

OBSERVING HYBRIDITY AND MARKETIZATION IN LONGQI WENHENG TEMPLE –
THE INCLUSION OF AMERICAN AND JAPANESE INFLUENCES IN TAIWANESE
POPULAR RELIGION

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Table of content

Abstract	4
Résumé.....	5
Introduction.....	7
Hybridization in the Taiwanese religious sphere.....	7
Longqi Wenheng Temple and the inclusion of superheroes inside the religious space	9
Scope of the thesis	11
Market theory and hybridization in the study of contemporary religion	12
Fieldwork and methodology	15
Structure of this study	17
Chapter 1. Social changes, “Religious Revival” and marketing strategies	20
Introduction	20
1) Changes in mobility: from <i>jisiquan</i> to pan-island movements	21
2) Political push-and-pulls, Religious revival, and insertion in “civil society”	27
3) Attracting visitors in an era of competition: from marketization to hybridization.....	31
Conclusion.....	34
Chapter 2. The hybridization process and the influence of Japan and the U.S.	35
Introduction	35
1) The competing influences of Japan and the United States in Taiwan	36
2) <i>Chibi</i> and changes in aesthetics	39
3) The attractiveness of new characters in the temple space	42
Conclusion.....	51
Chapter 3. Keeping Longqi Wenheng Temple within boundaries.....	53
Introduction	53
1) Theme as a syncretic link	55
2) Looking at the question of donations	60
Conclusion.....	63
Chapter 4: The effects of hybridization in larger societal debates.	64
Introduction	64

1) Taiwanese religions or Chinese religions?	65
2) The Malevolent Lantern incident: hybridization in religion as the ultimate Green/Blue divide.....	68
3) Religion and social commentary in the Lantern Festival.....	70
Conclusion.....	74
Conclusion	75
References.....	79

Abstract

This thesis aims to explore a recent way of attracting visitors to the temple of Longqi Wenheng Temple (*Longqi Wenheng Dian* 龍崎文衡殿), Longqi District, Taiwan. Since 2013, the temple committee has been admitting replicas of pop culture movie icons like Marvel's Avengers, or Paramount's Transformers into the main hall, together with the principal deity Lord Guan (Guandi 關帝) and others. This comes to complement the "cute" renderings of the gods derived from Japanese *kawaii* (*ke'ai* 可愛 in Mandarin) aesthetics present around the temple. I argue that these "hybridities" stand at the crossroads of several phenomena. Over the past hundred years, Taiwan has undergone rapid modernization, resulting in challenges to traditional communal ties and tensions in the religious market. Far from witnessing this from the sideline, many temples and institutions, like Longqi Wenheng Hall, have taken to extend their reach across the island, gaining visibility through new marketing strategies. Among these is appealing to the popularity of Japanese and American culture, already present in Taiwan through shared history and media. This "hybridization" process thus becomes entangled with a re-packaging, or 'commodification', of religion for broader appeal. While highly successful as a marketing tactic, these practices also trigger debates, prompting concerns about authenticity or apprehensions linked to larger identarian and social issues. I argue that Longqi Wenheng Hall navigates this by emphasizing the thematic ties and donation status of the aforementioned props, the whole of which participates in making it the local center it is today.

Résumé

Cette thèse vise à explorer une récente manière d'attirer les visiteurs au Temple de Longi Wenheng, dans le district de Longqi à Taïwan. En 2013, le comité du temple a commencé à inclure des répliques d'icônes de la culture populaire comme les Avengers (Marvel) ou les Transformers (Paramount) dans la salle principale, aux côtés de la divinité principale Lord Guan et d'autres. Cela vient compléter les représentations 'mignonnes' des dieux, dérivées de l'esthétique japonaise *kawaii* (*ke'ai* 可愛 en Mandarin), présentes autour du temple. Je soutiens que ces « hybridités » se situent à la croisée de plusieurs phénomènes. Au cours du dernier centenaire, Taïwan a connu une modernisation rapide, entraînant une forte pression sur les liens communautaires traditionnels et des tensions dans le marché religieux. Bien loin de se contenter d'observer ces changements, de nombreux temples et institutions, tels que le Temple de Longqi Wenheng, ont cherché à étendre leur influence à travers l'île, gagnant en visibilité grâce à de nouvelles stratégies marketing. Parmi celles-ci, on trouve l'appel à la popularité de la culture japonaise et américaine, déjà présentes à Taïwan à travers leur histoire commune et les médias. Ce processus d'« hybridation » devient ainsi étroitement lié à une réorganisation, ou « marchandisation », de la religion pour une plus grande attractivité. Bien que largement réussies en tant que tactique marketing, de telles pratiques suscitent également de nombreux débats, particulièrement autour de questions d'authenticité, ainsi que des appréhensions par rapport à des questions identitaires et sociales. Je soutiens que Longqi Wenheng Hall navigue ces questions en mettant en avant les liens thématiques et le statut de donation des éléments susmentionnés, le tout participant à en faire un centre local prospère aujourd'hui.

