headed south, toward an aboriginal village called Holland Land.<sup>5</sup> It started to rain, but that did not stop these pilgrims from exploring the topiary garden. The pilgrims were prepared for the unpredictable weather in Taiwan with umbrellas and raincoats, and some even had rain boots.

They arrived at their next four-star hotel, located on a steep mountain slope with hot springs as its prime attraction. Meiguo Mazu was invited out and placed in the main lobby. As before, a plate of fruits and flowers were presented to Meiguo Mazu. After paying homage to the goddess, a hotel employee asked Mr. Gao about Meiguo Mazu. Mr. Gao explained:

"We are from America, and we're here because Mazu wanted to come home. Zuma (head mother) and Sanma (third mother) told us they wanted to come home. Erma (second mother) didn't want to return, so she's in charge of the temple at San Francisco. This one over here (pointing to Mrs. A-Hua's Mazu) told us she wanted to come home to get new clothes. We're going to Beigang in two days. We are pilgrims. This is the purpose of our trip."

#### **Day Five: Gaoxiong**

After the mountain retreat, the pilgrims headed further south to Gaoxiong. It was roughly a three hour drive on the expressway. Mr. Yang commented that before the expressway was constructed, it took nearly an entire day to reach Gaoxiong from Hualien. Mr. Liu invited pilgrims to sing karaoke and several pilgrims passed around snacks to share. They drove through downtown Gaoxiong, with its multi-story buildings covered with billboard advertisements, gigantic posters of lean European and Asian models, Starbucks, and what seemed like a 7-11 store on every corner. They exited the bus at a harbor and boarded a ferry for a tour. A-Hua motioned for me to sit next to her, telling me that she will stay with her brother's family once she gets to Beigang the next day. She then proceeded to tell me her reason for wanting to come on the pilgrimage, saying "You know, I'm not here for the tour. I'm here to present incense, to seek Beigang Mazu's help in healing my legs." Giggling, she then added, "Mazu has been touring/enjoying the sites with us for several days."

#### **Day Six: Heading to Beigang**

After the Gaoxiong visit, they headed toward Sun Moon Lake before going to Beigang. On our way, Mr. Gao handed everyone a yellow vest with a red imprint of the likeness of the Golden Gate Bridge and an incense censer with the characters Chaoshen Temple—Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A.'s official chapter name. Mr. Gao goes on to say,

"Everyone, please make sure to wear this vest once we get to Beigang. Today is a very special day for us. Other Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. pilgrims, along with their relatives, will meet us at Beigang. We're going to have a record number of people participating in this year's pilgrimage. In 2002 there were only a dozen of us, but that is still better than in 1988, when it was just me and my wife. We have much to celebrate. Last year, we were able to finish paying off the temple's mortgage. So we have a lot to be thankful for. We're also going to participate in this year's parade with a float that we commissioned. It's a very special float. In the one-hundred-year history of the parade, a foreign pilgrimage group has never participated with their own float. Our float is unique because we have three San Francisco landmarks on it: the Golden Gate Bridge, the Transamerica Pyramid building, and the entry gateway to Chinatown. On top of that there's a revolving globe that symbolizes Mazu is on the move, moving around the world, protecting the four seas. Please put these vest on and keep it on for the rest of today."

Heading toward Beigang, Linda made a spur-of-the-moment decision to visit her family in Guangzhou. She asked the guides, Mr. Yang and Mr. Liu, to arrange airline tickets for her, saying "I'm so close; it would be a pity if I don't return to see my mom."

They finally arrived in Beigang, along with the rain. After checking into the hotel, some pilgrims, who were accustomed to the four-star palaces, grumbled about the inferior quality of their rooms. With umbrellas in hand and raincoats on, they marched from the hotel, over a red bridge, and lined up as a group behind other pilgrimage groups to parade down the main thoroughfare leading to the entrance of the Beigang Mazu temple. The commissioned float awaited them at the start of the parade route, along with a group of pilgrims who arrived to Beigang on their own, some accompanied by their Taiwan relatives. Both A-Hua and the 93-year-old A-ma protested using a wheel chair, insisting that they wanted to walk (roughly one mile) in the rain, through the chaos of the busy street with thunderous crackling firecrackers and honking mopeds. As they approached the temple, an announcer announced, "This is Meiguo Mazu, from San Francisco's Chaoshen Temple, with her group of pilgrims, returning to present incense."

