Religion and New Taiwanese Identities: Some First Thoughts

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The reanimation of a uniquely Taiwanese public culture in the 1980s was relatively unheralded next to the dynamic economic growth and stunning political changes of that decade. Taiwanese languages were spoken in places never before possible—academic talks, far more media broadcasts, even schools. Tea houses had revived from dilapidated hangouts for antiquated conservatives to vibrant social centers. Beer halls in a uniquely Taiwanese style filled the same function at night, as did a wide range of restaurants featuring traditional foods (like rice with sweet potatoes) that had been considered too vulgar and dull for eating out a decade earlier. All of this accompanied a new assertion of Taiwanese identity that finally became possible with the lifting of martial law in 1987. It was also part of a rising nostalgia for an imagined traditional, rural simplicity that typically accompanies rapid urbanization and market expansion. Antique collecting, which was a rage in the late 1980s but interesting only to foreigners a decade earlier, is an obvious example.

The struggle to elucidate a specifically Taiwanese identity has become far stronger and more explicit through the 1990s. An e-mail discussion group on Taiwan that I follow, for example, recently had a long message claiming a specific genetic inheritance for the “Taiwanese” population that distinguished them from mainlanders. The great majority of the ancestors of current native Taiwanese, it claimed, had come over as single men and intermarried with aborigine women. Eighty percent or more of the non-mainlander population was thus claimed to be part aboriginal by blood. This argument for the uniqueness of Taiwanese identity was new to me, and aroused some curiosity but no real opposition in the discussion group.

I find such a claim disturbing. This is not because the argument is necessarily false—it must have at least an element of truth, and I am no judge of its overall validity. I was disturbed instead because this kind of claim for identity resonated so closely with some of the most virulent cases of identity formation in the twentieth century. Highlighting a separate genetic ancestry asserts both a biological separateness from mainlanders and all other Chinese, and a closer historical link to the land by extending Taiwanese history there from a few centuries to millennia. It also dissolves the real history of bloody and brutal conflicts between aborigines and those early settlers from the mainland, which lasted until the Japanese came in 1895.

This argument about the genetics of Taiwan is not very significant by itself; it made a brief media splash in Taiwan and died down again. Its significance is

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1This paper was first presented at the Workshop on Cultural China and Taiwanese Consciousness, sponsored by the Hsin Yi Foundation and the Harvard-Yenching Institute, Cambridge, MA, 1997. I am grateful to the participants for their comments.
the ability of such an argument to remind us of the unpleasant possibilities that can result when complex and multiple identities are molded into a single identity for all. It echoes, in a milder way, the rhetoric of blood and soil (blut und boden) that helped create a German identity and ultimately the Nazi movement, an Afrikaner identity and the apartheid movement, and other modern disasters. If we add culture to the mix, particularly in the form of religion, we have a recipe for the construction of the monolithic identities that have so shaken this century. Every identity must be constructed against another and by denying internal differences. Where identities become monolithic—where one group draws a clear and allegedly permanent boundary between itself and others, erasing other possible internal and external boundaries—the other is all too sharply drawn and the potential for conflict is high. Cross-cutting and multiple identities, on the other hand, have less potential to grow violent. Is Taiwan’s current fascination with identity leading to multiplicity or monolith?

The push for a Taiwanese identity today has many sources. It is in part a reaction to posturing from the People’s Republic, and an attempt to justify an existence politically separate from them. It is also a reaction to many decades of heavy-handed cultural control by the KMT, one goal of which was precisely to weaken any sense of Taiwanese identity in favor of a more generic Chinese one. Repression of language was only the most obvious symbol of this. The new search for identity is thus both understandable and important, and it need not necessarily imply a dangerous monolith. Taiwan in practice is a place of complex and overlapping identities. Historically, for example, it is aborigine (itself a shorthand term for a complex range of identities), Dutch, southern Min (including finer distinctions in place of origin), Hakka, Japanese, and mainland (another shorthand).

I had a field assistant in 1978 whose identity was unusual, but in a way that illustrates the multiplicity of many Taiwanese identities. As far as I knew, she was a fairly typical Taiwanese, living in a very Taiwanese neighborhood of Taipei, speaking southern Min as her native language, with a father who repaired shoes, a typically Taiwanese petty trade. One day, however, I saw her identity card, which at the time listed province of origin. I asked her why it said Fujian instead of Taiwan. She replied it was because all Taiwanese came from Fujian. Now that is mostly true historically, but is not a point the identity cards cared about. I pressed her further until she grudgingly admitted that her father was in fact a mainlander from southern Fujian who had been visiting relatives in Taiwan and was caught by the end of the civil war. Technically speaking, she was a mainland “passing” as a Taiwanese.

