2000

Living at the Edge: Religion, Capitalism, and the End of the Nation-State in Taiwan

https://hdl.handle.net/2144/4512

Boston University
Taiwan lies at the boundaries of the world. Economically it has boomed, but with hardly a company or brand name that would be recognized anywhere else. A late entry to world capitalism, it skipped much of capitalism's high modernity of assembly lines and monopolies, and thrives instead as a welter of networked little firms and subcontractors, both the site of global investment and a major global investor. Politically it has spent the last four hundred years as a backwater frontier of the Dutch, Chinese, and Japanese empires, until the cataclysm of 1949 cast it adrift. Culturally, its people wonder whether they represent all of China, or are perhaps someplace else altogether. The island floats in limbo, not quite a nation and not quite a state, with no change in sight, but vibrant all the same with its economic success, its people's politics, and its arguments about who they really are.

This essay examines the religious side of how people live at these edges. A range of religious practices has developed in Taiwan that shapes and makes sensible their experience in distinct ways, varying greatly in, among other things, the ambition of their social organization, their claims to universalizing moralities, and the ways self and society are seen to relate. At one extreme lies fee-for-service religion that caters to asocial individuals, grants any request without regard to morality, and celebrates its shady deities through carnivalesque reversals and excesses. Its temples are postmodern celebrations of disorder and localization, a kind of feral religion. At the same time, the temples to community gods that had long been the heart of Taiwanese religion beyond the household have also grown, both in numbers of temples and in the scale at which existing temples are reconstructed. These address individuals more as embedded members of social networks. Although their orientation and organization is still primarily local, they also trace out new and old lines of migration and trade. Moving toward the other extreme are pietistic and new Buddhist
movements that proselytize for explicit constructions of new social values and create new kinds of community--globalizing, encompassing, structuring, modern. Nearly all of this builds on cultural and social resources that had been available to Taiwanese for centuries, but reworks and transforms them through the complexities of Taiwan's place in the current world economic and political system.

**On the Edge**

Taiwan's place at the literal edge of Asia--the island link between Japan, China, and southeast Asia--has shaped its political history. Most of its inhabitants before the seventeenth century were Austronesian speakers; the island was visited sometimes by Chinese or Japanese traders and occasionally used as a base by pirates. The Dutch took a kind of entrepot-based control for a while in the seventeenth century, only to be forcibly removed in 1661 by a Ming Dynasty loyalist using Taiwan as a last bastion against the new Qing government (a role Taiwan would later repeat). Chinese settlement increased drastically during this period, turning the island into the newest Chinese frontier, and ultimately forcing the aboriginal population to sinify or flee into the deep mountains.

The Qing Dynasty took over in 1683, but Taiwan was still very much a frontier, known for producing chronic rebellions the way other areas were known for producing scholars or silks. The Qing government had grave doubts about whether the island was really worth the investment, and Taiwan was not elevated to provincial status until 1884. Its new recognition only lasted eleven years, however. In 1895 China ceded Taiwan to Japan in the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese War. Fifty years of Japanese-style colonialism followed--the endemic violence was eventually pacified, bureaucracy and taxation were rationalized, infrastructure was improved, and basic education made widespread. On the other hand, the local population lost all political say above the local level, higher education was strictly limited, and major business positions were all controlled by the Japanese.

The island went back to China after World War II, but was still considered a backwater (worse yet, a backwater heavily influenced by Japanese language and values).
Relations between local Taiwanese and the new government had already deteriorated badly when the Communist victories of 1949 forced the Nationalist government to flee to Taiwan, taking as much of its wealth and military might as it could muster. The Nationalists claimed to be the only legitimate government of China, just waiting to retake the mainland from its temporary occupation by Communist bandits. Taipei, for the moment, was proclaimed as China's capital. A temporary "state of emergency" was declared, essentially the imposition of martial law, and it lasted for roughly forty years. For the first time, Taiwan was not just the outer edge of empire, at least in a sense. Taiwanese, however, were as much at the edge of political power as ever.

The Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek had learned their organizing techniques from the Soviet Union, during an early alliance with the Communists. The Nationalist Party (Guomindang) was organized along Leninist principles as a vanguard party, present in every institution including the military. The basic economic model was corporatist, although much of the technique of ideological control showed its common roots with the mainland. When I was first there in the late 1970s, walls were covered with slogans ("Retake the Mainland!"), the television offered quotes from President Chiang, and all media were tightly controlled.

This claim not to be at the edge had a weak point, of course—the People's Republic had an alternative reading of the situation, which ultimately redefined Taiwan's position. The crucial blow came when the United States withdrew its diplomatic recognition of Taiwan in 1979. Diplomatically Taiwan was fully in limbo from that point on. Removed from the United Nations, they have no voice in international treaties. Their claims to be a state are recognized by only a handful of the world's least powerful countries. Thoughts of giving up claims to China and becoming a new nation are immediately squelched by saber-rattling from the mainland. In addition, Taiwan was not part of China during the first half of the twentieth century, when ideas about Chinese nationalism developed most strongly. In a world organized by nation-states, Taiwan falls between all the boundaries.
The dilemmas this poses strengthened further after martial law was finally lifted in 1987. In the years that followed local people could, for the first time in a century, speak explicitly about what it meant to be Taiwanese, in contrast to the Chinese they had been for the previous four decades, and the colonial Japanese they had been for the five decades before that. More than any other issue since 1987, the problem of identity has preoccupied Taiwan. When the government stepped back from its uncompromising paternalistic moralism, it left an empty field in which anything seemed possible. This new free space, added to Taiwan's irresolvable political position, has fostered the religious creativity we now see there.