Temple staff members promptly came over to the American pilgrimage group and guided the three male Meiguo Mazu incense masters into the temple, instructing them to place the goddess over the incense censer in the middle of the court yard, a ritual called "passing over the incense censer." This ritual rejuvenates the miraculous power of the three images of Meiguo Mazu (*guoxiangyan*). The images of Meiguo Mazu passed through several pairs of hands, all male, before being placed in the main shrine, alongside her mother and hundreds of sisters from around the world and the entire island. The pilgrims were then given an incense stick and instructed to kowtow three times. Afterwards, they were escorted into a break room and served hot tea, pineapple cakes, and grapes. A team of news reporters, both national and local, streamed in to ask the American pilgrims questions. Being the oldest, 93-year-old A-ma received the most interest and attention. One reporter asked if anyone dreamt about Mazu recently and A-Hua announced, "I have! I dreamt about her and she told me to take a vow of vegetarianism on this pilgrimage. I dreamt that I was with a group of people, they were all 'eating meat' ('*ziah hun*')," but I choose to 'eat vegetables' ('*ziah cai*'). This is how Mazu told me to take a vow of vegetarianism."<sup>6</sup>



FIGURE 3: 2006 MA-TSU TEMPLE U.S.A. PILGRIMAGE AND TOUR GROUP PHOTO IN FRONT OF HISTORICAL MOTHER TEMPLE, CHAOTIAN GONG.

### Days Seven and Eight

As they prepared to parade around the town of Beigang, Mr. Gao requested that all A-mas who were not capable of walking the entire distance of the parade board the float. Even though she wanted to walk, A-Hua came and was escorted up. Bingbing was given a sword and asked to perform a *taiqi* dance leading the group in the inspection tour and parade that circumscribed the perimeters of the town. The pilgrims, followed by the float, slowly moved through the major streets of Beigang. Viewers and pilgrims cheered back-and-forth at each other, waving. Some viewers, with palms together, stood along the streets and alleyways, cheering the pilgrims as they passed. Some mothers would take their children's hands and place them together, motioning with them in a ritualized manner. At times, some viewers would remark to the next person, "There's a Mazu in America?"

After the parade through the streets of Beigang, A-Hua said, "You know my legs feel better already. Mazu has lessened my pain." Although our participation in the parade ended, the parade itself continued well into the next morning. Pilgrimage groups from all over Taiwan, with their floats playing techno music, Canton pop, and American rap, and decorated with Disney cartoon characters made their way through the streets of Beigang. One float in particular caught my attention, as it loudly played a song by Black Eyed Peas, entitled "My Hump." The lyrics to the song are inundated with graphic imageries of sex. For instance, the song starts:

My hump, my hump, my hump, my lovely little lumps. (Check it out).  
 I met a girl down at the disco.  
 She said hey, hey, hey yea let's go.  
 I could be your baby, you can be my honey.

Let's spend time not money.  
I mix your milk with my cocoa puff,  
Milky, milky cocoa,  
Mix your milk with my cocoa puff, milky, milky riiiiiiight.  
They say I'm really sexy,  
The boys they wanna sex me.  
They always standing next to me,  
Always dancing next to me,  
Tryin' a feel my hump, hump.  
Lookin' at my lump, lump.

The explanation for why this song was appropriate was that Mazu enjoys whatever her pilgrims enjoy.

