

## Religious Service Development of Folk Religion Temples in Taiwan: A Comprehensive Perspective\*

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Kuo-Yan Wang  
School of Management, Xiamen University Tan Kah Kee  
College  
philipwang1688@gmail.com

### ABSTRACT

Buying a sense of happiness from divine power for the future is the reflection of cultural relativism and universal values, whether the religious belief and person perception. Folk religion temples in Taiwan, undergoing economic anxiety and social status chaos in the past two decades, have illustrated the phenomenon of commercialization, and this phenomenon is forming a service system with many tentacles due to the highly homogeneous of religious services. This article, therefore, is clearly distinguished the increasing sources of donation/profit at current folk temples in Taiwan, and further discussed the influence of folk belief adherents. The conclusion involves future research directions, which can be enriched for the issue of Chinese folk belief religious services development.

Keywords: Folk belief, religious service, temple, secularism.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Zaidman (2003) observed that the New Age sect, in contrast with traditional Christianity, has opened at least 25 shops in Israel. Recently, Zaidman delved deeply into whether “New Age shops” harm spirituality, and concluded that such shops are making an effort to construct a “creation of a sacred place” in the commodity context (2007). Vokurka and McDaniel (2004) also categorized three common types of church marketing strategy: traditional, program-oriented, and worship-oriented, based on the responses of 247 Southern Baptist churches. Ivakhiv (2003) focused on “self-spirituality” in the phenomenon of “New Age pilgrimage” and found that New Age pilgrims usually have their own individual interests or objective knowledge, rather than traditional Christian pilgrims who sincerely embrace the stories or myths associated with sacred places. Scholarly, the current articles have discussed the issue ‘religious service’ in western religions, however, eastern religious, particularly in Chinese folklore belief organizations provides various spiritual services, however, the existing study seldom address this field.

To fill the gap of previous study, this exploratory research presents the current development in folklore belief, as surveyed among temples in Taiwan. In Taiwan, Religious pluralism is reflected in various culture values and spiritual denominations, such as Buddhism, Catholicism, Islamism, Protestantism, and Taoism. This research

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\* This paper is partly based on the PhD dissertation of the author.

believes that the inherent traits of folklore belief marketing as exhibited in business patterns within local culture are worthy of study and should be promoted in the future.

## 2. RELIGIOUS SERVICES IN TAIWAN

Folklore belief in Chinese society and religious culture has diachronically developed over several thousand years, with a mixture of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism (Chang et al., 2012). Culturally and philosophically identical religions in Taiwan are syncretized and pantheistic (Chang, 2009). Taiwanese folklore beliefs are heavily influenced by the Mainland Chinese provinces of Fujian and Guangdong, as exemplified by the ancestral homes built during the immigration wave of the 17th through the 19th centuries. As the immigrant population adjusted to a new living environment and faced uncertain future, communal rituals and folklore beliefs grew from the immigrants' original religions and became widespread on the island. These events have shaped the belief system of contemporary Taiwanese people.

Regarding the revenue sources of folklore belief temples in Taiwan, in addition to ordinary donations, increased temple exhibits three patterns: ritual for averting disaster or misfortune; carnival celebration; and prayer for blessing.

First, averting disaster or misfortune can be divided into three religious services: lighting a secure lamp; pacifying Tai Sui Xing Jun; and worshipping the Big Dipper as describe as following terms.

**Lighting secure lamp.** The custom of lighting a secure lamp originated from using traditional butter lamps in Buddhist culture. Followers come for peace of mind and request brightness throughout the entire New Year by lighting a secure lamp in the temple. Generally, Taiwanese folklore belief followers participate in secure lamp lighting before the arrival of the next Chinese New Year. Lungshan Temple in the Wanhua District of Taipei City is possibly the most famous example of this lamp lighting phenomenon. The temple's followers have lined up for several nights and await registered numbers for renting a luck and fortune lamp stand of the next year (Taipei Times, 2007). Undoubtedly, lamp lighting is a vital source of temple revenue.