Taiwan's economy is not as unusual as its current political situation, but the island's history has also fostered an economic edginess. The Chinese settlers in Taiwan had been market-oriented from early on. By the nineteenth century much of their agricultural production was sold. Taiwan was the major supplier of tea to the United States after the Civil War, and exported its rice and sugar cane to mainland China and southeast Asia. The Japanese built up the agricultural base still further, and invested heavily in infrastructure; Taiwan was to become a rice basket for Japan. When Chiang Kai-shek and his followers took over in 1949, they followed a developmental state model. They actively promoted key economic sectors through state-owned companies or the promotion of private industry, and their tight political control enforced docility in the labor force. Under a generally corporatist model, Taiwan's economy grew steadily. By the 1960s Taiwan was attracting the cheap labor industries that ride at the front of capitalism's advance. In Taiwan this included both textiles--the classic leading edge of the cheap labor frontier since they first moved from England to New England--and newer industrial manufacture like cheap plastic toys and electronics assembly.

This story of tough political rule and enlightened economic leadership could often be heard from Nationalist officials. The economy has another side, however. Quite unlike Japan or South Korea, the heart of Taiwan's economic growth has been very small-scale entrepreneurs, not the gigantic companies that work closely within state policy. Taiwanese
bosses complain that workers only stay around long enough to learn the business, and then set themselves up as competition. There is a cliche in Taiwan that it is "better to be a chicken's beak that a bull's behind" (ning wei jikou, bu wei niuhou), and in fact by some estimates one of every eight adults in Taiwan is the boss of his or her own small business.¹ The government has not exactly hindered this growth, but has also done very little to foster it directly. For example, tight banking policy has long made it almost impossible for small businesses to get credit. As a result Taiwanese turn to the informal economy. Primary sources of credit thus include post-dated checks and rotating credit associations.² None of these techniques have formal legal backing, and so all rely on informal networks of social trust to succeed. Entrepreneurs, potential entrepreneurs (which includes almost everyone), and even people working at household-based putting-out production must develop and maintain ego-centered networks of connections to do well.

The 1980s brought economic transformations that were almost as great as Taiwan's political changes of the period. As the economy thrived, costs of labor continued to go up until it made little sense to continue investing in cheap labor production of footwear, garments, and injection-molded plastic. The crisis was not so much that multinational companies left for greener pastures, but that Taiwanese entrepreneurs themselves could no longer compete in these businesses, even through the traditional advantages in milking household labor. Their small scale, however, meant that they did not usually have enough capital to move into higher technology and more capital intensive sectors. The logical solution would have been for them to invest overseas in the industries they already know


(and this has happened in the 1990s). At the time, however, government currency regulations and political fears of China--the most obvious source of cheap labor--prevented people from expatriating their money. The result was a lot of unproductive investment, especially speculation in the stock and real estate markets. Both of these saw large bubbles that would burst a few years later. Taiwan became a gambler's economy, in which earlier values of hard work and savings no longer explained profits.

This changed again in the 1990s, when barriers to overseas investment were largely broken down and Taiwanese entrepreneurs rushed into the opportunities. Taiwan is the largest single investor in Vietnam, and a very large investor in parts of China. This fosters a new mode of precariousness, with the constant specter of political or economic turmoil threatening to undermine investments. For all these political and economic reasons, and in spite of the wealth so much of the population has achieved, Taiwan is not an easy place to sit back and feel secure. All of these changes have intertwined with religious life in Taiwan, which has undergone several decades of creative expansion and seems to thrive on Taiwan's general uncertainty.

Of Dogs and Death

A whole series of previously minor temples suddenly became prominent in Taiwan in the mid-1980s, just as the gambling economy thrived. The most famous of all was the Eighteen Lords temple at the northern tip of the island, built in the shadow of a nuclear power plant.3 No one knows how long a little shrine had stood there. It was small even for a ghost temple, too small to be recorded, not much more than a grave and an incense pot. According to most people who told the story, a fishing boat had washed ashore sometime in the past, carrying seventeen unidentified dead bodies and one live dog. They buried the bodies in a mass grave and built the little shrine, as one usually does in such cases. The

only variation here was the dog: loyal to the death (a value most associated with upright ministers, good business partners, and powerful bandits), the dog leaped into the grave after its dead masters and was buried alive. Seventeen corpses and a suicidal dog: the Eighteen Lords.

Soldiers on coastal sentry duty worshipped there occasionally, but not many others. When construction of the nuclear power plant began in the 1970s, the shrine was scheduled to be buried as the land around the plant was leveled. Popular sentiment and eerie experience, however, combined to convince the government to rebuild the shrine. A number of workers had died in construction accidents (often taken as a sign of unhappy ghosts), and a backhoe mysteriously froze just as it stood poised to destroy the original little shrine. These events helped mobilize both workers and neighbors to lobby against destruction. The government ultimately agreed "to respect local customs" by building a new temple, which was quite magnificent by ghost cult standards. It features images of the Eighteen Lords on an altar at one side, and the grave, flanked by two large bronze statues of the dog, on the other. This grave was in fact a fake, a simulacrum of the original, which was now preserved in an underground room, directly below its replica. Both graves are mounds covered in mosaic tiles. The genuine grave, now reached through an unmarked basement staircase in the back, is said to be the true center of power.