Some months later, I made a further discovery about her, and so did she. We had been interviewing Buddhist clergy, who kept telling her to be sure that her family never offered beef on their home altar. This is not a very taxing stricture because most Taiwanese offer pork and poultry. She dutifully went home, checked with her mother, and learned to her dismay that the offering on her ancestral altar at that moment was beef. “We never told you this,” her mother said, “but you’re a Muslim. Your ancestors cannot get pork offerings.” There were lots of identities here, but they did not form any kind of monolith.
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Her situation may not be common in Taiwan, but it does show a typically Taiwanese cross-cutting of boundaries.

In this brief essay I will look more closely at religion as a potential source of a Taiwanese identity. Religious practice has always tied closely to changing identity in Taiwan, and it should be no surprise that religion forms an important part of current arguments. Religion will inevitably be part of the new identities that are coming to life. On the other hand, it offers little support for a single and uncontested unity as Taiwanese, in large part because it has so few institutional mechanisms for controlling interpretation, and is thus always open to competing uses.

Religion could potentially support at least three kinds of identity: as Chinese, as part of a southeastern Hokkien and Hakka culture area, or as uniquely Taiwanese. All three cases are made by various people in Taiwan, although the main line of division is between the Chinese nationality reading and the local Taiwanese reading. In fact, of course, these three interpretations are not mutually exclusive, although their political implications may be—it is easy (if not always realistic) to imagine Taiwan as a part of China again, or as an independent nation, but the road between is difficult to travel, as the current government will attest.

At one level, Taiwanese popular religious practice is clearly Chinese. Ancestor worship, for example, is widely shared, and probably varies less across the Taiwan strait than within the mainland. Many of the same gods are important to Chinese throughout the world—Kuan Kong, Kwan Im and others play similar roles everywhere. Structurally, the association of gods with local communities in a nested hierarchy of Kitchen Gods at home, Earth Gods in the village, and community gods beyond is also ubiquitous. So is the idea of ghosts as the uncircumcised dead, marginal to social categories of kin and community.

The case for a specifically southeastern religion, or ethnically Hokkien or Hakka religious traditions, rests primarily on local gods shared across the Taiwan Strait, and on the genetic relationships between temples. Most community temples in Taiwan can trace the incense in their pots back to mother temples in Fujian. They either brought incense directly from these temples, or took it from Taiwanese temples with direct ties to the mainland. This transfer of incense brings spiritual efficacy to the daughter temple, and also establishes a hierarchy of incense-giver over incense-taker. On the other hand, similar regional networks tie temples together all across China. The case for a regional religious tradition may grow as economic and social links are reestablished, but it does not carry much weight so far.

The argument for Taiwanese uniqueness has been much more important in Taiwan, and does have an empirical basis. Many of the regionally based gods have evolved independently on Taiwan to an extent, so that people can point to differences between images now carved on Taiwan and in Fujian. More importantly, the inherent flexibility and interpretability of ritual have allowed uniquely Taiwanese creations to develop.

One example of this kind of thing is the evolution of the annual festival for hungry ghosts (puda) in Taiwan. This festival took place across China in the seventh lunar month, but underwent unique developments in Taiwan. In the late nineteenth century its most infamous feature was a violent near-riot at the end
of the ceremony, where young toughs would clamber over each other to steal the offerings to the ghosts. I have argued elsewhere that the rioters themselves took on the role of ghosts—they were socially marginal people acting just like starving ghosts desperate for their offerings. By the late nineteenth century parts of Taiwan had recreated a level of frontier violence that had not been common for a century. This was largely the result of the new camphor trade, which brought single young Chinese men deep into Taiwan's mountains for the first time. The new trade caused several kinds of social disruption: it fostered renewed battles with aborigines whose safe mountain strongholds were now being threatened; it created large numbers of unattached young men; and it encouraged them to organize a black market trade in defiance of the government monopoly on camphor. These young men appear to have been the heart of the violent form of the Universal Salvation.