**Pacifying Tai Sui (太歲).** Taoist mores recognize the deity Tai Sui Xing Jun (太歲星君) is taking turns in duty of based on six decades, who oversees all affairs on the earth in his responsibility year. Pacifying Tai Sui Xing Jun is, for the most part, accompanied by secure lamp lighting in the temple's religious services.

**Worshipping the Big Dipper (Baidou; 拜斗).** According to Hsieh (2011) and Mollier (2008), the Big Dipper (Beidou; 北斗) is humanity's fate supervisor. DeBernardi (2008) observed that a Taoist orthodox believer prays to the Big Dipper to prevent clouds on the horizon and keeps her/his fingers crossed. Most of the worshipping the Big Dipper ceremony is held in February and September of every lunar year.

Second, carnival celebrations in Taiwanese folklore belief have recently and gradually become local cultural characteristics because of historical development and government financial subsidizes. Interestingly, mass media industry development since 2000s makes the temples with full of incense becomes a channel of promotion fueled by political figure and performance personals, and these temple celebrations have also attracted the eyes of ordinary followers and tourists. Three mass activities are composed according to: the deity's birthday or succession date of Taoist/Buddhist spiritual practices; deity's procession; and adding creative elements to deity-themed merchandize. The following is a brief description of the folklore belief carnival celebrations.

**Deity's birthday or succession date of Taoist/Buddhist spiritual practices.** Temple celebrations of the dedicated deity's birthday or succession date of Taoist/Buddhist practices always fascinates numerous followers visit and pray. For instance, Wen Chang Di Jun's birthday is February 3rd, and Fu You Di Jun's succession date of religious practices is May 18th of every lunar year. The important dates of both deities' celebration are mainly organized by devout Taoist/Buddhist chanting religious doctrines or tribute gifts such as floral bouquets, fruit, and incense.

**Deity's procession.** Similar to the mass participation ceremony on the deity's important day, on a particular date, the deity makes a procession to affiliated temples several hundred kilometers away, accompanied by a mass of volunteer followers seeking blessing. The most famous example of this practice is for Mazu, dedicated by the Jenn Lann Temple in Dajia, Taichung City. A grand procession to the affiliated Mazu temple, Feng Tian Temple in Singang, Chiayi County, occurs each March of the lunar year with numerous devout believers involved.

**Adding creative elements to deity-themed merchandize.** Deity-themed souvenirs abundant in emerging trends, innovation, and religious culture are welcomed at temples by the majority of followers and tourists. Taipei Confucius Temple, for example, developed many types of souvenirs such as lazurite Confucius scriptures Universal Serial Bus (USB) flash drives Scarf with calligraphic analectic scarves; and antique style ceramic wine vessels. In addition, mobile phone straps and key rings are commonly found among deity-themed merchandise.

Analogously, temple religious functions are the same as those of churches, mosques, and synagogues, performing the function of soothing minds. Temples provide an environment where people come to return to an initial state, pray for the deity's blessings for health, family, fortune, love, or anything else, and make a wish. To satisfy the needs of followers, aside from ordinary praying patterns, numerous celebrated temples offer services for followers seeking good luck in obtaining wealth. Such practices entail lending lucky money and accepting general donations.

**Lending lucky money.** Zihnanong (紫南宮), a dedicated Land deity temple located in Jhushan, Nantou County in central Taiwan, has experienced a boom from a luck money lending service funded by ordinary donations and temple property income since the 1960s. This lending service involves followers borrowing money for emergencies or for venture capital of a small business operation. In recent decades,

borrowing lucky money (up to 600 NTD), especially for businessmen, has entailed seeking the Land Deity's blessing for wealth. The rapid growth of Zihnangong's operation capital is due to the joyous followers (of course, as the lucky money borrowers) returning money with interest. Many temples, in recent years, have begun to imitate this "service model" for the benefit of its believers.