While waiting for the evening inspection tour and parade to start, pilgrimage groups from Indonesia, Malaysia, Australia, South Africa, and Manila arrived carrying their images of Mazu. Other groups of pilgrims from all over Taiwan arrived as well, carrying the palanquins and images of the goddess into the main courtyard of the Chaotian Temple. Shortly after the pilgrims started their procession in the town of Beigang, Mr. Gao was being interviewed by TV reporters. Mr. Gao told a Niandai TV News reporter that,

"Since 1992, we have participated in San Francisco's Chinese New Year Parade. We are the only Mazu temple in the world to participate in a foreign parade, which is one of our biggest successes because everyone in America will know about us since it is televised."

The reporter asked a follow-up question, saying "Please tell us about Meiguo Mazu's history and whether or not Americans worship her in America." Mr. Gao replied:

"We were founded in 1986 after we were divided from the Beigang Temple. We have been in America for over twenty years, and a lot of Americans are aware of our temple and many Americans come to Ma-Tsu Temple U.S.A. to worship."

Evening had arrived and a sea breeze lingered over the city. Besides the bright neon lights of the shops, the colorful floats with flashing Christmas lights glowed. Little boys and girls dressed in traditional costumes, looking like Chinese opera singers, sat on the floats with baskets of candy and flowers to throw out at the eager audience. Offerings of fruits and flowers were placed outside of some devotees' homes for the goddess, while others burned gold paper. The atmosphere was one of hyper conviviality, induced by the blurring of disco-like techno music, Mickey and Minnie Mouse, Superman, and dancing Buddhas. Red firecracker remains blanketed the streets, combined with betel nut spit, creating a sea of red litter.

### **Day Nine: Cementing Old Friendships**

The Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. pilgrimage group left Beigang and headed south toward Tainan. They visited Mr. Chen, a man of modest means, who had donated \$20,000 New Taiwan Dollars (approximately \$1000 USD) to the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. Twenty-eight pilgrims managed to squeeze into his tiny living room, and Mr. Gao reiterated Mr. Chen's piety. Mr. Yang and Mr. Liu handed out cans of Mr. Coffee and little bags of squid jerky. Mr. Gao then presented Mr. Chen with a gift

from the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A., a token of their appreciation of his support. The visit was short and ended with a group photo with the host in his courtyard.

### **Day Ten: Return to Beigang**

The pilgrims returned to Beigang and checked into the Beigang Mazu Chaotian Temple hotel. The hotel was own and operated by the Chaotian Temple, so the American guests were treated to a complimentary night stay. It was to be a free day to do whatever they wanted to do in Beigang, so most of them went and shopped around and ate food from the local street vendors.

### **Day Eleven: Happy Birthday Mazu**

Dawn arrived and the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. pilgrimage group had gathered to celebrate Mazu's birthday known as *zhushou*, which is also referred to as "paying respects to one's ancestor," *yezu*. On that day, Mazu turned 1047 years old. A ceremony was performed in honor of her birthday, and an offering of a slaughtered pig and goat were presented to her, indicative of her imperial status. Mr. Gao was one of the principle ministers in the ceremony. At 8 a.m., Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A.'s three Mazu images were invited out of the main shrine. They each were dressed in new imperial gowns, ornately decorated with embroideries of celestial sky-blue dragons and phoenixes, with an imperial yellow backdrop. Their crowns were decorated with emeralds, rubies, and sapphires, mixed with strands of silver and strings of pearls and accented with red velvet balls.<sup>7</sup> The images named Zuma and Sanma will return to San Francisco with their pilgrims, while Huama (Mazu donated by Mrs. A-Hua) will stay behind. As Meiguo Mazu was being taken out, many temple workers and locals shouted in Taiwanese "don't turn your head back" (*mai-uat-tao*). This is an old custom which dictates that when pilgrims and Mazu leave the mother temple, they are not allowed to turn their heads, otherwise Mazu's newly recharged miraculous power will stay behind and the journey was in vein. On another level, some pilgrims informed me that it may also mean "don't let her cry" which reflects Mazu's feelings about leaving her mother's home—again. Of the three images of Meiguo Mazu that returned to her mother's natal home, only two will return with her Taiwanese American pilgrims. Mr. Gao says, "Huama will stay behind 'to chitchat with her sisters' from around the world." A-Hua jovially said, "Did you see how happy my Mazu is? She has a big smile on her face. She looks so beautiful in her new imperial gown."