Bending the government to its will accounted for the initial fame of this temple. Its boom really began in the mid-1980s, however, along with the rise of other temples to shady characters who combined ritual efficacy with low moral standards. Unlike gods, ghosts will grant any request. Ghosts are improper deaths, the spirits of people who have no one to worship them because they died too young or (like the Eighteen Lords) died by violence and far from home. With no descendants to worship them, they are starving in the underworld--this explains their fondness for any paying proposition. Their only condition is proper repayment (buying them gold medals, giving money to their temple, sponsoring operas for their pleasure), without which they will exact a nasty revenge. This is fee-for-service religion, something like cutting a deal with a local hoodlum.
Ghosts had long had this greedy and individualistic streak, quite different from the community base and upright morality of gods. One of the most obvious ritual statements of this occurs in ritual offerings of incense. Gods receive incense in single pots that combine the smoky offerings of entire worshipping communities. Ghosts, at their annual propitiation ritual, instead receive separate, single sticks of incense, often marked with the name of the donor, stuck into plates of food. Worshipers are individualized, and any sense of community is minimized. The Eighteen Lords differ from this normally shadowy corner of Taiwanese religion only in having suddenly jumped into the open during this period. By the late 1980s, the Eighteen Lords temple may have been the most popular temple on the island. Thousands of people visited every night, knotting up traffic on the north coastal highway. People said it was especially popular with prostitutes, gamblers, and petty criminals. They would warn me to watch for pickpockets, who came both to steal and to worship. In fact, all kinds of people made offerings, and I saw talismans from the temple everywhere—rearview mirrors, fish restaurants, fancy hotels.4

The Eighteen Lords emphasized their departure from community and conventional morality through a series of reversals. People worshipped there at night, with the center of power underground at the original grave. Instead of offering sticks of incense at the grave, they erected lit cigarettes. A wall now blocks access to the grave from the front (where the incense pot stands), so the cigarettes must be offered from behind. The trip from parking lot to temple was equally carnivalesque, not just in its huge and unorganized crowds, but in the

---

4 I asked temple employees who the patrons were. These employees help worshippers read poetic talismans that are part of standard temple divination, and they thus see a wide range of people and listen to their personal situations. These employees invariably said that the people who came seemed no different from what might be found at any other temple. The Eighteen Lords temple allows visitors the frisson of thinking they are rubbing elbows with gangsters and prostitutes, without actually forcing them to do it.
literal sense of having rows of carnival games (shoot the balloons, knock over the ducks, and all the rest). And as a reminder of the driving force behind it all, everyone asked for cash. Even the toilets were fee-for-service.

The temple spawned more than its share of commercial offshoots. These included souvenir dogs (I saw one on an altar in a small business, smoking a lit cigarette), but more significantly a movie, a television soap opera, and even a fake temple, a bit closer to town on the same highway. One subplot from the movie--it was postmodern itself, all subplots and no plot--was particularly striking. The heroine of the moment was a beautiful prostitute, stuck in debt bondage to her pimp. Her handsome boyfriend was a gambler, but he could not win enough to buy her freedom. The boyfriend's clownish sidekick, however, came to the rescue by worshipping the Eighteen Lords. As he was leaving the temple a book blew open to a particular spot. When the sidekick looked at the page, he saw a formula for winning at gambling: the gambler needs a talisman made from the umbilical cord of a newborn baby. With that he cannot lose, although taking the umbilicus destroys the fate of the infant. By happy coincidence, our sidekick had a wife in the hospital who had just given birth. He waltzed in, ripped the cord off the wailing baby, and soon everyone's problems were solved. Except, I imagine, for the baby, who disappeared from the film at this point. The film itself looks like a quick attempt to milk some cash out of the temple's popularity, but both its greed and its plots align well with the principals of the Eighteen Lords.

This image of ghosts is not new in Chinese culture, but its sudden magnification by the late 1980s was a real change. In part, this temple and others like it--one to a murdered thief, another to an executed bank robber--thrived by telling people winning numbers for an illegal lottery that also boomed during this period. As a form of the numbers game, this lottery gave fairly high odds of success for a temple that could ambiguously suggest three or four digits. With thousands of worshipers looking for signs in the incense smoke or through divination techniques, the odds of success on any given day for at least a few people were not bad. Standard community gods were said not to be willing to help people gamble. This
reasoning just puts off the problem, though, because the sudden flowering of this illegal lottery during these years also demands explanation; a state-run lottery had existed for many years without such competition. The lottery and these temples went together because both offered the chance of unearned wealth.

Such things boomed in the late 1980s because of the specific economic and political events of the period. First, the lifting of martial law allowed a huge moral free space to open up, and all kinds of things walked into it, including the Eighteen Lords. Second, people had achieved the kind of standard of living that is usually associated with the developed countries, but were also caught in a momentary economic vise: with lots of money and nowhere productive to put it, unproductive investments that might lead to unearned wealth seemed to make sense. When this situation changed in the 1990s, especially as Taiwanese were increasingly able to invest in mainland China, both the Eighteen Lords and the illegal lottery faded in importance.

