

Paying homage to the 'Heavenly Mother': cultural-geopolitics of the Mazu pilgrimage and its implications on rapprochement between China and Taiwan

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Abstract

Much has been researched on tourism across (former) borders of conflict and on pilgrimage as a socio-cultural activity, but the relationship between the two remains poorly understood. Pilgrimage-tours carried out by Taiwanese devotees to the birthplace of Mazu (or Tianshang Shengmu – the Heavenly Mother) in Putian, China offer a significant platform to further our understanding of how religion can play a part in the rapprochement between China and Taiwan. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this paper goes beyond the conventional state-level analysis to discuss interactions and encounters forged at the levels of the temple organisations and the individual. It utilises Victor Turner's concept of 'communitas' to understand how spiritual spaces are being *performed through* the pilgrimage rather than already existing *before* the pilgrimage. Importantly, the Mazu pilgrimage-tour is conceptualised not as a tourism product, but as both a social activity and a socialising one, producing opportunities for different forms of interactions between the Chinese and Taiwanese devotees. These 'interactions along the side' as opposed to state-level diplomatic exchanges offer insights into the 'more-than-state' and 'more-than-human' relationships that bind/divide devotees on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

Keywords: Mazu pilgrimage; rapprochement; communitas; cultural-geopolitics; China; Taiwan

1. Introduction: Paying homage to the 'Heavenly Mother'

The ambiguous political status of Taiwan and its equivocal relationship with China has sustained scholarly inquiries since 1949. However, research on China-Taiwan relations has often focused on macro-political or state-level analyses (see, for example, Baldacchino and Tsai 2014 for a similar critique) In this paper, I seek to go beyond the 'state' in my analysis of rapprochement between China and Taiwan. Rapprochement is a process experienced at the personal level in the everyday geo-politics of cross-strait relations. Rather than state-level politics, I focus on micro-episodes of people-to-people interactions and performance of identities in pilgrimage spaces. Yet, such personal practices of identity negotiation are never totally detached from macro-political events, and the often assumed 'distant considerations of statecraft and international diplomacy' (Newman, 2011: 37) are very much part of the everyday. More specifically, and in contributing to the expanding debates about the role of non-state actors in political geography, I argue that religion plays a part in the rapprochement between China and Taiwan, and that such relations may be analysed not only at the level of the state, but also the temple organisations and the individual.

The cultural proximity of people from Fujian province in China and those in Taiwan (due to diasporic linkages) means that religion is a common social denominator for most. Their common belief in the cult of Mazu or Tianshang Shengmu (the Heavenly Mother) is a case in point. After the establishment of informal contacts¹ in 1987, pilgrims travelling from Taiwan to China to discover their religious roots became the 'largest and most visible groups of travellers' (Katz, 2003: 407). On 2 October 2002, a 426-member delegation made up of devotees from ten Mazu temples in Taiwan became the largest pilgrimage group to visit

¹ People from Taiwan allowed by its government to visit China included war veterans, businessmen and industrialists, and religious pilgrims (Katz and Rubinstein, 2003: 2).

China (*ibid.*). In fact, the role of religion in China's foreign policy has increasingly become a topic of scholarly interest. Recent works have explored Catholicism in Sino-Vatican relations (Leung, 2005), Buddhism in China-Singapore (Chia, 2008) and China-India diplomacy (Scott, 2016), and Islam in Sino-Arab connections (Ho, 2013). The Chinese government has indeed utilised religion as a strategy to enhance non-state or low-level state interactions. More specifically, although research interests on Mazu pilgrimages are not new (e.g. Boltz, 1986; Sangren, 1987; Katz, 2003), those that focus on more contemporary cross-strait ones are on the rise (e.g. Yang, 2004; Stewart and Strathern, 2009; Hatfield, 2010; Lin, 2014).² These studies are generally dominated by anthropologists and although they are important contributions in their own right, pilgrimage is usually treated as a tool or means by which certain societal ideals are achieved. For example, Lin (2014) looks at how Mazu pilgrimage was being utilised by devotees on Taiwan's Mazu Island as a social imaginary to reconfigure their economic and social conditions. She argues that recent large-scale pilgrimages performed by the islanders were aimed to realign them 'into the southeast neoliberal zone of China', and to pave 'a way for them to speculate on the possibility of becoming a mediator between China and Taiwan' (*ibid.* p.134). In other words, there is an emphasis on what pilgrims do with the pilgrimage, rather than an exploration into what the pilgrimage *does*. Furthermore, as Holloway (2006: 182) argues, the geography of religion has hitherto focused mainly on the 'construction and effects of religious-spiritual space' rather than on the production of such spaces (although see Kong, 1992; Martin and Kryst, 1998; Game, 2001). In other words, it is very often assumed that spiritual spaces were there *before* the pilgrimage rather than being *performed through* the pilgrimage. Therefore, I seek to adopt a perspective that understands pilgrimage as an embodied experience and a performance

² It is not my intention to provide a comprehensive review of the literature on (Mazu) pilgrimage in the study of Chinese religion. See (Lin, 2014) for a brief but insightful overview.

(Holloway, 2006; Laliberté, 2011) of a plurality of identities, and to examine pilgrims' behaviour and subjectivities as revealed through personal stories. I am also interested in how people's participation in such a shared religious event influences their perceptions of cross-strait relations and their counterparts across the Strait.

For most Mazu devotees, a pilgrimage is often also a leisure activity in itself. A trip to the ancestral temple is never complete without stopovers at scenic and shopping spots. It is no wonder that studies on the Mazu cult and tourism between China and Taiwan tend to treat such religious pilgrimage as a tourist product, focusing their analyses mainly on economic aspects of supply and demand (see for example, Guo et al., 2006). By situating the Mazu pilgrimage in the cultural-geopolitical³ context of rapprochement tourism, the pilgrimage-tour is conceptualised not as a tourism product, but as religious life that produces platforms for interaction and possesses the power to move people (Olaveson, 2001). As a form of rapprochement tourism, the pilgrimage-tour is both a social activity and a socialising one. Hence, the Mazu cult is seen as a potential force in creating alternative forms of communities between the Chinese and the Taiwanese devotees.