The riotous scenes disappeared sometime in the 1920s. By the time I first saw the ceremony in the 1970s there was no hint of violence. Concentration had moved from theft of the food offerings to the point of the ceremony when the priests toss out grains of rice and coins for the ghosts. These are caught by the human audience in front of the priests, and also bring good fortune. The spectators jostled and elbowed to get the thrown offerings, in a way vaguely reminiscent of the riots of much earlier. Yet the participants were no longer rootless young men; it was now primarily the old reproducing ghostly behavior in front of the altar. This was not a fundamental rethinking of the nature of ghosts. The riots had died out largely because that particular kind of marginal person was gone—the Japanese had discouraged Taiwanese camphor production, and chemical substitutes had undermined the world market for natural camphor by the early twentieth century. By the 1970s, however, the old had become a new kind of marginal person, often feeling abandoned by a younger generation over which they had lost earlier kinds of parental authority to arrange marriage or to control major economic resources like farm land.

By the 1990s two further uses of the ceremony had turned up. First, there has been a nostalgic revival of the earlier form where offerings are placed on raised altars and people compete to grab them (but without the riot at the end). The eastern city of Ilan has led the way in this, encouraged by the local government which wants to play up its preservation of tradition in the hope of building a reputation among tourists. The effectiveness of such a strategy again shows a facet of modernity in the search to rediscover the pleasures of an idealized and romanticized past. The second modern elaboration of the ceremony has been more strictly political. The Taipei County government, which

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[3] This is based on interviews with the Ilan County Executive, Yu Hsi-k'un, and the former County Executive, Ch'en Ting-nan, in August 1993.
has been under the control of the political opposition, has twice sponsored its own Universal Salvation. In part this is a DPP appeal to specifically Taiwanese tradition and identity. It implies a critique of the national KMT government, which had discouraged such large and expensive religious festivals until democratization made such policies unpopular. In part it also offered a chance to appeal to quite modern causes. It included, for example, a ceremony for the salvation of the "dead" Tamsui River—both appealing to the environmental movement and criticizing the industrial policies of the national government. It remains to be seen, however, whether such purely political uses of the festival will achieve any long-lasting significance.

These uniquely Taiwanese versions of ghost worship share some basic meanings with ghost worship across China, but they have also developed a particularly Taiwanese constellation of evocations. The idea of ghosts is broadly shared with Chinese religion anywhere, but the specifics of this evolution are unique.

A second, but very different kind of example of a uniquely Taiwanese development is the Buddhist Compassion Merit Society (Ciji Gongdehui). This group has grown into Taiwan's largest civic organization, giving away tens of millions of dollars in charity each year, with branches across the world. Buddhist ritual and Buddhist philosophy play only a minor role in this group. Followers are not expected to recite sutras at length, or to repeat the name of a Bodhisattva over and over. Nor is there much explication of Buddhist thought. Instead the emphasis is consistently on action in the world—the Bodhisattva ideal made concrete. Followers are expected to cut down on personal consumption, to be frugal in the broader world (for instance by promoting recycling), as well as to help the poor through contributions and work.

The Compassion Merit Society stands out in addition for its strongly female membership. Perhaps 70-80% of the members in Taiwan are women, although no formal rules of membership hint at any bias against men. To an extent, men feel the brunt of the group's discipline more than women; there is a prohibition on alcohol that appeals greatly to wives unhappy with their husbands' drinking, but that takes away an important business tool from men. More important, however, are surely the special opportunities the group offers to the relatively wealthy housewives who make up the core membership. These are women who do not need to work for a living (and prefer not to), and who can hire people to deal with household chores. This is a new circumstance for the great majority of these women—it is the direct product of Taiwan's economic success. Yet for many it also comes with a feeling of alienation, that their lives have no point.

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Here the bodhisattva ideal is read broadly as a dedication to social service, with a special appeal to women and nurture. In some ways, the Compassion Merit Society is another in the long line of popularizing Buddhist revivals in Chinese societies. Yet its secular concerns with charity and particular appeal to women also recall similar movements in the modernizing West, like the Women’s Christian Temperance Union or various women’s Christian charities that thrived in the nineteenth century among similar classes of women. Its emphasis on non-market economics through charity, on avoiding the market pressures for consumption, and on recreating moral values mark the movement off as a reaction to Taiwanese modernity as much as it is a continuation of Chinese Buddhism.

Unique regional variations like the Taiwan’s versions of the ghost festival or the Compassion Merit Society necessarily typify religious practice in a place like China, where there were no powerful institutions that could impose a unified interpretation. Taiwan is thus unique, but so is Sichuan or Shanxi. Two opposed processes have affected how different Taiwan is. On the one hand, extensive Chinese settlement began only three centuries ago there. Many areas of the mainland have had millennia to develop local traditions. This would lead us to expect relatively little difference between Taiwan and Fujian, and relatively more between Fujian and other parts of China. This effect is obviously true for language. On the other hand, Taiwan has been effectively separate from the mainland for almost all of the past century, and this has been a century of extraordinarily rapid change on both sides of the Strait. This has helped encourage more rapid religious transformation. The lack of major structural change in the religion should not disguise how much day-to-day interpretations have evolved over the past century in Taiwan, and thus how much they must differ from the mainland.

