Multiple Religious and National Identities: Mazu

Pilgrimages across the Taiwan Strait after 1987

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After the lifting of Martial Law in 1987 and the opening of cross-Strait trade, transportation, and postal service between Taiwan and China in 2000, pilgrimages to China have become a routine activity for many temples in Taiwan, especially in the case of temples of Mazu, who is a patron goddess of Taiwan. To most residents of Taiwan, Mazu is a symbol of Taiwanese identity; to the Chinese, Mazu is a symbol of peace between Taiwan and China. Thus, there are two nationalist interpretations of Mazu, and many tensions exist among Mazu believers and between Taiwanese temples and Chinese temples of Mazu. This paper focuses on the cross-Strait pilgrimage from Xingang Mazu Temple in Taiwan to Yongchun, Fujian in China in 2011, and the establishment of a Taiwanese branch temple in Fujian. In addition, the author shows that Taiwanese local politicians employ Xingang Mazu Temple to attract tourists and as a platform of new religious nationalism.

The relationships between state and religion are far more complicated than just seeing their antagonism or conflict. Multiple actors and political processes need to be examined. In this paper, I will show that KMT (Nationalist Party) or DPP (Democratic Progressive Party) has different attitude toward Chinese Mazu, resulting in their involvement in different groups of Mazu temples, and different degree of communication with Chinese temples. Politics within the state are unavoidable, just as competition amongst Mazu temples. Debates among politicians and bureaucrats over the interpretation of Mazu cult and its application to cross-strait relation occur in Taiwan and in China.
The Goddess Mazu in the form of a cute doll.
Speaker  Professor CHANG Hsun (張珣) received her Ph.D in Cultural Anthropology from the University of California at Berkeley in 1993 and is currently a Research Fellow at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan. She was the Deputy Director of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica (2011-2014), and served as the Chairman of the Taiwan Society of Anthropology and Ethnology (TSAE, 2012-2015). She is currently the Discipline Coordinator of Anthropology and Ethnic Studies, Ministry of Science and Technology (2015-2017). Her teaching and research interests include folk medicine and folk religion in Taiwan, religious revival in China, intangible cultural heritage in Taiwan and China. She has worked on cross Taiwan Strait pilgrimages since 2011, on religious transformation in Xiamen, and on interreligious dialogue in the Chinese context with researchers in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. Her publications include 《疾病與文化：臺灣民間醫療人類學研究論集》 (Illness and Culture: Essays on Folk Medicine in Taiwan) (1994 second edition), 《文化媽祖：臺灣媽祖信仰研究論文集》 (Constructing Mazu: Selected papers on the Mazu Cult) (2003), 《海洋民俗與信仰：媽祖與王爺》 (Maritime Folklore and Belief: Mazu and Wangye) (2010), “Between Religion and State: the Dajia pilgrimage in Taiwan”, Social Compass (2012). Edited volumes include Chinese Popular Religion: Linking Fieldwork and Theory (2013), Religion in Taiwan and China: Locality and Transmission (2017, co-edited with Benjamin Penny).