The rest of the paper is divided into six sections. The following section reviews the existing literature pertaining to tourism across (former) borders of conflict especially in its rapprochement orientation. This is followed by a discussion of methods employed, and a brief background on how the Mazu cult started, and why the various Mazu centres in Taiwan organise pilgrimages to the ancestral temple on Meizhou Island (China). The cultural-geopolitics of the Mazu pilgrimage will then be interrogated in the ensuing two

³ The Mazu pilgrimage is as much a cultural/religious activity as it is a geopolitical one. It plays a unique role in cross-strait relations. As such, I am very much interested to analyse the cultural-geopolitics of this phenomenon.

sessions, before the paper concludes with some closing thoughts on its contribution to existing debates and potential for future studies.

2. Tourism across (former) borders of conflict

Tourism's potential role as a vehicle for peace has been explored by many (see D'Amore, 1988; Jafari, 1989; Richter, 1994). In terms of re-establishing ties between partitioned states, studies have demonstrated that rapprochement tourism could well be the forerunner for peace making. For instance, in the Asian context, Butler and Mao (1996) observe that the 'amount and type of travel' between partitioned states can reflect and influence the development of relationships between them. Also, Kim and Crompton (1990) explore the role of tourism in reducing tension and see its potential in unifying North and South Korea, while Zhang (1993) argues that tourism exchanges between China and Taiwan 'help promote mutual understanding, clear up misunderstanding and strengthen unity... and may further be beneficial to peace in the Asian and Pacific region as well as world-wide' (p. 229). In recent years, there has been an emerging interest in research regarding battlefield tourism and its promotion of peace between enemies, both past and present. For example, studies by Timothy et al. (2004), Guo et al. (2006) and Cho (2007) explore the possibilities of reconciliation between belligerents like China and Taiwan, and North and South Korea.

There are, however, sceptics about tourism's role as a peace mediator. Empirical studies on visits made by Israeli students to Egypt (Milman et al., 1990), US students to the former Soviet Union (Pizam et al., 1991), and Greek students to Turkey (Anastasopoulous, 1992) all point to tourism's limited capacity in improving the guests' perceptions of the host

communities. Furthermore, Kim and Prideaux (2003) acknowledge that tourism may not necessarily promote people-to-people interaction and could merely serve as a political tool of the government. They argue that 'tourism...is a consequence of a political process, not the genesis of the process' (*ibid.*: 683). This is echoed by Yu (1997) who argues that travel between mainland China and Taiwan is sensitive to the shifting cross-strait relations. In this sense, tourism is seen as a passive outcome of rapprochement rather than an active agent bringing about closer ties between people. In Kim and Prideaux's example of tourism at Mt. Gungang in North Korea, they report that South Korean tourists have practically no contact with the North Koreans as they are completely isolated by fences and armed guards. Therefore, Kim and Prideaux dispute Kim and Crompton's (1990) theorisation that tourism is a good platform to foster people-to-people diplomacy and an eventual reunification of North and South Korea. In fact, the former are sceptical about the usage of tourism revenue by the North Koreans, fearing that 'tourism may be the vehicle for destroying peace' (Kim and Prideaux, 2003: 684) as monetary gains from tourism are used by the North to acquire weapons that threaten South Korea's national security. Indeed, tourism is inherently (geo)political.

Three observations can be made at this juncture. First, studies on post-conflict tourism exchanges tend to adopt a state-centric approach and see tourism as a panacea for peace (or the lack of it), without interrogating the practices of rapprochement that constitute the tourism process. Tourists are reduced to percentages; they become pawns of politicians and are portrayed as passive 'flows' representing 'peaceful relations' rather than active agents participating in the rapprochement process. Moreover, an increase in the number of tourists travelling across the Taiwan Strait does not necessarily equate to an improvement

in relationship or understanding between the Chinese and Taiwanese people (Zhang, 2013). Rather, more critical analyses are needed to understand the nuances of micro-political events and the various practices engaged by tourists and locals as they participate in the rapprochement process. The Mazu pilgrimage offers such an analytical platform.

Second, writings on rapprochement tourism often assume the 'universal tourist' and are more interested in tourist numbers than unravelling the critical geopolitics of tourists' subjectivities. As such, there is a need to qualify what we mean by 'the Chinese/Taiwanese devotees/pilgrims'. They are of course not homogeneous groups of people, but are characterised by rich cultural entanglements in, between and across two political entities. They have relatives, business partners, friends, etc. residing across the border. These various relationships add layers of complexities to the notion of 'the pilgrim'. Instead of a 'peace theory', we need a more 'grounded' approach to pilgrimage/rapprochement tourism that moves beyond the universal pilgrim subject and experience to recognize pilgrim 'subjectivities and performances' (Franklin, 2007). Instead of seeing pilgrim-tourists as numbers in an arithmetic formula of peace, it is more useful to think of them as active participants in the rapprochement process – each possessing her/his own subjectivities as she/he interacts with 'the Other' from across the border. 'Rapprochement' in a way implies the purposive stance taken by both China and Taiwan when it comes to cross-strait tourism. However, I am arguing that the pilgrim-tourists are not passively following states' rhetoric, but are actively engaging with devotees on the other side. So although their travels and interactions took place in a 'rapprochement climate', they were also actively contributing to and re-shaping the rapprochement process. Yet they are not the sole subjects of rapprochement tourism, but form part of a network of people, infrastructure, technology

and things (Franklin, 2007). In this sense, we need to adopt a more critical approach to understand the political geographies of tourism both as involving a complex relationship between macro and micro politics, and as an on-going process in a state of becoming.

Third, the critique on the dominance of economic discourse in tourism studies (Franklin and Crang, 2001; Crang, 2004; Picken, 2006) can also be applied to the current state of research on rapprochement tourism. Researchers tend to focus solely on the economic implications of the normalisation of travel between political units, overlooking the fact that tourism is in itself a socio-cultural phenomenon. For instance, in their synopsis of 'tourism between partitioned states', Butler and Mao (1996) primarily discuss patterns of tourist flows, motivations, accessibility, cost of travel and tourist expenditure. Yet it is necessary not to see tourism as just 'a logical extension of the general principle of industrial capitalism to the realm of leisure' (Crang, 2004: 74), but 'as a modern culture in and of itself.' Of course, this is not to belittle studies on the economics of rapprochement tourism. My intention here is to highlight the importance of not only addressing the 'why' of tourism, but also the 'how'. For example, how are common heritages managed in the midst of rapprochement tourism? How does tourism affect people from both sides? How are tourist destinations not only consumed but also constantly created by tourists? Some notable research on tourism exchanges between former/existing foes that go beyond the realm of economics include Webster and Timothy's (2006) piece on Greek Cypriots' perceptions of crossing the Green Line between the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and the Republic of Cyprus, Lisle's (2007) comparison of cultural institutions' political narratives in the two Cypruses under the current pressure for peaceful reconciliation, and Hazbun's (2009) explorations of 'new geopolitical and geocultural imaginaries' enabled by cross-cultural tourism between Israel

and Jordan. Common themes explored by these studies include 'everyday geopolitics', 'heritage at the personal scale', and 'post-national community imaginaries'.

