

The Development of Temple Culture in Taiwan

Ming-Chao Yeh^{1,*}

¹ School of Physical Education, Putian University, Putian City, Fujian Province, P.R.O.C.

ABSTRACT: The prevalence of temples in Taiwan is indeed a unique phenomenon. According to literature and news reports, the development of traditional religions was not encouraged during the Japanese Occupation Period and the Kuomintang administration. Rather, religious practice in Taiwan was controlled and derogated. This study investigated the structural factors affecting the flourishing development of well-known temples in Taiwan based on the religious and cultural policies from the Japanese Occupation Period to Kuomintang's lifting of martial law. It also attempted to understand the impact of local factions and clientelism on temple culture.

1. INTRODUCTION: The Unique Phenomenon of Taiwanese Temples

According to statistics from the department of the interior in Taiwan, apart from Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, Catholicism, Christianity, Islam, and Orthodox Christianity, there are a total of 22 religions in Taiwan, with 15,186 registered religious bases, as of 2021 [1]. More than 33,000 registered and unregistered religious sites exist in Taiwan. There were about 12,000 convenience stores in Taiwan in 2022, but the number of high-density convenience stores is even far lesser than religious sites. The area of Taiwan is 36,197 square kilometers. Hence, there are approximately 10 temples or churches per 10 square kilometers (about 1 per square kilometer). In contrast, there are only three convenience stores per 10 square kilometers.

Among the 15,186 registered religious bases, there are at least 9,600 Taoist temples (64%) and more than 2,300 Buddhist temples (15%). However, from 2002 to 2021, the number of churches decreased from 3,224 to 2,902 [1]. Although many religious sites exist in Taiwan, Taoist and Buddhist temples still account for the majority. Earlier literature indicated that the number of Taoist and Buddhist temples in Taiwan increased from 3,661 in 1930 to 5,531 in 1981. In 2001, there were 9,707 officially registered Taoist and Buddhist temples [2].

Comparing the data on political elections elicits a unique phenomenon. Between May and November 2019, Tsai Ing-Wen arranged 137 temple visits during her Taiwan presidential re-election campaign, accounting for one-fifth of the total campaign itinerary. She was ridiculed by the opposition party and deemed the "President of Temples." On the other hand, her Kuomintang competitor, Daniel Han, visited temples 113 times during the same period, and the proportion and number of times were large

[3]. The statistics mentioned above indicate that temples significantly influence political elections in Taiwan; thus, politicians spend a lot of time connecting with temples. Taiwan's many temples and the fact that politicians must regard temples as important stakeholders during elections have created a unique social context.

2. Religious and cultural policies from the Japanese Occupation Period to Kuomintang's lifting of martial law

The belief in temples is prevalent in Taiwan. It is reasonable to infer that temples were developed by the ruling party over the long run to reach such prosperity. Contrarily, the present study's literature review found that the actual situation was quite different. During the Japanese occupation of Taiwan (1895-1945), in the beginning, the Japanese regime adopted tolerance for local culture and religious beliefs. However, with the intensified aggression of the war and the implementation of imperialization, the Japanese regime began to suppress the culture and religions in Taiwan. This led to the destruction of temples and statues and the persecution of local religious figures [4].

After Kuomintang withdrew its troops from Mainland of China and retreated to Taiwan in 1949 to consolidate the legitimacy of its regime, winning over local political forces was part of Kuomintang's clientelism to control culture and religion. As the Kuomintang government shifted the focus of its cultural policy from purely negative control to promoting its own agenda in Taiwan and monitoring cultural elements, authorities were created to oversee local culture. The most influential among these authorities was the Committee for the Revival of Chinese Culture (CRCC), established in August 1967, which was primarily responsible for promoting Kuomintang's vision of Chinese culture. It combined traditional Confucian

*Corresponding author. Email: 3393173021@qq.com

values, such as loyalty to the country and filial piety, with ideas proposed by the party leaders, such as Sun Yat-Sen and Chiang Kai-Shek [2]. The CRCC represented Kuomintang's pan-Chinese cultural ideals and tended to oppose the development of local culture in Taiwan, including temple worship.

Another government authority responsible for cultural policies was the Bureau of Culture, established by the department of education in 1967, which lasted until May 1973. The authority assisted CRCC in promoting Kuomintang's Chinese cultural vision, with its role more focused on education. For example, the Bureau of Culture helped the CRCC establish branches and sponsor several lectures in different colleges and universities [2]. In addition, it also engaged in various publishing projects and hosted local and international Chinese cultural conferences.

