

Transnational Pilgrimage, Tourism and Identity Politics: An Anthropological Study of the Cult of Mazu (The Goddess of Heaven)

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Key implications

1. The local-level social and political implications of the new Mazu worship in Macau where the goddess is a symbol of the city and also a source of local and ethnic identity.
2. The ways in which the cross-strait Mazu worship which is particularly organized by and held in Macau in a post-colonial era, can provide a new platform, or create a new regional ritual space and religious community, for helping the Chinese government to promote a national identity between China and Taiwan.



Background

The worship of Mazu (Goddess of Heaven) is the most popular cult in Taiwan and coastal China. Macau, a coastal city-state whose name is derived from this seafarers' goddess known locally as A-Ma, has no exception. Built in the 15th century and managed by several ethnic groups, the A-Ma Temple has been a ritual center of the Mazu cult and a major tourist attraction. In recent years, its centuries-old leading role has been challenged by another group which aspires to promote a new form of worship and celebration. In 2001, it started building a A-Ma Cultural Village—a 7,000 square meter complex of towers, temple palaces, a museum and shops, with its architectural design copied from the Mazu ancestral temple on Meizhou Island in Fujian. They also followed Meizhou to organize Mazu Cultural Tourism Festival annually in Macau. The festival includes: pilgrimage to major Mazu temples in Taiwan and Fujian; an elaborate ritual of offerings to the goddess; a grand Mazu procession; and an array of performances and activities organized by an invited mainland city. By 2009, the pilgrimage and the festival had attracted approximately 200 million worshippers and tourists worldwide.

Focus of study

This research examines the implications of the above development from a sociocultural perspective. At the local level, it investigates ways in which the old and new Mazu temples compete for reputation, resources and donations, and worshippers, and how they struggle to (re)define a sacred ritual centre, religious community and collective identity in Macau. At the regional level, it reveals how the new

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form of worship contributed to the development of Macau sustainable tourism in competitive Asian tourism industry. And, it investigates Macau's newly-defined mission and role in promoting the cult and culture of Mazu across the Taiwan Strait for the continuity of the civilization of Greater China in modern contexts. At the national level, it explores the political meaning of that sacred transnational cult in the context of complex interactions between China and Taiwan. Focus will be on how such a cult defines a strategic position and role of Macau, particularly in post-colonial era, in helping the Chinese government advocate a modern Chinese nationalism or a national imaginary between China and Taiwan, through the shared religious traditions. In sum, this research aims at revealing a complex and multifaceted relationship between pilgrimage, religious tourism and identity in the context and framework of a Taiwan-Macau-China triadic pattern of religious connection.

Research methods

Participant-observation and interviews were adopted in this anthropological research which is proposed to last for 2 years, from January 2011 to December 2012. We had conducted interviews with the participants in the Mazu Cultural Tourism Festival in Macau, followed the organizing committee of the festival to visit Mazu temples and associations in Taiwan and China on the purpose of exploring how the committee cultivates or maintains its transnational religious networks and promotes the Mazu Cultural Tourism Festival.

Key findings

1. The A-Ma Cultural Village and its associated annual Mazu Cultural Tourism Festival opens up a new platform for pilgrims, mainly from the mainland, Taiwan and Macau to meet, reconnect, and exchange.
2. The A-Ma Cultural Village Management Board actively builds up networks with Mazu temples and their associated associations in Taiwan.
3. The Mazu Cultural Tourism Festival becomes a major religious-cum-tourism event in Macau.

Significance of findings for practice and policy

This study of a new and emerging Mazu cult in Macau addresses a complex and inextricable relationship between popular religion, tourism and identities (local, ethnic and national). It explores how that shared religious tradition, which transcends political and territorial boundaries, has contributed to the further development and negotiations of a new identity by Taiwan and the mainland in paving the way for the emergency of modern nation-state. In addition, by examining internal flows and intersections of people, images, information and knowledge, and capital moving within and across national borders, this research will reveal how different local and regional religious tourism-related networks have been formed and appropriated by different interest groups to construct their own definition of culture, tradition and identity.

REQUEST FOR MORE DETAILS

Please contact Dr. Chan Kwok Shing at kschan@hkbu.edu.hk for more information about the project.

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