These novel research directions dovetail well with feminist contributions to critical geopolitics that emphasise the inclusion of the 'everyday' and 'ordinary' (e.g. Enloe, 1990; Smith, 2009; 2012; Pain and Staeheli, 2014). In the case of the Mazu pilgrimage, devotees often find themselves negotiating their political and religious identities when communicating with their counterparts on 'the other side'. Therefore, rapprochement does not only involve state-to-state macro politics, but can also be personal and intimate.

Furthermore, cross-strait tourism is not only for those seeking leisure, but also for people seeking relatives and territorial re-attachments of places they were once forced to leave. In this respect, Webster and Timothy (2006) discuss what they call 'personal heritage tourism' while Hazbun (2009) talks about 'return tourism'. Since the Cyprus border reopened in 2003, thousands of Cypriots from the south have travelled across the 'political divide to experience the lands of their ancestors' (Webster and Timothy, 2006: 177). Similarly, Hazbun observes that of the Jordanians travelling to Israel, 90% were of Palestinian origin and most cross over to meet relatives. According to Butler and Mao (1996), more than two million Chinese crossed over to Taiwan after the Chinese Civil War. Most of them were military personnel who left their families behind. Today, many Taiwanese tourists visit China to re-discover their ancestral and religious roots. China welcomes such 'return tourism' by their Taiwanese 'compatriots' as it fits into the discourse that the two sides are 'one family', and that Taiwan would eventually 'return' to the 'brotherly love' of China. Forays into the notion of 'personal heritage' in the context of the Mazu pilgrimage are refreshing as heritage can now be discussed at not only the scale of the national, but also the personal.

The body becomes the centre of focus as it transcends geopolitical fault lines and engages in the performance and negotiation of one's identity. As such, Mazu pilgrimages participated by Chinese and Taiwanese devotees are seen as potential analytical platforms to develop 'new geopolitical and geocultural imaginaries' that allow for more pluralistic notions of overlapping territorial attachments, and 'alternative relationships between territory and identity...' (Hazbun, 2009: 33-34).

In order to gain a better understanding of post-war relations between China and Taiwan, an analytical space needs to be reserved for common religious practices like the Mazu pilgrimage, as it is occasionally through them that memories of the past are recalled and hatred possibly eliminated. The belief in Mazu binds devotees with different political allegiance and personal agendas together to fit into the overall discourse of rapprochement. Thus, we are moving away from the rationality assumed by the 'peace through tourism' agenda, and coming to terms with the irrationality of rapprochement tourism. Religious activities organised around a popular folk deity like Mazu, and participated by devotees from both sides of the Taiwan Strait are generating many novel case studies for research on the cultural-geopolitics of rapprochement.

3. Methodology

Primary data for this paper was collected via semi-structured in-depth interviews with five mainland Chinese Mazu devotees and five Taiwanese pilgrims either during or after a Mazu pilgrimage. Shorter and more informal interviews were also conducted 'on-the-go' as and when opportunities arose. Due to the close-knit pilgrim community, all interviewees were

recruited via snowball sampling. My respondents were mostly females in their 40s to 60s. Many of them are housewives and active members in their respective temple organisations. Interviews with the mainland Chinese devotees were conducted in Mandarin, while a mixture of Mandarin and Minnan dialect was used when interacting with Taiwanese pilgrims. Participant observation was also an important method and was employed in two different Mazu pilgrimages. On the first occasion, I signed up for a full pilgrimage with Taiwanese pilgrims who set off from Kinmen Island (governed by Taiwan), in order to gain a first-hand experience and a more comprehensive understanding of the procedure, procession and propitiation ceremonies. The experience allowed me to better engage with respondents during our interviews. Also, by sharing accommodation, attending celebratory dinners, and engaging in informal chats with fellow pilgrims, I was able to build rapport with potential interviewees. On the second occasion, I took up more of an observer's role and was able to better perceive the politics of interaction and engagement amongst Chinese and Taiwanese devotees. It was also during this time that I conducted additional in-depth interviews with pilgrimage organisers and a Mazu medium.

4. From seafarers' guardian to 'Cross-strait Goddess of Peace'

As the legend goes, Mazu was born into the Lin Family on Meizhou Island, off the coast of Putian in Fujian Province in 960 A.D. Just before the arrival of the baby, a spectrum of red light was cast from the sky into the family's bedroom, followed by a lingering fragrance in the air, and thunder-like rumbles. When she was born, she did not utter a single cry, thus her name – *Moniang* (silent lady). Such 'signs and wonders' (Rubinstein, 2003: 183) led her family and villagers to believe that she was not an ordinary child. One day when Lin

Moniang was 15, her father and brother had gone out to work at sea. She fell into a trance at home and could not control her hands and legs. Her mother was terrified and tried to wake her up. Upon her returning to consciousness, she cried and demanded to know why she was not given enough time to rescue her brother. Moments later, news arrived that a boat had capsized at sea and while Moniang's father survived, her brother drowned. Her father told his family of a spectral being saving his life during the ordeal. It became apparent that it was indeed Moniang who 'went' in aid of her father and brother, but because she was revived too early by her mother, she could not get a good grip of her brother, and thus he drowned. That was when Moniang's divine power was realised and she continued to lend her hand to seafarers in distress. She did not die a natural death. At the age of 28, she ascended to heaven from Meizhou Island. After her ascension she continued to be the guardian for fishermen and merchants who ply the treacherous waters of the Taiwan Strait. People soon erected a temple for her on Meizhou Island and the local folk deity soon gained popularity in the coastal areas of mainland China, Taiwan and Southeast Asia. According to Maspéro (1963, cited in Irwin, 1990: 63), by 1228, Mazu temples could already be found in 'all the maritime provinces of coastal China.'⁴ As Boltz (1986: 211) professes, Mazu is attributed with 'a vast range of divine power, but overall her reputation rests on her ability to rescue those who suffer hazards at sea. As the special guardian of seafaring populations, she remains unsurpassed.'