### **BEYOND SACRED AND PROFANE: MEIGUO MAZU PILGRIMAGE**

In the Chinese religious field, the secular and the profane, the religious and the commercial have always been blurred because the focus of a religious festival is the *community*. From a western perspective, as Lutz Kaelber (2002) suggests, "post-modern religious sphere, which includes organized religion as well as civil religion and implicit religion, is much more fragmented than in earlier times" (p. 67). From a Chinese perspective, such "fragmentation" has always existed because religious experience and expression is focused on the communal, not the individual.

Juan Campo (1998) speaks to the fragmentary nature of pilgrimage in modern society as well, whereby he demonstrates that, while traditional religious pilgrimage remains vibrant in modern America, it has been complemented by cultural

journeys and popular quests to a plethora of national shrines such as Mount Rushmore, Pearl Harbor, Yellowstone, Disneyland, and Graceland to engage in what Kaelber (2002) terms "cultic consumption." Campo says, "Modernity, rather than displacing pilgrimages, has actually been responsible for globalizing them" (*ibid.*, p. 40). Campo (1998) and Kaelber (2002) are both describing the postmodern experience of religion, which is understood as a form of veneration anchored in consumptive practices. This so-called "postmodern experience of religion" has always been present in Chinese religious community festivals. It is more informative and productive to consider the social relationships that are being highlighted, reconfigured, and reconstituted in religious rituals, in particular through the practice of pilgrimage.

Meiguo Mazu's pilgrimage is a ritual demarcation of space, with religious space grounded in the centrality of iconicity in Mazu's ritual tradition and sphere. Her devotees take her out on ritual processions around the territorial borders within her sovereign reach. Therefore, within the context of the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. pilgrimage-tour, Meiguo Mazu is literally inspecting her territorial ritual space, while simultaneously reaffirming her sovereignty over Taiwan, as she inspects the highways, byways, allies, and thoroughfares of the urban landscape nested on the dashboard of a tour bus equipped with karaoke.

Meiguo Mazu is able to produce transnational ritual spatiality by establishing new inter-temple bonds, as well as reaffirming old ones. Mazu's cultic sphere may be inflecting larger transformations in the economic habitus of late capitalism. Mayfair Yang has suggested that capitalism and satellite television have impacted nation-state territorial demarcations and identity qua Mainland China and Taiwan. This has been informed by the "transnational ritual spatiality of Chinese popular religion" which ". . . means that popular religion can no longer be regarded as merely a traditional folk culture that disappears with modernization" (2004, p. 225). And by extension, geo-political and economic transnationalisms are simultaneously shaped and informed by religious transnationalization, which is a product of current political and economic global relationships.

### **TRANSNATIONAL TAIWANESE AMERICAN MAZU CULT AND THE NEW TERRAIN OF AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION**

Robert Bellah's (1967, 1975) first coined the term "American civil religion." Albeit overwhelmingly white, middle-class, and Protestant, the concept has since been a topic of major discussions and critiques (e.g. Bellah and Hammond, 1980; Treat, 1999; Angrosino 2002; Cloud, 2004). According to Bellah, Americans embrace a common civil religion with certain fundamental beliefs, values, holidays, and rituals, parallel to, or independent of, their chosen religion. The case study just presented calls for a reexamination of American civil religion. In what ways does a Buddho-Daoist goddess cult popular among Taiwanese American new immigrants impact the arena of American civil religion? The post 9/11 atmosphere in America questions the penetration of American Mazu into the public sphere because American national identity is considered by the majority to be threatened by competing ideologies and theologies of social order (Huntington, 2004). This essay has explored the ways in which a non-Protestant goddess has produced an alternative American national identity among its community members that is fluid, reflecting the deterritorialized nature of today's global society.

