

Project Title:

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

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.

This research examines the implications of the above development from a socio-cultural 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 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 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 relationship between pilgrimage, religious tourism and identity in the context of a Taiwan-Macau-China triadic pattern of religious connection.