Mazu's efficacy and power was not only recognised by ordinary people, but also acknowledged by the ruling elites. Hence we see the numerous official titles conferred to Mazu by emperors of different dynasties (from Song to Qing) ranging from *Shengfei* (Holy

⁴ Chang's (2012) piece on the interconnectedness between State and religion in the context of the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage in Taiwan provides a succinct background on the official introduction of the Mazu cult to Taiwan in 1683, and its subsequent rise in popularity and ubiquity on the island.

Queen), *Tianfei* (Celestial Consort), *Tianhou* (Empress of Heaven) to *Tianshang Shengmu* (the Heavenly Mother). These titles were often bestowed on her for her 'services to mankind'. For instance, she was given credit when she reportedly guided the boat of the ambassador to Korea to safety during a storm in the Song Dynasty. Some scholars interpret this as a way for rulers to institutionalise the Mazu cult and legitimise their own authority (Irwin, 1990). However, such legitimisation is a two-way process. In China, deities also needed sanction by the political authorities so as not to be deemed as secret sects and therefore illegal. '[G]ods are perceived as powerful only insofar as people worship them' (Sangren, 2000: 72). As such, '...state recognition and promotion of local deities... in effect allows each to tap the other in a process of mutual legitimization' (*ibid.*: 77).

Today, Mazu is hailed by the Chinese, especially in the official account, as the *haishang heping nüshen* (Sea Goddess of Peace) or *haixia liang'an heping nüshen* (Cross-strait Goddess of Peace). A Mazu devotee in Putian expressed:

As I was born in Mazu's hometown, I feel very proud that a woman from Putian can become a common deity for the Chinese in the world... I feel that by referring to deities and religious belief, we are better able to go beyond politics and concentrate on a kind of common identity and communication platform [between the Chinese and Taiwanese]. This is what I feel as a local.

Apart from the pride of being born in Mazu's ancestral hometown, the Chinese devotee used a shared religious belief to foster an 'alternative relationship between territory and identity' (Hazbun, 2009: 33-34). Indeed, the common worshipping of Mazu and the pilgrimage tours have provided a welcome relief from sensitive issues of sovereignty and

reunification for devotees on both sides of the Strait. Victor Turner (1974) argued that pilgrimage is akin to a liminal or liminoid phenomenon. He adapted van Gennep's three-phase model of rites of passage and emphasised the middle 'liminal' phase to develop his idea of 'communitas', as 'a state of equality, comradeship, and common humanity, outside of normal social distinctions, roles, and hierarchies' (Olaveson, 2001: 93). I have discussed elsewhere Turner's idea of the liminal and used it to explicate the socio-psychological states of cross-strait tourists (Zhang, 2013). Here, the shared belief in Mazu provides a more intimate platform for a communitas to form between its devotees on both sides. This idea will be discussed further in the following empirical sections.

Other than a symbol of cross-strait peace, Mazu, as 'Heavenly Mother' to devotees on both sides of the Strait, also represents familial ties between China and Taiwan. In this respect, the annual pilgrimage has often been promoted as *Mazu hui niangjia* (Mazu returns to her natal home). The 'Mazu homecoming' discourse is related to the concept of *ling* in Taoism.

As Sangren (2000: 56) explains:

...*ling* is one of the key concepts uniting Chinese culture and religion. In brief, *ling* is a kind of magical efficacy attributed to supernatural entities of all sorts – gods, ghosts, ancestors, and so forth. Moreover, it is a relative quality: some gods and ghosts are more *ling* than are others.

Being housed in the ancestral temple, the Mazu on Meizhou Island is regarded as the most *ling* amongst all the other Mazu idols at other cult centres. That is the reason why on the 23rd day of the third lunar month (Mazu's birthday), pilgrims will travel to Meizhou Island to pay homage to the goddess. Some will even bring along their own Mazu idols and pass them

over the ancestral temple's incense burner. They will then leave them overnight in the temple so that the various Mazu idols 'can take a rest and chat amongst themselves' (Chinese temple staff in Meizhou, personal communication) (Figure 1). Devotees believe that by doing so, the *ling* of their Mazu idols will be recharged. It is therefore not difficult to understand the Chinese government's keenness to harness the popularity of Mazu for its reunification aims. With a basic knowledge of the cult established, the following sections will explicate the cultural-geopolitics of the Mazu pilgrimage and how it creates spaces of the political within which the identities of Taiwanese pilgrims and that of their Chinese counterparts are being performed.



Figure 1 Mazu idols from different temples being assembled with the main idol in the Meizhou ancestral temple

5. When movement takes on meanings

The mobility aspect of a pilgrimage takes on a myriad of cultural-geopolitical meanings at a variety of different scales. In the following, I look at what the movement of Taiwanese

pilgrims across the Strait means to Chinese and Taiwanese governments, the management of a cult centre in Taiwan and the pilgrims themselves. Before the relaxation of the travel prohibition of Taiwanese to mainland China by the nationalist government in 1987, Mazu pilgrimage was deemed illegal. Since 1987, the number of Taiwanese pilgrims travelling across the Strait has increased considerably. However, they were not allowed to travel directly to mainland China and had to take a detour mostly via Hong Kong.⁵ When the leadership of Taichung's *Zhenlan Gong* (Zhenlan Temple) (one of the main Mazu cult centres in Taiwan) proposed a direct pilgrimage to Meizhou Island by sea in 2000, the proposal was heavily politicised and further polarised the two main political parties in Taiwan – the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the Kuomintang (KMT). Katz (2003) reports that the temple leader, Yen Ching-piao, and representatives from the KMT party even gathered at Zhenlan Temple to throw divination blocks in order for Mazu to 'decide' on the date of departure. After the date was decided with the impending direct pilgrimage just one and a half months away, this issue created political mayhem between the KMT supporters and the then newly-formed Chen Shui-bian's government. The pro-independence DPP, which Chen led, was clearly not in favour of such direct pilgrimages to mainland China as that would imply an acknowledgement of Chinese roots. Chen attempted to convince the Taiwanese people that participation would only be complying with China's propaganda efforts (Katz, 2003). Considering the long-standing pro-status quo stance of the KMT with regards to cross-strait issues, I would argue, however, that the support for a direct pilgrimage to

⁵ Direct flights between China and Taiwan started in 2008 under the Ma Ying-jeou's administration.

mainland China by the KMT was more of an act of opposing everything that the DPP stood for, rather than representing an ideological reunification with mainland China.⁶

The Taiwanese government did not grant approval for the sealink in 2000. Zhenlan Temple then led over two thousand Mazu devotees from across Taiwan on an indirect pilgrimage via Hong Kong. Pilgrims flew from Taiwan to Hong Kong, then to Xiamen in Fujian. From Xiamen, they boarded chartered coaches to Putian City and reached Meizhou Island by ferry.