Establishing the Council on Cultural Affairs (CCA) was Kuomintang's cultural policy, which gradually transitioned Taiwan into a more international society and was the first step towards democracy. CCA, also known as the Cultural Council for Planning and Development (CCPD), was proposed on September 23, 1977, by Chiang Ching-Kuo. CCA reflected the government's constructive role for temples in society in Taiwan, which represented a significant change in traditional cultural policy. In the past, Kuomintang aimed to reform local temples, reduce the scale of celebrations and festivals, and combat superstition. After lifting martial law, the Taiwanese government attempted to help sponsor festival activities by reforming some festivals by regulating their content. Examples include Keelung's Floating Lantern Festival and Donggang Art Festival [2]. The sponsorship of CCA and local cultural centers still failed to replace temples as vital public spaces. However, the Taiwanese government's attention to this issue revealed a significant shift in the emphasis on local religious traditions in Taiwan. In the meantime, more and more temples in Taiwan began to compete with the CCA by gaining sponsorships for belief culture from the political and business circles.

3. The impact of local factions and clientelism on temple culture

Political parties in Taiwan have tried to use local temples to win elections. Some ambitious local politicians have instead harnessed temple worship to promote their interests against the regimes. The most representative example was in 2000. Amid religious and political complexities, the Zhen Lan Temple (see Figure 1), led by Ching-Piao Yen, the speaker of the Taichung County Council, attempted to make a pilgrimage directly to the Mazu Temple in Meizhou [5]. In 2000, Ching-Piao Yen announced his support for James Soong's presidential bid to establish himself as a local elite, and a religious and political leader. Ching-Piao Yen's actions caused political turmoil among Chen Shui-Bian's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Kuomintang, New Party, and People First Party (PFP, founded by James Soong) [2].



Figure 1 Zhen Lan Temple, Dajia, Taichung City (Photo supported by Dr. Hsiao-Ming Chang)

Clientelism refers to a relationship network that exchanges explicit or unspecified conditions, goods, and services, to obtain political support [6]. An asymmetric relationship is formed between patrons (politicians) and clientele (voters) to facilitate patronage to organize some groups or interest groups at the expense of the public interest. In 1949, when the Kuomintang regime withdrew its troops from Mainland of China and retreated to Taiwan, it lost its ties with traditional society and lacked a foothold in Taiwanese community. The party's ruling class gained support and advocacy by collaborating with local and business elites [7]. In the early days, Kuomintang controlled elections through local political factions in Taiwan, built on the relationship between patrons and clientele. Kuomintang utilized "local leaders" (politicians, local gentry, or capitalists) to organize and win the political support of followers and exchanged certain forms of interests to maintain the stability of the regime [8]. This characteristic of clientelism is similar to "a network" which loops in local grassroots people. Instead of challenging the legitimacy of Kuomintang or its dominating role in the political arena, local factions have monopolized the privatization of local politics and the economy through the patronage system [9]. Kuomintang shared political and economic interests with local factions, which laid the standard foundation for political stability and regime legitimacy in Taiwan.

Nevertheless, this normal foundation was destroyed by political forces that controlled the temples. In addition to the Zhen Lan Temple in Dajia of Taichung, this study took the Chaotian Temple (also a historically famous Mazu Temple, see Figure 2) in Yunlin Beigang as an example. 5,516 household heads elect each term of Chaotian Temple's board of directors and supervisors from 15 villages in the sacrificial circle. They are not simply temple managers, and their "public opinion base" may be equivalent to that of the town mayor [3]. To compete for the dominating role in Chaotian Temple in Beigang, complex political and economic relations are no longer limited to political parties or local factions. Various competing relationships and grievances exist between political parties and factions [10].

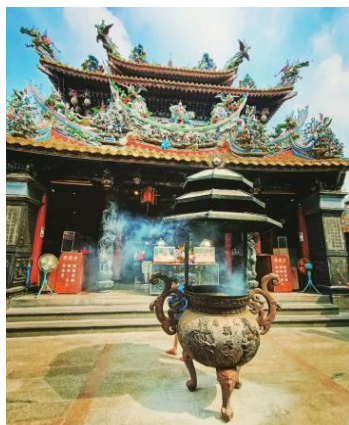


Figure 2 Chaotian Temple, Beigang, Yunlin County (Photo supported by author)



Figure 3 Mazu pilgrimage of Zhen Lan Temple (Photo supported by Dr. Hsiao-Ming Chang)

Generally, temples can be considered the most important public space in a region and a living space in Taiwan. Moreover, temples are the center of local politics, economy, and even social belief culture. The members of temple organizations are typically local politicians; some temples have even become treasuries operated by local factions [10]. Most people involved in temple affairs in Taiwan are successful entrepreneurs, local leaders, or local elites. They may serve on the board of directors or management committee in the temple or as the furnace owner or the head, forming mutual assistance and reciprocal interpersonal networks. Why are there so many followers of temples? In addition to the fact that lottery gambling was once widespread across Taiwan, the possible reason might be that long-term political repression and poor social functions made temples a valid public domain and a place of spiritual belief. Furthermore, grassroots believers were integrated into the mutual assistance and reciprocal interpersonal networks.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 was an unexpected situation that the temples had never encountered before. Politics became an essential factor in the contradiction between pandemic prevention and pilgrimage. Since the person in charge of Zhen Lan Temple is in a different political party from the current ruling DPP, the administration of Zhen Lan Temple stirred political struggle at its annual Mazu pilgrimage (see Figure 3). Although the administration of Zhen Lan Temple decided to restart the pilgrimage in June on a smaller scale when the pandemic was alleviated, it still provoked attacks from the media and the Internet, equating the temple's decision of holding the pilgrimage with its political stance [11].