The Eighteen Lords and similar temples seem playfully postmodern. Who could better symbolize such things than a pile of unrecognized dead bodies? They inflict no set morality. They do not even suggest a morality by favoring an immorality; they just do not care about such issues. Their space is restless and chaotic, always filled with masses of people, but never the same people. No one has the authority to impose a unified interpretation on this, nor do interpretive social mechanisms exist that might order it. Even the movie made no attempt at a unified reading of the temple. These ghosts are radically individualistic, serving people's selfish ends without regard for older social ties like family or community, and with any effective means to foster a unified, authoritative meaning.

Gods and Networks

These ghost temples stood out partly because, for the first time, they began to rival community god temples. Most gods, like ghosts, are spirits of dead people. Unlike ghosts, though, gods were known (before or after death, or both) for their upright acts. Anyone can create a temple to a god, and many people choose to worship one or two favorites on their
domestic altars at home, next to the ancestors. The most important god temples, however, are run by local community committees. There is no priesthood affiliated with these temples, although Daoist or Buddhist priests may be hired to conduct rituals. Nor is there any institutional organization beyond individual temples. Some temples locally are connected historically through "incense division," in which a branch temple starts up by bringing incense from the mother temple, and usually reaffirms the tie by returning annually. Maintenance of such ties is evidence of historical roots and ongoing economic or social connections. Overseas communities often maintain ties to their home communities through incense division networks.

This system never fit very well with Western ideas of what a religion is. One of my earliest impressions in Taiwan, for example, was the way my anthropological instincts of sacred and profane were defied. This was not just the observation that religion and daily life were inextricably intertwined; I was much more struck by the absence of sacred space in rituals. Early in my first extended field research I remember a Buddhist altar that had been set up to feed the lonely ghosts during the seventh lunar month. During the ceremony itself people simply surrounded the altar and the monk conducting the ritual, walking right up next to him, even grabbing objects from the altar table. Normal temple altars are also very approachable, and so are gods when they physically appear through a spirit medium; people just sit around and have ordinary conversations with the god. This is not a priestly view of things--that Buddhist monk had busily created a meditational mandala around himself, and a glance at temple architecture does show a division of sacred space. Yet it reflects popular attitudes. There was not even a clear translation of the term "religion" into Chinese before the twentieth century, when China borrowed the term from Japan, which got it in turn from Western philosophy. A number of older informants still do not recognize the term today, and even among those who do, many denied that they had any religion (meaning something institutionalized, textual, priestly), but said they just "carried incense" (gia: hiu:).
The distinction between the worlds of commerce and religion also never worked well in Taiwan. Any act of worship beyond a minimal lighting of incense requires burning "spirit money." The most common forms in Taiwan are cheap squares of paper with gold or silver foil on them, although some in Hong Kong is printed to look like secular currency, and says "Bank of Hell" in English. In contrast to the fee-for-service ghosts, however, people do not talk about money for gods either contractually or as bribes. Instead, the image is much more of the kinds of reciprocity through which people build community and personal networks. For instance: "Offering things to the gods is just like taking a gift to one's host. A stranger won't necessarily help you no matter how nice a gift you bring, and a good friend will help even if you bring nothing at all." Another said, "[P]olice act one way to people who giver them red envelopes [bribes] and another way to those who do not. But gods are not like that. It is not that the more things you give them the more they will help you. It is only necessary to do good deeds and burn three sticks of incense and they will be enormously happy. A god is a being with a very upright heart."\(^5\) This is a very different conceptualization from the repayment of ghosts, but it also shows the general comfort with commerce beyond the marketplace in Taiwan. The standard wedding or funeral gift, for example, is cash.

God temples in Taiwan have also thrived over the last few decades, although they have not undergone the kind of spectacular boom that ghosts briefly did. They have increased in both quantity (temples per capita have been rising since about 1972) and quality (as older temples are rebuilt in larger scales and at great expense).\(^6\) Some of these temples are entrepreneurial, especially when they are associated with spirit mediums. A


contractual relationship is also involved here, but it is directly between the client and the human spirit medium. This sector has grown like any other petty capitalist product—mediums have multiplied the numbers of deities on their altars because different gods fit different market niches, and mediums innovate new techniques in competition with each other.7 The appeal to market segmentation in religion is part of the general fracturing of marketing to fit the disunities of the population.

The most important temples are still those dedicated to community gods. These temples are uncompromisingly local in orientation. Other towns may have temples to the same deities, and some deities are nationally recognized, but each god in his or her temple looks primarily after just the locality. Many of these temples have been rebuilt at great expense recently. Lists of contributors and the amounts of their gifts are typically posted outside temples; and these donors are often featured in the videos of major rituals that temples now make. These gifts are more than just conspicuous consumption. They enter into relations of claimed reciprocity simultaneously with both the gods and the local community, proclaiming membership and asserting the right to future support (often by wealthy people who no longer live there). Rebuilding a local temple or contributing money to its ritual life are in part ways of solidifying the social networks that are so crucial to Taiwan's mom and pop capitalism. Gods and patrons are bound up together in these obligations, which are concretized in the increasingly ornate forms of the temples themselves.