Zhenlan Temple invited several Taiwanese television news stations and newspapers to cover the six-day event, paid for the airfare and hotel accommodations of over 80 media personnel, and arranged for the pilgrimage to be broadcast live via satellite television from China back to Taiwan (Yang, 2004). The ability to mobilise such a large group of pilgrims and manpower on both sides of the Strait was a testament to the temple's intent to not only pressure the Taiwanese government over the establishment of a 'direct religious sealink' (*China Times*, 9 June 2000), but also to assert its authority as one of Taiwan's leading Mazu temples. In a sense, Mazu was used by the temple leaders to protest against policies and decisions of the Taiwanese government (see also, Chang, 2012).

Conversely, the Chinese government, especially local officials from Fujian Province, who had considered the financial gains and ideological meanings of such direct pilgrimages, were more than willing to welcome the Taiwanese pilgrims. Yet, Beijing is also 'nervous about the dissemination of a popular grassroots religious organization among local people, and it aggressively limits and monitors the movements of Taiwanese pilgrims' (Yang, 2004: 216).

How meaningful is the Mazu pilgrimage to an individual then? Here, I observe that there is a

⁶ In 2000, the KMT became an opposition party for the first time in its history after losing the administration of the central government to the DPP. The KMT, unlike the pro-independence DPP, was pro-status quo and would neither have supported independence nor reunification.

disjuncture in the appropriation of Mazu between the state and the individual in terms of its significance and meaning. For example, the Taiwanese state prefers to recognise Mazu as a national heroine for her assistance to Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga) in his expulsion of the Dutch colonisers from Taiwan, while Chinese officials are keen to stress the peace-keeping attribute of Mazu (thus the title 'Sea Goddess of Peace' – *haishang heping nüshen*). For the individual, however, it is Mazu's magical efficacy in dealing with everyday problems that is most cherished. After numerous conversations with Taiwanese pilgrims during my fieldwork, I realised that although they were aware of the rapprochement climate and conscious about the Chinese promotion of Mazu as Sea Goddess of Peace, the discourse of Mazu as cross-strait peace-maker is 'politically correct' but not quite relevant to their personal motivations for participating in a pilgrimage. Madam Hong, a Taiwanese pilgrim in her 50s, shared how it was a personal pact with Mazu to join the annual event:

I had an agreement with Mazu last year when I went to Meizhou. If she keeps my knees strong, I will return again the next year to thank her and make offerings to her. True enough, my knees did not give me any problems throughout the last year and I saved a lot of money that would have otherwise gone to the doctor! So I mainly went back to thank her for her grace and mercy.

Indeed, many of the pilgrims went on the pilgrimage to thank the goddess for answering their prayers (*huanyuan*). Yet, there were others who claimed that they were being 'instructed' by Mazu to join the procession, and hoped that by following her instructions, their wishes would be granted. It was the expression of gratitude for miracles that had already taken place and the hope for more divine help in the future that contributed to the 'collective production of divine power' (Sangren, 2000: 90).

For many pilgrims, the ritual procession itself was a meaningful event. During the pilgrimage from Kinmen to Meizhou, which I participated, Mazu idols were ‘invited’ from the temples where they reside, and were literally taken on board coaches and ferries to reach the destination. Once on Meizhou Island after a ten-minute ferry ride from the mainland, the Mazu idols were seated on sedan chairs, ready for the 500m procession towards the ancestral temple situated on high grounds (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Pilgrims preparing their Mazu idol and sedan chair for a procession

The ‘islandness’ of such a cult centre and the idea of negotiating the ‘mountain’ (although only at a height of about 30m) to reach the ancestral temple contributed significantly to the

overall sacredness of the pilgrimage.⁷ Amidst the blasting of firecrackers, Chinese trumpets, drums, gongs and cymbals, the ritual procession started in earnest. At some point during the procession, sedan chairs could be seen swinging violently from side to side as handlers, both women and men, tried to regain control of them; the tempo of the drums, gongs and cymbals keeping up with their movement. Handlers of Mazu's sedan chair have often shared their experiences of feeling the force of the goddess running through the chair itself, thus the rocking movement as they paraded towards the ancestral temple (Figure 3).



Figure 3 Pilgrims carrying their Mazu idol in her sedan chair

Such 'divine power' also manifested itself in corporeal ways respondents argued. One of my informants, Mdm Lee, told me about how she had suffered from rheumatism of her shoulder joints and that Mazu appeared in her dream one night to instruct her to help out in

⁷ According to Naquin and Yü (1992:11), 'The classic form of [a Chinese] pilgrimage involves a journey to a temple on a mountain peak... The principal objective is to make contact with the resident deity (shen 神), whose image is enshrined in the mountain temple.'

the local temple's pilgrimage to Meizhou. She complied and performed the role as one of Mazu's 'servants in waiting' during the procession. Half way through the journey from the pier to the ancestral temple, she could feel a certain energy surging through her body, as if helping her along the way, and her shoulders felt less tense after the procession. This testimony and the experience of the sedan chair handlers bring to mind Sangren's (2000: 111) description of a pilgrimage as 'scared time' as devotees believe Mazu will very likely 'manifest her power' (*xianling*) during a pilgrimage. For the sedan chair experience, the divine power is materialised through the swinging and rocking of the chair. For Lee, her encounter with divinity was more of an embodied experience. Importantly, 'these were bodies, both material and immaterial, in contact, relation, movement, and rhythm' (McCormack, 2002, cited in Holloway, 2006: 184).