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Introduction

Hybridization in the Taiwanese religious sphere

Walking in any large Taiwanese city, the impact of globalization is in plain sight, from the many Starbucks, McDonald's, and other fast-food restaurants, to brands like Chanel or Uniqlo in the shopping malls, or Disney Princess parties in local parks. Perhaps more specific to Taiwan are the armies of animated characters, or as Terri Silvio describes them: “virtual personalities that live within bodies made of ink and paper, wood and cloth, vinyl and metal, pixels and code” (Silvio, 2019, p. 1). These images are prevalent across various platforms, including metro cards, police signs, pamphlets, images on temple grounds, etc. They mimic the renowned aesthetics of Japanese manga, or feature characters from DreamWorks, and Disney, as well as iconic figures like Hello Kitty or Doraemon. The 2023 Lantern Festival in Taipei played on the rabbit theme to introduce several versions of Alice in Wonderland in lantern shape, and even politics make use of the Japanese *kawaii* (*ke'ai* 可愛, usually translated as “cute” in English¹) style, where characters gain child-like proportions, large eyes, and rounded faces. One may recall the A-bian 阿扁 doll, a cute version of former president Chen Sui-Bian 陳水扁 sold during his candidacy, to which many attribute his victory (Chuang, 2011, p. 4).

To comprehend this phenomenon, many scholars have turned to “hybridization” as an interpretative lens. In the most restrictive sense of the term, “hybridization” is a process where “the meanings of externally originating goods, information and images are reworked, syncretized and blended with existing culture traditions and forms of life” (Featherstone, 1996, p. 117). It

¹ Though the literal English translation exists (“cute”), *kawaii* as a term is linked to an entire sub-culture and aesthetic that the English translation does not account for. I will thus be using the Japanese term when talking about this specific kind of “cuteness.”

represents a set of cultural transformations that takes place during the adaptation and reconfiguration of foreign elements. In Taiwan, Japan, and the U.S. emerge as prominent sources of inspiration, especially in popular culture where their aesthetics are employed for broad appeal and widespread consumption: their images feature in many promotional endeavors, where their popularity gains them great currency (Chuang, 2011, p.2; Hsiao, 2002, p. 57).

This is also observable within the religious sphere. In the late 2000s, for instance, many temples in Taiwanese popular religion started including *kawaii* versions of their deity within their premise. This was inspired by the success of a promotional project from the major chain of convenience stores, Family Mart. The company had started giving out figurines of popular deities in *kawaii* form against evidence of in-store purchases, launching a “toy-god craze” (Silvio, 2023, p. 56). Seeing that the series was popular beyond expectations, temples started commissioning and selling cute versions of their own deities as souvenirs or spiritual commodities, often in an effort to connect with younger generations. This is not the only example; other religious places go to great lengths to include popular characters directly within the temple space. We might for instance consider the case of Longqi Wenheng Temple² (Longqi Wenhengdian 龍崎文衡殿), near Tainan City 臺南市.

² 龍崎 can be romanized as either Longqi (*hanyu pinyin*) or Longci (*tongyong pinyin*, used until 2006 as the official system in Taiwan). Since the temple references itself using “Longqi” on their website, I have opted to keep the *hanyu pinyin* version. For clarity purposes, this will be applied to every subsequent romanization.

Longqi Wenheng Temple and the inclusion of superheroes inside the religious space

Longqi Wenheng Temple was built in 1998 as an act of gratitude from a successful businessman, Chen Qingfei 陳慶飛, to his divine benefactor, Lord Guan (Guandi 關帝)³. Initially connected to the deity through the Houjia Guandi Temple (Houjia Guandi Dian 後甲關帝殿), a renowned temple in Tainan's East District, Chen found expanding the latter economically and spatially challenging. He therefore decided to build a new temple in the countryside, some thirty minutes from Tainan City Centre, in the hilly district of Longqi 龍崎. The temple is quite large, with a two-hall structure. The first hall holds the main deity of Longqi Wenheng Temple, The Holy Emperor of Balance and Knowledge (Wenheng shengdijun 文衡聖帝君), who is one of many iterations of Lord Guan. Accompanying him are the goddess Zhusheng (Zhusheng niangniang 註生娘娘), responsible for childcare, pregnancy, and motherhood, and the Fortune God (Fude zhengshen 福德正神). In the back hall are the revered bodhisatva Guanyin 觀音 and the goddesses Fengniang (Fengniang shengmu 鳳娘聖母), and Ziyun (Ziyun shengmu 紫雲聖母).