Nowadays Taiwan's regimes and local elites have a vested interest in supporting local religious traditions. Although their goals may differ, officials tend to be more interested in control. In contrast, elites aim to increase their power and legitimacy [2]. However, both groups are aware that temples are important public spaces where multiple interactions may occur. The case of Zhen Lan Temple in Dajia illustrates that challenges from local factions and clientelism have increased. The well-known Discovery channel named the world's three major international religious events. Namely, Christmas Mass in the Vatican (Catholicism), the Hajj trip to Mecca (Islam), and the Mazu pilgrimage of Zhen Lan Temple in Dajia, Taichung City, Taiwan (Taoism) are religious activities involving over one million people each year. In 2010, Mazu culture was listed in the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. The reconstruction of Meizhou Mazu Temple enabled domestic and overseas Chinese followers to redefine their religious beliefs. The connection between Dajia Zhen Lan Temple and Meizhou Mazu Temple is impacted by the competition with other temples in Taiwan, accentuating the leadership role of Mazu culture [12].

4. Conclusion

The popularity of temple culture in Taiwan not only represents the reassurance of the Taiwanese people in the absence of public interest but also a cultural hegemony that uses temple worship to promote certain people's personal interests. Temples are not limited to the competition for political and cultural power in the public arena. They symbolize the complicated interpersonal networks of local politics and the economy. In recent years, the belief in Mazu in particular has challenged the previous patterns of local factions and clientelism in the regimes in Taiwan. This has led political figures running for elections to compete to visit temples, creating a unique phenomenon in elections. Mazu belief has created significant political and economic impacts within the local area. For example, the Mazu pilgrimage of Zhen Lan Temple in Dajia has become one of the world's three major

international religious events. Dajia Zhen Lan Temple's competition for the dominating role of Mazu culture in Taiwan is of great significance. What kind of new horizons can its connection with the Meizhou Mazu Temple bring to the belief culture in Taiwan? More field research is required to understand the path mechanisms of development and evolution of the impact of temples on political-economic networks of culture.

Sciences Newsletter Quarterly, 2021, 22 (2), pp. 48-54.

12. C. Choi, Beyond hegemony and sisterhood: transnational Tianhou-Mazu cult in East Asia. *Asian Education and Development Studies*, 2019, 9(1), pp. 26 - 36. DOI: <https://doi.org/doi:10.1108/aeds-01-2018-0014>

REFERENCES

1. Zijia Liu, The temples on Matsu islands are the densest-there are more churches in Taipei City than temples-Taiwan' s religious trivia based on data, The Central News Agency, 2022 July 28, Retrieved from CNA Web site: <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/ahel/202207285003.asp>
2. P. R. Katz, Religion and the state in post-war Taiwan, *The China Quarterly*, 2003, 174, pp. 395-412. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/s000944390300024x>
3. Yiqian Chen, Youru Li, Yushen Lai, Where are worship there are votes: The temple politics of presidential candidates, *Reading+*, 2019 Dec.18, Retrieved from *Reading+* Web site: <https://www.readr.tw/post/2085>
4. Wan-Yao Chou, The Ko minka Movement in Taiwan and Korea: comparisons and interpretations, in: Peter Duus, Ramon H. Myers, Mark R. Peattie (Eds.), *The Japanese Wartime Empire, 1931 - 1945*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996, pp. 40 - 68.
5. H. Chang, *Wenhua Mazu (Cultural Mazu)*, Institute of Ethnography, Academia Sinica, Taipei, 2003.
6. M. Pellicer, E. Wegner, M. Bayer, C. Tischmeyer, Clientelism from the client's perspective: A meta-analysis of ethnographic literature, in: M. Bernhard, D. I. O'Neill (Eds), *Perspectives on Politics*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2020, pp. 1-17.
7. PC. Lee, Political clientelism and professional baseball in Taiwan: The merger between the two leagues in 2003, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 2011, 47(4), pp. 475-491.
8. CP. Tang, Democratizing urban politics and civic environmentalism in Taiwan, *The China Quarterly*, 2003, 176, pp. 1029-1051. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20059072>
9. CL. Wu, Local factions and the Kuomintang in Taiwan' s electoral politics, *International Relations of the Asia Pacific*, 2003, 3, pp.89-111. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/irap/3.1.89>
10. Bing-Yuan Tsai, The impact of temple' s personnel elections on local elections: A case study of Beigang Town, Yulin County in Taiwan, Master's thesis, Tamkang University, New Taipei City, 2022.
11. Ying-Fa Hong, H. Chang, "Does Mazu work": The pulling and intertwining of temple epidemic prevention and local politics, *Humanities and Social*