As is evident from the above accounts of spiritual encounters, as much as the Chinese authorities would wish to idealise Mazu's role in reunification, the Taiwanese pilgrims are actually 'returning' to Meizhou, the sacred island where Mazu Temple resides, rather than China per se. They are in pursuit of religious sacredness, be it individually or as a group, not political unification with China. The movement of the entourage of devotees during the ritual procession, and the performance of roles like sedan chair handlers and servants in waiting are all part and parcel of a collective spiritual experience. As Yang (2004: 216) espouses, 'Rather than the political unification of China and Taiwan, it would seem that cross-strait Mazu pilgrimages are creating a regional ritual space and religious community of Chinese coastal peoples that do not conform to existing political borders'. Yet, a common ritual space and religious community comprising of both Taiwanese and Chinese devotees are cornerstones for the formation of a 'communitas' (Turner, 1974), and a platform of

interaction for people on both sides of the Strait. This will be discussed in the following section.

6. Pilgrimage as a social(ising) activity

While the procession might be one of the most popular activities during a pilgrimage, time spent in coaches, ferries and restaurants before and after the procession can be equally as productive in creating spaces of encounter amongst pilgrims. Such pockets of interspersed space-time were meaningful as devotees – some familiar to each other, some not – shared their spiritual encounters. One's testimonial on how she/he was blessed by Mazu would be acknowledged by nods of agreement before others chipped in with their own experiences. During my fieldwork, although the procession was performed predominantly by Taiwanese pilgrims, their Chinese hosts often joined them for meals during the pilgrimage period, and it was during such space-time that interactions took place. According to Chen (1984, cited in Sangren, 2000: 91), '...participating in the pilgrimage is essentially an engagement in a legend-telling session. The incense guests [pilgrims] like to exchange their own memorates [testimonies] to invite friendly conversation.' In this sense, a pilgrimage is as much a social activity as it is a socialising one. The sharing of testimonies is a performance of a pilgrim's religiosity, and the act of relating spectral encounters with Mazu to fellow pilgrims is a validation of one's self-identity/faith vis-à-vis those of other devotees, thus rendering these instances of space-time as meaningful as the actual ritual procession. Indeed, religious space overflows the fixities of the temple and the fluidities of the procession; it manifests itself in these in-between places where the 'faith-as-personal' boundary is redrawn to incorporate a more communal sense of the Mazu cult. Furthermore, such cross-strait

pilgrimages also encourage the production of liminal spaces where differences in people's identities and/or political allegiance seem to be transcended in favour of a pilgrim 'communitas' (Sangren, 1987; Turner, 1974; Turner and Turner, 1978). A Chinese devotee I interviewed shared, "I think Mazu acts as an important communicative medium for two people who are under different political systems. She is a very important force...a medium...When surrounding Mazu, we can shed away a lot of our political baggage". These liminal spaces allow 'sensuous impulses [to] flourish and... normative codifications of identity and practice [to] be suspended' (Holloway, 2006: 183). It is clear, therefore, that such in-between places and times are platforms for socialising and binding pilgrims into a collective.

However, my participant observations also revealed differences within this supposed unity of the pilgrims. In his observation of Mazu pilgrimages within Taiwan, Sangren (2000) notes that the annual pilgrimages have the sociological effect of 'unit[ing] Taiwanese into a single ritual community' (p. 76). There is continuity with this sense of Taiwanese-ness in the context of a cross-strait Mazu pilgrimage especially when the entourage of Taiwanese pilgrims parade their Mazu idols through the Chinese streets, passing homes and shops. Due to its more elaborated style, and the sheer number of its participants, a Taiwanese procession is often greeted by local devotees who will line both sides of the streets and look in awe at the spectacle. Some even set up tables of food offerings in anticipation of the passing procession and burn incense to welcome the numerous 'Taiwanese Mazu' idols. The Taiwanese pilgrims I communicated with expressed their pride as they processed past the local people, and highlighted that they managed to preserve the Mazu cult traditions better than their Chinese counterparts, and were 'superior' in terms of their religious know-how.

Differences were also observed amongst the Taiwanese pilgrims too. The richer and thus more influential of the temple groups had more elaborated dresses and accessories for their goddesses, bigger sedan chairs and marched at the front of the procession. The identity of each group was very clearly represented by the cloth banner, embroidered with the name of its Mazu temple, behind which its followers marched. Therefore, as much as the pilgrimage seems to have created a united religious community, it has also contributed in erecting borders of differences, either between the 'more religious' Taiwanese pilgrims and local Chinese onlookers, or amongst the Taiwanese pilgrims themselves. Here, 'identities are not so much temporarily discarded as they are foregrounded in such pilgrimage performances' (Sangren, 2000: 99).

The Mazu pilgrimage is at once an event that serves individuals' spiritual needs as well as a remarkable assemblage of politics, people, spirits and things. When Chinese and Taiwanese pilgrims interact with each other, the cultural identity of being fellow Mazu devotees or 'children of Mazu' takes precedence over national identity. This discourse of sameness is dominant in Taiwanese pilgrims' responses when asked about their views on their Chinese counterparts. However, as explicated above, I caution against a naïve take on such blanket-covering identity based solely on similarities between devotees from both sides. The enchantment of divine power does not work on the basis of the same, nor does it function through complete difference. Mdm Liu, a Taiwanese medium, shared with me her religious autobiography and how Mazu instructed her to carry out voluntary/humanitarian work in mainland China. Below are snippets of her enchanting experience in Putian:

You are interviewing the Mazu medium who has saved millions of people...

Mazu has instructed me to come to the mainland, to attain a higher level [*shenzao*], to learn more '*kung fu*' [skills]...to learn...So sometimes I have to come here two to three times a year...

Mazu just comes to me...possesses me...and I will be able to feel it. She will possess me, and will go to various places to pray, to do volunteer work or to save people with terminal illnesses.

For example, over a three-year period, I rescued three daughters of someone who volunteers at the Mazu temple in Putian. Each time, they were in critical condition, even the doctor couldn't do anything... because they were suffering from 'formless illness' [*wuxing bing*]

Twelve years ago, I came on a pilgrimage. The temple was very unhygienic then...people spit on the ground...very dirty... That's why I was determined to help. I treated it just like my own house... I cleaned the toilets, kitchen, sinks...everywhere...everything...