**General donations.** For prayers in temple, three items are essential in Taoist rituals: incense, joss paper, and a pair of red candles. Temples usually prepare these prayer items for followers after receiving donations at several times higher than purchase price.

### 3. RELIGIOUS MARKETING IN TAIWAN

To distinguish precisely the specific characteristics of folklore belief religious-based organization and activity from other types of not-for-profit patterns, this study believes that marketing must be examined in isolation to describe effectively the main theme of this research. The research herein expresses four typologies of religious organizations endeavoring to promote their identity and activity.

**Publicity and promotion.** Many large religious missions in Taiwan have TV channels for promotional and missionary work, or, purchase TV and radio hours for media missionary program production. For example, both DaAi TV, sponsored by the Buddhist Tzu Chi Culture and Communication Foundation, and Good TV, funded by Christian missionaries, have been broadcasting since 1998 in Taiwan. In addition, online promotion is gradually becoming a popular channel accompanying the rise of the Internet.

**Establishing an online community.** Societal networking service websites are thus far welcomed by the e-Generation [people born after the 1990s who are particularly skilled in information technology (IT)]. According to the definition of Turkle (2005), the spread of IT leads to the young generation paying more attention to the development of politics, social tolerance, public expression, and environmental protection. Several social networking websites (e.g., facebook, Google+, Google Buzz, Kiwibox, Quechup, Renren, and Sina) have fiercely competed to enlarge their registered users in recent years. Hence, religious organization cannot ignore the approaching new wave of potential followers. Moreover, the front page of the temple in the facebook as Figure 3.3 reveals. In addition to ordinary opinion exchange and obtaining information from the temple, their's page on facebook, interestingly, has provided online cleromancy (also known "the drawing of lots") service for its followers seeking fortune or solutions for troubling circumstances. For thousands of years, Taoist culture has believed that each lot guides the future guide, based on the deity's will. Conventional Taoism deems that the sortition should be carried out in front of the deity inside the temple, instead of outside, for fear that the obtained results may be due to other non-deity spirits. However, the temple-sponsored facebook page offering online cleromancy has a sense of following contemporary trends and meeting the needs of the e-Generation. Accordingly, it has also the opportunity to increase their believer base.

**Ritual narrative.** Services provided by temples must explain the orthodox rituals they promote to ensure the comprehensibility of followers. In addition to worship ritual registration notification, the second paragraph of the announcement describes the history and significance of worshipping the Big Dipper in Taoist thought. Undeniably, such an effort can simultaneously raise follower attendance and increase the probability of expanding the temple's financial resources.

**Placement marketing.** Numerous folklore belief ritual worship books are available in bookstores. Each book provides an incense choice guide to the major dedicated deity's functionality. The content of each book rarely if ever indicates the "best" temple to be the reader's first praying choice. Yet the term "suggested" temples have often drawn the reader's attention. Therefore, because believers have the intention to follow every step of the worship ritual the book teaches, they usually attend the temples the book has "suggested". Notably, the authors of these books are mostly the respective temple's fulltime or part-time staff, even though they have only a brief introduction in the book. Consequently, the temple where the author of a particular book works would be a popular choice for the readers seeking religious advice.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

More than 2,300 land properties in Taiwan are registered in the name of deities, most belonging to Mazu and the Land Deity (Loa, 2011). The disposition of these properties is an inevitable affair for the temple as a legal personality e.g. deity-owned land and house for rental, sale or cooperation to real estate developers. Furthermore, Taiwan has deregulated Mainland Chinese tour group visitors in July 2008, attracting tourists from the economically strong cities of Beijing, Shanghai, and Xiamen in July 2011. In contrast with Mainland China, Taiwan more comprehensively retains the Chinese culture-based folklore belief and religious attractions, and several decades of separation between the two shores evokes much imagination and curiosity from the Mainland traveler. Indeed, the challenge of answering the question "Where does our customer come from?" is a vital task for temple management who seek to avoid resting on their laurels.

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