But as Samuel Huntington argues, these diasporic cum transnational identities are the singular cause of a weakening American national identity (2004). Ironically, the most influential actor in the production and extension of modern globalization processes seems to be unable to negotiate its own byproduct—namely, the process that Michael Kearney (1995) calls the "peripheralization of the core." Accordingly, diversity is seen as the gravest internal peril to American solidarity and identity. This essay questions the traditional model of American civil society and civil religion and shows that the future contour of American national identities will be multiple when it comes to immigrants from Asia. The process and complexity of Americanization is best exemplified by the comment of one of the pilgrims during the return trip from Taipei. When asked if American Mazu has a U.S. passport, she responded, "Of course!...She's been living in America over twenty years."

Among the first-generation Taiwanese American immigrants, ritual continuity *viz* Meiguo Mazu's participation in the San Francisco Chinese New Year Parade, is the attempt to maintain a pattern of life that informs their understanding of being "Taiwanese." However, second and subsequent generations of Taiwanese Americans might not feel the psychological need to maintain this pattern. During the 2006 pilgrimage to Beigang, board members of Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. and Beigang Chaotian Temple discussed plans to construct a second Mazu temple in New York. Pilgrims from Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. were excited to hear of these plans, and enthusiastically offered to assist and offer advice. The Beigang Chaotian Temple representatives said it would be another branch from Beigang Mazu, which he said would make Mazu "even more global." Flushing, New York, has a thriving Taiwanese American community known as "Mandarin Park," so it is not surprising that community would be selected. It is interesting to speculate on whether Meiguo Mazu from Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. will be represented in the New York Mazu temple, and if, by extension, the New York Mazu temple will perform annual pilgrimages to San Francisco, to Beigang, or to both? Will New York Mazu be taken out of her temple to participate in New York's Chinatown Chinese New Year parade? That there are current plans for the construction of another Mazu temple in New York suggests that the life and vitality of this cult will not diminish anytime soon.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Although the "Taiwanese American" can be subsumed in the category of "Chinese American" there are various Taiwanese ethnic groups (Hakka, Zhangzhou, Quanzhou, several Fujianese, and various "aboriginal- Taiwanese") to distinguish from the "mainlanders" who fled to Taiwan in the wake of the Communist victory of 1949 (Harrell and Huang, 1994, pp. 12–18). This distinction did not stay in Taiwan and/or China, but has been transplanted onto American soil in slightly different forms. New Taiwanese American communities confront older generations of Chinese American communities, and are introduced to the politics of racial identity in American society. Although, the cultural, social, economic, and political backgrounds of Taiwanese immigrants make their experiences different from those of the previous generations or other recent Chinese immigrants (e.g., Sino-Khmer and Sino-Vietnamese), the all-encompassing category of "Chinese American" is capable of usurping them all. However, it creates a myopic view of the situation, obfuscating the diversity inherent in the singular category of "Chinese America." Therefore, in an attempt to avoid the totalizing implications of the taxon "Chinese America," this essay will emphasize "Taiwanese American" as opposed to the more general "Chinese American" to stress the complexity

of cultural and ethnic identity discourses among the assortment of "Chinese American" communities.

2. Worldwide it is estimated that 250,000 Taiwanese-expats returned to Taiwan to vote (Kent, 2008).
3. Translation: "Go! Go! Go!"
4. The incense masters are typically male. They did not depart from the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. Some met at SFO while others joined the pilgrimage group in Taiwan. Once all the incense masters were available, only they can carry the goddess.
5. The Dutch colonized Taiwan from 1624-1662 C.E. Holland Land is a theme park that mixes aboriginal culture with Dutch gardens and architecture.
6. In spoken Taiwanese, "ziah hun" can also mean "eating cigarettes" which A-Hua would not do because she does not smoke.
7. Depending on the icon, some of the jewelry may be faux or real.

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