The bed was extremely dirty...they were being bitten by mice...just like those you see at a rubbish dump... the bathroom, toilet, sink and so on. I paid for new ones.

This journey is very tiring...needs a lot of money too...it is not just about volunteering. I donated too... all these years...I've donated quite a lot of money...could be around a few million RMB.

My younger brother suggested that I could buy a house here and rent it out to people and earn some rental. But Mazu told me not to and instead donate the money to the temple.

Mazu will not differentiate... people from both sides are all her children... As long as you are sincere, no matter where you are, I believe Mazu will always protect you...

As can be seen from these extracts, Mdm Liu is obviously proud of her achievements as a Mazu medium. She perceives herself as an embodiment of Mazu's divine power in her intervention into the everyday lives of Chinese devotees, who like her, are 'all Mazu's children', but meanwhile different in terms of political allegiance and economic and spiritual well-being. In highlighting the existence of 'formless illnesses' – something that even modern science cannot address, she established a rationale for the divine healing power that she possessed through Mazu, and gave ontological status to the deity. Additionally, Liu also demonstrates that she is fulfilling Mazu's calls and deems such cross-strait missions as 'training sessions' and a path to attaining greater divine power. Her efforts in renovating the temple, donating money and even in overcoming a dilemma to profit from the housing market⁸ were used to valorise her commitment to Mazu and her Chinese devotees. Indeed, the experience of *communitas* is 'usually a "deep" or intense one, and belongs in the intuitive or emotional realm, as opposed to the rational one' (Turner, 1969; 1974, cited in Olaveson, 2001: 104). Yet, the volunteering aspect of Liu's 'religious duty' is as much a humanitarian effort contributing to the betterment of her patron's society as it is a means towards her own personal ends to enhance her contact with the deity, and in the process gain 'greater divine power'. Furthermore, as observed from Liu's testimony, although both

⁸ Scholars of religion have reported that pilgrimage and religious networks are often intertwined with economic ones (see for example, Raj and Morpeth, 2007).

Taiwanese and Chinese devotees are children of Mazu, they are not deemed to be equal, be it financially or spiritually. This relates to the earlier assertion that 'The enchantment of divine power does not work on the basis of the same, nor does it function through complete difference.' Although the Taiwanese medium identified herself with her Chinese counterparts as 'children of Mazu', it was the perceived differences in the standard of living and religious know-how that urged the medium to offer her services, and thus provided a platform for her to practice her craft and nourish her enchanting encounters with Mazu.

The fleeting transcendence between sameness and difference in the socialising process is also exhibited in the interactions between Mazu organisations from both sides. Although a similar religious conviction has allowed such cultural entities to be at the forefront of the rapprochement process, their inherent differences is one of the key reasons that draw them to each other in the first place. After the Cultural Revolution and the re-establishment of cross-strait ties, there was a huge incentive for the Chinese and Taiwanese governments to utilise common religions as socialising platforms for their people. However, many customs and rituals concerning the Mazu cult in China were lost. These need to be re-introduced by the Taiwanese devotees during pilgrimages, and here is where temple organisations from Taiwan usually play the 'big brother' role. As Mr Ding, a representative from one of the Mazu cult centres in Taiwan enthused:

They have lost those traditions...propitiation to the goddess (*bai bai*)...recital of religious scriptures (*songjing*)...The recital team (*songjing tuan*) in the Meizhou ancestral temple was trained by us. They had no idea of food offerings too. When I brought apples there, they thought they were fake! Haha! Joss sticks and incense paper were also re-introduced by us.

Now on Meizhou Island, there are proper rituals commemorating Mazu's birthday, and the day she ascended to heaven. At her birthplace at Xianliang Gang, there is even a sea prayer event. We have re-introduced them to those rituals performed by our ancestors.

Such encounters reflect a reversal of roles in China-Taiwan relations. China has always positioned itself as the 'big brother' who is the legitimate player in international politics. In terms of rapprochement, it sees itself as the magnanimous elder sibling, always forgiving, and always yearning for the homecoming of his other half with open arms.⁹ However, in the enchanted world of the Mazu pilgrimage, it is the Taiwanese game that the Chinese are trying to get a foothold on. In terms of the know-how of Mazu pilgrimage, the Taiwanese have an advantage over their Chinese counterparts, and therefore, play the 'big brother' role instead. They know that the Chinese authorities are mainly utilising Mazu as a unification platform, but are happy to play along with it. As the ensuing paragraphs will make clear, the Taiwanese Mazu organisations might have separate sets of agendas other than reunification with the mainland. These agendas may include the aim to revive the Mazu cult in China, and elevating their status as cult centres in Taiwan. A Taiwanese pilgrim revealed:

To be honest, we jolly well know that the mainland is trying to use Mazu as a tool for unification (*tongzhan*), but what they do not understand is that Taiwan's Mazu culture is so well established and deeply embedded in our lives; our devotees are even more religious than theirs. There is no way that they can pull us over! Haha...But they thought since we are so devoted to Mazu, they will use Mazu as a bridge for both

⁹ China has consistently utilised the rhetoric of family or brotherhood when dealing with Taiwan in the rapprochement era.

sides to communicate. This is not a bad thing though. So before we talk about politics, we use Mazu culture as a topic of exchange....

From this response, it is clear that the 'Chinese intentions' are very much in the consciousness of Taiwanese Mazu devotees. Here we can appreciate the complexities of national and religious identities at play in a pilgrimage: it is never a simple replacement of one with another but a strategic manoeuvre at times. Turner's version of *communitas* 'entails that the actors in ritual and pilgrimage processes leave a domain where relations are complex, for one where they are simple. Their relations with others are...no longer those of interconnectedness but of similarity: no longer do they occupy social positions in a hierarchical or segmentary structure of localised status roles; now they are assigned to a class of anonymous novices or plainly and uniformly garbed pilgrims, all torn or self-torn from their familiar systemic environment' (1979: 122). It is true, to a certain extent, that the Mazu pilgrims do put their political baggage aside while harnessing a common religious identity for interaction. However, it is less straightforward as hierarchy does exist in terms of religious 'know-how', and 'state territoriality' and 'ritual territoriality' are not in sync (Yang, 2004). Taiwanese temple organisations, with their separate sets of agendas, are obviously taking advantage of the rapprochement climate to further their interests in reviving the Mazu cult in China. As such, these organisations felt obliged to re-educate their counterparts on how propitiation of Mazu should proceed.