The networks that trace historical connections between temples remain as important as ever, above all because Taiwan's current rage for investment in China encourages

entrepreneurs to revivify temple ties to their ancestral homelands, where they plan to invest. The People's Republic relaxes its usual glare at popular religious practice in these areas, recognizing that Taiwanese investment in local temples also eases the flow of capital for other purposes. Temples are thriving on both sides of the Taiwan Strait as both symbols and mediators of their new economic ties. The anthropologist Brigitte Baptandier gives a good example of the ironies that can result. Back when Taiwanese temples still could not visit the mainland directly, she brought a Taiwanese version of a temple text concerning the goddess Linshui Furen to the mother temple in Fujian Province. A few years later the mother temple held a conference on the goddess, and the organizers were able to invite their Taiwanese counterparts. They reprinted the text and gave it to the Taiwanese, who happily brought it back as evidence of their own renewed authenticity. On the other hand, Taiwanese feel a new kind of power in these relationships—they are now returning as magnates, not prodigal sons—and this sometimes shows up in claims that Taiwanese images are more authentic that those from the mainland.\(^8\)

Taiwan's odd political position also plays out through temples. Two of Taiwan's most famous temples are dedicated to the goddess Mazu. The one in Beigang is considered senior to the one in Dajia, which had a famous pilgrimage to Beigang every year. When travel to the mainland became possible, Beigang initially refused to go, in what amounted to a claim of its own ultimate authenticity. Dajia, however, jumped at the chance to go to the original mother temple; it brought back incense and then claimed seniority to the Beigang temple. These events were island-wide gossip for a while, and widely interpreted as Beigang support for Taiwan independence, and Dajia support for reunification. Temples have thrived as the nodes of economic and political networks, but subject to the intricate particularities of Taiwan's unusual economy and unique politics.

\(^8\)See P. Steven Sangren, "Anthropology and Identity Politics in Taiwan: The Relevance of Local Religion," paper presented to the Taiwan Studies Workshop, Fairbank Center for East Asian Research, Harvard University, 1995.
On Sects

Yet another religious growth area in Taiwan comes from the rise of several indigenous pietistic sects, loosely related to earlier Chinese traditions like the White Lotus. A wide range of such groups now exists, making it difficult to generalize about them. The largest and most influential pietistic sect in Taiwan today is the Way of Unity (Yiguan Dao), which claims over a million followers. They run most of the vegetarian restaurants in Taiwan, and also feature the active membership of the shipping magnate Zhang Rongfa—one of the wealthiest men in the world. They are currently planning to build a university.

Many of the sects are millenarian. They often have large statues of Maitreya, the Buddha of the next age, whom they say will imminently appear on earth, or perhaps, they whisper, he is already here. Many of them also worship a goddess, the Eternal Venerable Mother (Wusheng Laomu), who created the world but is now saddened and disappointed at her children's lack of morality. Nearly all these sects give a prominent place to spirit writing, in which a deity writes commentaries in sand through a possessed medium using a planchette. Most sectarians are also self-consciously syncretic, drawing on Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, and sometimes crossing the globe for their religious resources. I have a spirit writing text published by one of these groups, for example, which gives the transcript of a panel discussion involving the "founders of the five religions," who include the Primordial Heavenly Worthy (central to Daoism), Sakyamuni, Confucius, Mohammed, and Jehovah. The moderator is Guan Gong, the popular Chinese god of war, business

____________________


and loyalty. The message is that all the religions of the world share the same basic message of morality.

All the sects claim to be moral revivals in an era of moral crisis. They unite large groups of followers around clear leaders and clear sets of ideas. They come together as ordered groups--the word "congregation" is tempting. This is very different from the relatively disorganized and disaggregated popular worship of gods and especially ghosts. Many of them emphasize this further through the body. Uniforms of some kind, for example, are very common among all these groups. Pietistic sectarians typically wear blue or white robes over their clothing when they worship or conduct spirit writing sessions. This is a significant departure from people's usual ritual practice. They tend to worship in neat rows with coordinated movements and segregation by gender (men on the left in standard Confucian order); this contrasts with the unorganized worship typical of community god temples, and even more with the total chaos of the Eighteen Lords. Membership is voluntary and strongly marked, again unlike popular temples where anyone can walk in and worship. This makes distinctions of sacred and profane suddenly become relevant again, as the select are distinguished from others. Having gotten used to the non-sacred nature of much ritual space, I was surprised again when I first visited a number of sectarian temples, because I was not allowed to approach the altars, or sometimes even to see the god. As part of this marking off of sacred space, money has also been removed from the ritual--there is no spirit money in any form.

This is not to say that sectarians oppose either the market economy or Taiwan's modernist state. The "new" morality they stress in Taiwan is anything but revolutionary. In the sectarian panel discussion I mentioned above, for instance, the Primordial Heavenly Worthy--perhaps conscious of the political "state of emergency" at the time--offers us a summary of the panel's conclusions: "Those who cultivate the Dao should respect the Constitution, be faithful to the nation, be faithful to human plans, not abandon the laws, and behave as good citizens.... [They] should be filial to their parents, carefully attend to their
funeral rites and make sacrifices to them."¹¹ Most of the groups in fact trumpet the market success of their members, arguing in Weberian fashion that sect members make good business connections because you understand and share the person's moral position, even if he or she is a stranger to you. Some sects also have a calculation of the profit and loss of the self--each convert is supposed to accumulate enough merit to achieve individual salvation.¹²

These sects offer an overarching morality that is very comfortable with the market, but uncomfortable with what they see as the moral failing of society. Like the revived god temples, but even more powerfully, they help establish the networks of like-minded people that have been so crucial to Taiwan's economic expansion. Like the ghost cults, they celebrate the market, but with a very different moral message. While ghosts enjoy exactly the loss of a shared sense of morality and revel in the reduction of all relationships to commodity exchange, the sects attempt to rebuild moralities and to construct communities on a new basis. Ghosts relish living at the edge--quite appropriate for liminal beings--but the sects react against it. These sects remain very important in Taiwan now, but have to an extent been overshadowed by another form of organized religion, based more purely in Buddhism. I turn to that now.

