

# Religion in Taiwan

## How can religion without texts be transmitted?

Since the PRC was established and the Bamboo Curtain was implemented, Taiwan has provided a window into Chinese society and culture (whether real or imagined) for Western researchers in the social sciences and the humanities. However, since 1978 and the beginning of China's "opening up," Taiwan has moved from privileged to marginalized in the political, economic and even academic arenas. Nonetheless, such marginalization has not occurred in the field of religious studies, particularly with respect to Chinese popular religion. Despite some attempts to limit the role of popular religion in Taiwanese society by KMT leaders after the island's retrocession, the traditions and practices that Chinese settlers brought from the mainland in the 18th and 19th centuries have survived and even thrived as they adapted to new conditions, particularly in the wake of Taiwan's industrialization and its "economic miracle" in the 1970s. Improved cross-strait relations between the PRC and the ROC have even led to flows of "traditional knowledge" back to the mainland from Taiwan as restrictions on religious worship have resulted in a surge of interest in popular religion in the PRC.

In this context, Professor Lin's most recent work, *Materializing Magic Power: Chinese Popular Religion in Villages and Cities*, is an important contribution to the anthropology of religion. In particular, the book's emphasis



### The book on the altar

After the book was published, a copy was placed on the altar to demonstrate how the deity's magical power has spread as far as the United States.

on the role of statues in materializing deities and their power is significant, as statues also enabled worshippers to enter into wide-ranging relationships with these deities. These relationships are a fundamental feature of popular religion – and a feature that is not limited to Chinese culture – that has been largely overlooked and poorly understood until now, possibly as the result of the generally negative view of "idols" in Abrahamic religions. In this book, Lin discusses how statues are employed to tie gods to a particular village and how personal relationships are constructed between gods and villagers through those statues.

Spirit mediums are a feature of popular religion and have received considerable attention in

the literature. However, by focusing on materialization and the agency of objects, Lin is able to describe how mediums – much like statues – act as personalized and localized manifestations of a deity that are fundamental to the god's ability to interact with villagers and participate in their daily lives. Statues and spirit mediums are thus shown to represent a basic distinction between popular religion and other forms of religion, such as Buddhism or Taoism, that have their own clergies and a fixed textual tradition. The power of these materialized deities, a popular topic in the anthropology literature, is also shown to be based on relationships constructed with the community by means of their physical form, whether human or wood.



**A deep hollow at the base of Dadaogong's statue, formed from repeated scrapings by devotees**

There is a deep hollow at the base of the most efficacious statue of Dadaogong in Wannian where I carried out my fieldwork. This is because when a devotee falls seriously ill, the spirit medium will scrape the bottom of the statue, and boil the scrapings in with Chinese medicinal tea. It is thought that this will increase the potency of the medicine, and help the person recover more quickly. It was not a simple matter to lift the statue and photograph its base. There is a story behind how I obtained this picture. As a result of the repeated scrapings of devotees, the base of the Dadaogong statue in Wannian village had become unstable, and staff at the temple decided to use a piece of steel to seal the bottom of the statue to prevent devotees from gouging it further. In order to take a photo of the hollow that was said to be there, I went to the chairman of the temple committee and asked for special dispensation from him. I was hoping that he would agree to have the metal plate removed so I could take a photo. The chairman considered it, and then told me: "Let's see what the deity thinks." So we went into the temple together. He lit some incense and bowed to the statue and, picking up the divinatory blocks, intoned: "Professor Lin Wei-Ping would like to photograph the base of your statue, in order to show everyone your great powers. Do you agree?" As I listened, my whole body broke out in a cold sweat, and I thought, What if the deity refuses? The blocks fell to the ground, "He's agreed," the chairman said. "He agreed right away, which means he's happy to do it. He wants everyone to know his magical power."

Further, this book offers insights into how the roles of materialized deities (and particularly spirit mediums) have changed in Taiwan in response to urbanization and industrialization. Lin's initial fieldwork was conducted in a rural village in southern Taiwan, and her ethnography details present-day religious practices together with the history of the village and its temples and deities. Her investigation then extends beyond the standard ethnographic scope of a single village to follow the development of local religious practices and the role of spirit mediums among families that migrated from the village to a northern Taiwanese city to find work. In this manner, she shows how new relationships and emotional intimacy – all subsumed under the metaphor of kinship – develop among rural migrants in an urban setting. Perhaps even more significant is Lin's description of how

the role of the urban spirit medium has changed, an area that has scarcely been addressed in previous scholarly work on mediums. Lin delves into both ritual details and the thinking that informed the spirit medium's decisions to introduce changes or create new forms of interaction between the deity and believers. In so doing, she shows how the power of the village deity has been delocalized and how popular religion can be understood to have taken a turn towards the personal and the individual, thus mirroring trends that have been termed the "affective turn" or the "subjective turn" elsewhere in the contemporary world.

This shift toward the private or the intimate opens up a wide range of intriguing areas for further study in the field of religion and beyond. However, while noting that such developments are not unique to Chinese soci-

ety, Lin emphasizes the importance of localizing the global by grounding further research in a firm understanding of fundamental Chinese cultural concepts such as kinship and personhood.

### Reference

Wei-Ping Lin. *Materializing Magic Power: Chinese Popular Religion in Villages and Cities*. Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series (Book 97) Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015

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