Nevertheless, Turner did remind us that the idea of a *communitas* is not static. In other words, it has its creative potentials: 'Liminality is not only transition, but also potentiality, not only "going to be", but also "what may be"' (Turner and Turner, 1978: 3). There was a hint towards the end of my interview with Mr Ding that the Mazu pilgrimage could indeed

be a formidable force in generating curiosity and actually promoting cultural exchange and integration of social collectives. As he shared further:

One official from Putian City came to our temple and participated in the entire 9-day Mazu procession. He went back to China and held an exhibition on Taiwan's Mazu culture – showing people there the popularity of Mazu in Taiwan.

I have also written a couple of books on Mazu...the most recent one is on ancient couplets (*duilian*) carved on the pillars of Taiwanese Mazu temples that made references to Meizhou Island. I want to tell people that although they might not know their counterparts in Meizhou, the couplets that were carved a few hundred years ago were testament that they share the same roots...Such cross-strait culture still needs everyone's effort to be patient and communicate more and understand more...

We learn from them too. For example, through historical records in China we learned about the Mazu Feast (*Mazu yan*) – an ancient way of making offerings to Mazu that was even more elaborated than what we have in Taiwan. We also brought the Taiwan style to China and showed it to them. This is one way for knowledge to be exchanged.

And in 2000, we performed a full-scale Taiwanese-style Mazu procession in the mainland. We brought over all our traditional equipment and props. The event was even telecast live in China and Taiwan.

Our temple has made pilgrimages to Meizhou Island for the past 24 years...Through these years, cross-strait cultural exchanges have matured... In the future, we still need to depend on Mazu to act as a bridge for both sides to communicate, because both

sides can't agree with each other's political stand...So by using local cultural events as a platform for communication...politics and confrontations can be avoided. The greatest credit must be given to Mazu for acting as a bridge...a nest for cross-strait communication to nurture.

Ding's account of how Mazu pilgrimage acts as a bridge for cultural exchanges offers an idea of how a common religious identity between post-conflict societies can be used to harness new 'geopolitical and geocultural imaginaries' (Hazbun, 2009). Such a sense of community is not based on national identity, but imagined along religious affinity. Heritage in this case, is not something managed by the state, but one that is personal, and appeals to ordinary people in search of ancestral roots. The exhibiting of Mazu culture in China, the writing of books on historical religious connections between the people, the teaching and learning between devotees through various Mazu events, are all elements for creating alternative communities that go beyond partisan politics between the Communists, the KMT, and the DPP. These imaginaries allow for a common religious heritage between post-conflict societies to be engaged at personal levels, and are cornerstones for building a pilgrim *communitas*.

7. Conclusions: From state-level diplomatic exchanges to 'interactions along the side'

By drawing on cultural relations at the everyday level, rather than political relations at the level of the state, this paper offers new insights into the geopolitical relations between China and Taiwan. I shall concentrate on four points by way of conclusion. First, I have shown how religion plays a part in the rapprochement between China and Taiwan.

Discussion at a variety of scales – from that of the state, to temple associations and the personal provides an avenue to go beyond dominant state-level analyses of cross-strait relations. As much as Mazu is incorporated into both governments’ political agendas and the interests of temple organisations, the cult also represents a form of personal heritage for pilgrims. Belief in the efficacy of the sea goddess is the main driving force behind the continued interaction of devotees across the Strait, and a continual commitment in unravelling personal experiences of encounters amongst Chinese and Taiwanese devotees will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between pilgrimage and tourism across borders of conflict.

Second, I turn to Victor Turner’s concept of ‘communitas’ to elucidate the different ways in which a pilgrimage is as much a social activity as it is a socialising one. Rather than seeing it as purely a social/cultural phenomenon, I highlighted the spatial and temporal qualities of a pilgrim communitas through the pockets of space-time where and when devotees temporarily put aside their political allegiance and engage in conversations about spiritual experiences with Mazu. Yet communitas is not entirely about ‘sameness’. It is often the complexities between sameness and difference that initiate, sustain or disrupt interactions. Moreover, as the discussion shows, there is a plurality of identities at play during pilgrimage-tours. Rather than just a simple replacement of one identity with another, the pilgrim-tourist experiences a plethora of identity-defining and identity-making moments such that it is unclear when one identity starts and the other ends. Indeed, identities within a pilgrim communitas are always in the making, but never made. It is on this basis that religious spaces are not quite ‘already there’ but are constantly being *performed through* the pilgrimage and inscribed with personal meanings.

Third, and following on from the previous point, religious activity across borders of conflict is seen less as a political tool than one that possesses a life of its own and is actively producing platforms for interaction. Therefore, contrary to critiques that Turner's ideas are 'somewhat static' (see Lin, 2014), a *communitas* is constantly evolving. Devotees from both China and Taiwan are cognizant of the creative potentials of the Mazu cult and its associated events in binding people together. There is evidence that such cultural activities are beginning to move beyond state-sanctioned definitions and are actually defining new frontiers of 'geopolitical and geocultural imaginaries' (Hazbun, 2009). Hence, there is potential for alternative communities to take root via religion-led activities, but more research is needed to see whether this will flourish into some kind of 'shared humanity' (Bauman, cited in Franklin, 2003).

Finally, rapprochement between China and Taiwan, as interpreted by the paper, has got more to do with 'interactions along the side' than state-level diplomatic exchanges. Moreover, we begin to engage with the language of affect as understood in an enchanted world, rather than the logic of meaning in a secular one. Instead of adopting a rationality of 'peace through tourism' (e.g. the belief that people will better understand and be less fearful of each other through increased tourism exchanges etc.), we are coming to terms with the non-rationality of rapprochement tourism as evident in experiences like possession of the medium's body by Mazu or spiritual communication between devotees and deity while participating in a ritual procession. These are experiences that seem outlandish in the first instance, but the shared belief in the existence of the otherworldly gives credibility to the power of the enchanted world. Further studies need to go beyond the 'more-than-state' and engage with the 'more-than-human' in order to gain a more profound understanding of this enchanted world. But for

now, we need to acknowledge that rapprochement tourism is more about affect than effect; emotion than reason; feeling than meaning. It is on such a basis that we can remain open to many possibilities when analysing cross-strait relations between China and Taiwan.

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