**On Charity and Compassion**

Roughly simultaneous with the beginnings of the Eighteen Lords enthusiasm and the increased popularity of sectarian religion in the 1970s, Taiwan also saw a resurgence in Buddhism of various sorts. I will concentrate here on the largest of these groups, the

¹¹Shengxian Tang, p. 10.

Compassionate Relief Merit Association (Ciji Gongdehui). Claiming about four million members, they are the only social association in Taiwan larger than the Nationalist Party. They give away over US$ 20 million each year in charity, and many followers also volunteer large amounts of time visiting the poor or working in their hospital. They are led by a charismatic Buddhist nun named Zhengyan, although the vast majority of followers are lay people and they do not emphasize joining the sangha.

Zhengyan began her movement on Taiwan's poor east coast in 1966 with five disciples and thirty housewives, who contributed a few cents a day and sewed children's shoes to support medical charity. Now they claim four million members; they have branches around the world, run a university, and are building their second cutting-edge hospital. Like the Eighteen Lords and some other Buddhist groups, they grew slowly and steadily through the 1970s and really boomed in the 1980s, and they have so far outlasted the ghost temple fad. They are almost matched in scale by a few other Buddhist groups (especially Buddha Aura Mountain [Fuoguang Shan] and Dharma Drum Mountain [Fagu Shan]).

Compassionate Relief itself stands out for its concern with secular action. They downplay many traditional aspects of Buddhism in Taiwan; sutra-singing is relatively unimportant, and so is philosophical discussion. The emphasis is consistently on changing this world, creating a Pure Land on earth by bringing the Buddhist message of simplicity.

---

and compassion into all aspects of people's lives. The followers are about 80 percent women. They wear identical conservative dresses (more recently differentiated by rank), and come together periodically in small groups to carry out their charitable works, and in larger groups to listen to members testify about their new lives or to sermons by Zhengyan, either in person or on video. The sermons are light on Buddhist text and heavy on action in the world. Zhengyan is known for her terse advice on how to live with problems, not how to transcend them. She urges people to cut down on conspicuous consumption, and to devote their resources and energy to helping the poor and sick.

The testimonials, like their Protestant counterparts, tend to contrast current happiness with former lives of dissolution and dissatisfaction. As one said, "I used to have closets full of clothes. None of them ever seemed beautiful enough to satisfy me. But now I have found that most beautiful dress. It is the one I am wearing [the Compassionate Relief uniform]." A few even relate tales of changing loyalties from the Eighteen Lords to Zhengyan--feral religion tamed again. For many, the transition point was their first sight of Zhengyan, when visitors are often lost in uncontrollable weeping in the presence of their frail leader. This is an inescapable theme in people's discussion of conversion to Compassionate Relief, and I have seen families prostrate themselves at her feet with tears flowing down their cheeks.

Much of the movement is about the remaking of the self--the charismatic transition through tears in the presence of Zhengyan, the constant messages of the testimonials, the explicit instructions to volunteer among the poor and sick. The new self is molded just as much in the implicit body practices of daily life. Serious followers keep a vegetarian diet, and men are required to abstain from alcohol--a primary lubricant for much business in Taiwan. Followers are even instructed to wear their seatbelts. The uniforms, like those of

Many of these techniques sounds Protestant, although there is no evidence of borrowing. The general social message, however, is said to stem in part from Zhengyan's early contact with several Catholic nuns, who compared Buddhism unfavorably to Catholicism for its lack of social action.
the pietistic sects, help mark group membership; they contrast as much with individualistic daily dress as their carefully constructed group ceremonies contrast with the disorganized daily worship at temples. Compassionate Relief uniforms also carry their own specific meanings, however. Sectarian robes, worn over daily dress, emphasize the purity necessary when dealing with their deities, and play up the sacred/profane contrast that these groups emphasize. Their traditional design also promotes the general feeling in those groups of a revival of Confucian tradition. Compassionate Relief uniforms are instead dresses of the sort that might be seen every day. The emphasis is thus on the secular world, rather than the sacred world of sectarian temples.

Compassionate Relief is not an anti-market movement by any means, but it does look to heal the moral problems of the market-based universe. Like many moral revivals, it discourages consumption and encourages social relations outside of contract and commerce. Charity, after all, is a fundamentally non-market way of redistributing wealth, although its money often comes initially from the market. Historically in China this combination of Buddhism and charity is new (even begging by monks was downplayed there), but both popularizing Buddhist groups and private charitable organizations have long histories and close ties to the rise of the commodity economy in China. For example, a late Ming Dynasty (sixteenth century) boom in philanthropic associations responded to the huge influx of Spanish silver at that time by allowing merchants to join local Confucian elites in a cause that justified their new cash as an answer to social problems. Compassionate Relief is new in bringing this a Buddhist form and in giving women the leading role, but it also helps answer the old moral problems of new wealth. That is why this group—unlike,

---

15 A Taiwanese graduate student of mine, who had been doing research in Namibia, first walked into Compassionate Relief's Taipei headquarters, saw all the uniforms, and exclaimed "Zionists!"

for instance, many of the Japanese "new religions"--appeals particularly to the wealthy end of the population. Many of the other new pietistic and Buddhist movements now also command enormous followings and huge pots of money, and it serves similar functions for them. Two have opened or are planning universities, and Buddha Aura Mountain was involved in the U.S. Presidential campaign contribution scandal of 1996.