The situation has become significantly more complex in the last few years as lines of communication between Fujian and Taiwan have again opened up. One early result of this is that community temples send delegations back to mother temples on the mainland to renew their spiritual authority by taking incense ash. This process itself is open to multiple readings. Superficially it recreates the authority of home temples on the mainland over their Taiwanese descendants, putting the heart of authenticity on the mainland and leaving Taiwan as the dependent. One could easily see this is an affirmation of official government policy favoring a reunification of the Chinese people, or possibly as a step toward some kind of Southern Min ethnic unity.

Yet such a reading is too facile. Few members of these delegations would admit to having such intentions. Their actions have more important implications within Taiwan itself: these trips establish direct ties to the home temple, and can thus constitute a declaration of independence from intermediate mother temples on Taiwan itself. Thus several Taiwanese temples to the An-ch’i County god Co Su Kong have long claimed to be the original offshoot of the home temple on the mainland, from which the others grew as secondary or tertiary developments. One trip back, however, makes these arguments moot, as each returning temple can now claim direct ties to the original fount of spiritual authority. This attempt at upward mobility within the Taiwanese hierarchy has been seen most clearly in Taiwan’s most famous Ma Co temples. The temple
in Tachia returned to the home temple on the mainland very early, after which it claimed to be the equal of the temple in Peikang, arguably Taiwan's most famous single temple. It stopped participating in the annual pilgrimage to Peigang because it would no longer admit to an inferior status.⁵

The situation often becomes more complex still as a result of these trips. Taiwanese sometimes see temples whose neglect and abuse since 1949, and especially during the Cultural Revolution, leaves them in terrible condition. Some complain about the poor quality of the restorations compared to Taiwanese temples, or about how truly fine god images are now carved only in Taiwan. Such complaints begin to move the center of authenticity from the mainland back to Taiwan. After all, some people argue, Taiwanese temples never broke the stream of incense the way mainland temples did. This argument also evokes broader sentiments that Taiwan is now somehow more genuinely Chinese than China after decades of Communist rule. Such feelings that the power relations have been reversed are strengthened when Taiwanese donate huge amounts of money to rebuild mainland temples, as well as when they make business investments.

These return trips thus make a complex case: power and authenticity appear in the mainland temples through the very act of going on pilgrimages there, but also shift back to Taiwan as pilgrims become the main investors in those temples and their communities, and as they experience a loss of tradition on the mainland. The political message is just as messy. Popular religion generally has been the realm of Taiwanese, not mainlanders, and using religion as the cutting edge of contact across the Strait is ironic for both governments. Yet while the celebration of these very localist deities strengthens specifically Taiwanese traditions within Taiwan, it also promotes a kind of de facto reunification in this realm.⁶

The ironies, ambiguities and contradictions in religious flows between Taiwan and the mainland, and within Taiwan itself, result in part from the fluid possibilities of Taiwanese religious practice itself. The monastic traditions were weak compared to many places on the mainland, leading to a clergy less able to try to impose orthodoxies from the center. The frontier conditions that dominated for so long also encouraged indigenous development and a lack of standardization. The long political separation from the mainland and the as-

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⁶For a very sensitive discussion of the implications of religious transactions between Taiwan and Fujian, see 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).
tonishing speed of social change in the last few decades have further discouraged any unification of identity around religion. Chinese popular religion in general has little effective institutional authority over interpretation, and the history of Taiwan has contrived to limit such control even more. If a monolithic Taiwanese identity is ultimately created, religion is unlikely to be one of its core pillars without undergoing drastic changes. On the other hand, religion’s close ties to Taiwan’s multiple identities are as strong as ever.

The international political realities facing Taiwan mean that it is not likely to be a traditional nation-state, or to be a fully integrated part of one, in the near future. While this state of diplomatic limbo is enormously awkward in many ways, it does remove one of the important structural factors that can encourage virulently monolithic identities—the most problematic single identities in the twentieth century have often been tied to nationalistic political projects. More than most parts of the world, then, Taiwan has the possibility of encouraging the multiplicity of identities, for which its religion is a natural resource.