Both the Buddhist and the pietistic sects promise a moral compass at a time when people feel their older moralities are crumbling from the economic and political pressures of current Taiwanese life. And both refocus market profits into non-market activities, cleansing the cash in good causes. None of the other new religious movements, however, is quite the same as Compassionate Relief. It is the most worldly, and also the most popular with women. These issues are probably related: the movement offers a way of maintaining conservative female values--the image of a nurturing mother and a "simple" life--while breaking down the social barriers that had limited those values to the family proper. The pietistic sects lean instead more toward revitalized Confucianism, which is clearly less appealing to women.17

Compassionate Relief also thrived at this particular moment for political reasons. A similarly social-minded Buddhist reformer, a monk named Yinshun, had been silenced by the Buddhist establishment (with government support) in the 1950s; it seemed too close to leftist agitation at the time. By the 1970s, when Compassionate Relief began to grow, however, Taiwan's authoritarian government had become staunchly laissez-faire on social issues. Swayed largely by neo-classical economics by this time (in spite of their large state-owned sector), they kept taxation low in exchange for offering very little in the way

welfare, unemployment, or health benefits. This began to change only when the
democratization after 1987 changed the political dynamics of offering social services.
Compassionate Relief met a genuine social need in a way that was also very convenient for
a government with Taiwan's economic direction of the time. Zhengyan has never offered
direct political support to the government, and is generally seen as quite independent, but
there was no doubt a happy coincidence of purpose.

**Why This? Why Now?**

Anthropologists in Taiwan in the early 1970s tended to see indigenous forms of
religion as fading away. This may in part have been a remnant of modernization theory
assumptions that secularization was inevitable, but it was also supported by the crude
statistical measures (like registered temples per capita) we have for religion. The major
growth in all these versions of indigenous religion began in the early 1970s and has
continued unabated on the whole, although individual movements can ebb and flow over
just a few years. This coincides roughly with the period when Taiwan moved firmly into an
export-oriented economic policy with minimal state support of society beyond education
and infrastructure--the kind of model that has more recently become the general liberal
economic prescription for the entire world. Taiwan did very well under these policies, but
its very success also encouraged the economic worries of the 1980s (as cheap labor
gradually dried up) and the political worries of the 1990s (as democratization has pushed
the issue of independence or reunification to the point of ongoing identity crisis).

It is not enough to point out that modernization theorists mistook the relationship
between secularization and capitalism. Taiwan is hardly unique in casting doubt on that
theory, or in experiencing the kinds of moral doubts that religion can address. Nor is it

---

18See Qu Haiyuan and Yao Lixiang, "Taiwan Diqu Zongjiao Bianqian zhi Tantao [Discussion of Religious
655-685.
enough to point out that these religious developments respond roughly to market pressures that are not unusual around the world--an uneasy combination of growing individualism in a Hobbesian world of competition and contract, combined with an attempt to create new forms of community. Instead, it seems worth exploring why Taiwan's animated, vigorous and diverse set of religious possibilities takes the particular forms it has at this historical moment. At one side the Eighteen Lords wildly celebrate the moral freedoms of the individual in the market. At the same time, resurgent god cults help solidify business networks, and organized religious movements offer entirely new moral communities. One can move from the chaotic midnight mass of self-interested worshipers to neat congregations of identical followers; we see fads for nameless and homeless ghosts, for gods with communitarian loyalties, for charismatic and saintly leaders. Some people in fact switched, almost overnight, from ardent followers of ghosts and gambling to loyal welfare workers for Compassionate Relief. As Taiwan has thrived in the new capitalist world it has simultaneously become more localizing and more universalizing, pushed market competition and charitable redistribution, celebrated individualism and constructed social values, wallowed in disorderly ghosts and crafted new kinds of order. It is both postmodern and modern, together and inseparable.

Part of the answer to the particularities of Taiwan's current religious vigor lies in its long history of involvement in global trade, market economies, and borderland politics. While the configuration of the world economy in the late twentieth century is of course new, China and especially Taiwan already had an intimate familiarity with things like cash and contracts. Neither the political tension of Taiwan's current limbo nor the economic edginess of life in a changeable commodity economy are new for Chinese. China was filled with political edges of one sort or another, often international or domestic regional boundaries where communication and political control were difficult, and where ethnic interaction was common. Taiwan nearly always fit this category, although the events of the last few decades have made its position even more anomalous. Especially during periods political weakness in China, these edgy places have sprouted unusual religious growths.
Peripheral Guangxi in the 1840s, for example, was just such a place, and one of its main deities at the time was King Gan, who had achieved high office while alive by murdering his mother and burying her in a geomantically attractive grave. Others in the area included a sexually licentious couple and a dung-throwing vagrant. Several of them tended to extort money out of innocent passers-by, speaking through possessed spirit mediums. This was distant indeed from the image of upright bureaucratic gods promoted in most areas. The endemic violence of such places also often took place through religious sects. Nineteenth-century Taiwan was home to many, and it was the founding home of the Triad Society.

China's earlier surges of market and commodity dominance also had religious interactions. I have already mentioned the rise of philanthropic associations and popularizing Buddhism in the late Ming. Another case that resonates today occurred in 1768 when China suffered a wave of soul stealing, where either a bit of hair or the written name of the victim was allegedly used for personal gain. The victim, often a child, was robbed of his spiritual essence and would soon waste away and die. This was an economic boom period in China (after tea had seduced the British, but before they wreaked their opium revenge), and the accusations occurred in China's wealthiest region. The wealth led to a general freeing of peasant labor, but only to enter a buyer's labor market, especially given recent and rapid population increases. This was not capitalism, but it was a form of market culture based in rapid commercialization and its social effects.

Even the great variety of religious options in Taiwan today is not new. Religion has not been strongly institutionalized in China since the Song Dynasty dropped the earlier idea of adopting Buddhism or Daoism as a state religion. Most religion for centuries has been

---


either strictly locally controlled in community temples, or only loosely centralized through rival centers of Buddhist and Daoist ordination. Most worship was domestic, overseen by no higher authority. Under these circumstances, China and Taiwan have long brewed a wide variety of local religious options, and there is little institutional obstacle to change compared to Christianity or Islam.

These long roots help explain part of Taiwan's reaction to millenial capitalism, but the movements I have discussed are not simple continuations of earlier religious ideas, even though each one has direct precursors. They have also become parts of Taiwan's transformation, and differ from earlier movements because Taiwan's economics and politics are not just a reiteration of earlier bouts of commercialization or political weakness. One aspect of this change in the global context is communication, including both the media and transportation. The new ease of movement has allowed people and temples to act on larger scales than ever before, including the international stage for Compassionate Relief (which has branches in nineteen countries), the new levels of interaction between Taiwanese and mainland temples, and even the island-wide popularity of the Eighteen Lords temple. New media play just as strong a role: the Eighteen Lords spawned a movie and a television soap opera, community temples hawk souvenir videos of major rituals, and important clergy like Zhengyan frequently preach on television.

The specific forms of religion today in Taiwan are unique, both in comparison to their historical antecedents and to comparable religious resurgences in other parts of the world. The Eighteen Lords cult, for example, aggrandizes ghosts beyond anything documented earlier in China or Taiwan. As a ghost temple, it differs fundamentally from the unruly god cults of a place like 1840s Guangxi. In some ways it is more similar to the recent growth in many parts of the world of what Jean and John Comaroff call "occult economies," which generally paint a Hobbesian world of all against all, with individualism run rampant and
amoral self-interest the only goal.\textsuperscript{21} There is rarely any institutional structure beyond the locality, and while the themes draw on indigenous traditions, they also reflect a rapid transnational flow in the cultural capital of evil.

These religions are all feral in a sense, but Taiwan's Eighteen Lords are also quite different from the others, including the South African case the Comaroffs document in detail. South Africa has seen an epidemic of witchcraft accusations, sometimes culminating in the murder of the "witch" by the old revolutionary means of necklacing. The accused witches are said to be wealthy, old, and infertile. One common theme is that they murder people and revive their bodies to work as agricultural slaves at night. During the day the zombified bodies are stored in metal oil drums. Other tales tell of the harvest of human body parts, ideally from freshly slaughtered children, to make magic potions for personal gain. The epidemic of witchcraft accusations, and the very real violence that results from it, has been serious enough to spawn government commissions of enquiry. In great contrast to this grim portrait, Taiwan's version of fee-for-service religion is essentially playful, not evil. The difference reflects the very different experiences of capitalism so far, and particularly the great success of Taiwan's particular form of networked mom and pop entrepreneurs. Rampant self-interest does not seem quite so evil when most people have clearly thrived on it. Indeed, the Taiwanese Eighteen Lords are as much a celebration of capitalist greed as a damnation of it.

Community god temples in Taiwan are the closest thing to a simple revival of what was already there. Even they, however, are caught up in the new systems. They are part of the rapid cross-strait expansion of personal networks as economic investment opportunities have grown over the last decade. Partly for this reason, they have also become crucial to the new local and international politics of identity. This shows up in arguments over relative "authenticity" of ritual and iconography, or between independence and reunification.

versions of a goddess. More locally it appears when political candidates behead a cock in front of the community god to prove the seriousness of their promises, or when temples help organize local environmental demonstrations. Temples and local political power have long had an intimate relationship, but democratization has helped change its nature. At still larger scales the pietistic sects claim a relation to market success that is new in their history, and the Buddhist moralizing of Compassionate Relief is part of a transformation in women's broadest social position.

All of these changes tie to the complex and weakly institutionalized religious history of Taiwan, and to the specific ways Taiwan has adapted to its unusual economics and politics. In part Taiwan is the result of the growth of its networked capitalism during its decades along the global cheap labor frontier that has now moved farther west into China and southeast Asia. In part, it is also the creation of its anomalous political world. Identity in Taiwan is in so much flux as much because it has no place in a world of nation-states as because of its market experience. Were it not for the political loosening after martial law was finally lifted, for the consequent explosion of worry about what it means to be a Taiwanese, and for the international (or intranational--that confusion itself is the problem) conundrums it has created, religious culture in Taiwan would look rather different than it does. Taiwan's wide range of indigenous alternatives reflects its fragmented identities as a postmodern economy in a non-nation non-state, less certain of its religious certainties than other places and other times. Its rich religious cultures evolved around the tensions of modernity in its particular historical context, but their specific forms require us to look to the forms of life that characterize the edges of the economic and political worlds, formed by the convergence of their history and a new world system.
Bibliography