Locally, the temple is well-known for its wide courtyard, practical position on the highway between Tainan and the city of Kaoshiung (Gaoxiong 高雄), and many amenities, including karaoke sets, bathroom stalls, a coffee shop, and shaded areas. Online and at the national level, however, Longqi Wenheng Temple is known for its inclusion of American superhero replicas inside its main halls. Once up the flight of stairs that leads inside, visitors can

³ The literal translation for Guandi 關帝 is Emperor Guan, while his other title Guan Gong 關公 means Lord Guan. Both refer to the same deity, also the scholarship on the subject usually overlooks this and associates Guandi to Lord Guan. I will be doing the same.

find a whole gallery of characters, including Iron Man from the first *Iron Man* (2008) movie, Iron Man Gold, Iron Patriot and War Machine from the sequels, Hulk and Hulk Buster from *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), Thor from *The Dark World* (2013), Captain America from *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), Optimus Prime and Bumblebee from *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014). In total, including the Elsa and Olaf replicas from Disney's *Frozen* and Batman's cowl from *The Dark Knight Trilogy* (2005-2012) in the side exhibition hall, one can find more than ten characters from famous movie blockbusters on site.

When I conducted my fieldwork there between March and June 2023, the visitors and volunteers made it very clear to me that those statues are not thought of as deity-images (*shenxiang* 神像), or efficacious artifacts to be worshipped. Rather the first replica was an idea from the temple founder, Chen Qinfei. In 2013, after seeing his grandson's admiration for Iron Man, Chen decided to put the character's replica in the main hall so that children who accompany their parents would find their own hero there at the same time. This first intention was then followed by a series of donations, building up to an entire gallery of blockbuster characters. Today, everyone understands them as marketing props, included here to attract visitors and entertain the children. They make the temple particular (*tebie* 特別 or *you teshu* 有特殊) which so far, according to Longqi Wenheng Temple's website and staff, has been a very successful strategy. Visitors and worshippers from all around Taiwan can be seen at Longqi Wenheng Temple, establishing it as not only a local center but an island-wide attraction.

Scope of the thesis

In this thesis, I offer to look at the localization of American and Japanese cultures within the realm of Taiwanese popular religion. I argue that the inclusion of Japanese and American aesthetics such as presented above is embedded into the larger context of modernization – here understood as a process that includes industrialization, democratization, economic development, and urbanization – and the impact of globalization in Taiwan. More specifically, their inclusion is linked to the evolving commercialization of religious connections, the intensified competition within the Taiwanese religious market, and the perceived effectiveness of hybridization as a marketing strategy.

The temple of Longqi Wenheng Temple offers an interesting example of this by referencing both Japanese and American cultures with varied degrees of effect. For instance, one can find *kawaii* representations of Lord Guan on the temple's roadside billboard and on the merchandise. This reformulation of the deities in such a well-known and popular aesthetics participates in making them more approachable (Silvio 2019, p. 90). As a strategy, it is completely accepted and embedded within the popular religious sphere, despite relying on recognizable elements of Japanese manga culture. On the other hand, the American superheroes inside the two halls are “odd,” “surprising” and “special,” which is part of their marketing power: the way Longqi Wenheng Temple presents itself at the national level relies on its promise to surprise with the strangeness of its decorations. This in turn translates into a feeling of “specialness” (*tebie* 特別) or “fun” (*youqu* 有趣). To put it another way, the *kawaii*-deities and the American statues are a twist, both embedded in and dis-embedded from the larger religious culture. They can thus be modeled as two points on the spectrum of hybridization.

The example of Longqi Wenheng Temple therefore provides the opportunity to see the impact and tensions that arise from hybridization in its various forms as it intersects with the religious market. Visual culture in Taiwanese folk religion is constantly changing and engaged in a symbiotic process with the larger society. The influence of globalized consumer culture raises important points around the question of identity, orthopraxy, and how change is dealt with at the grassroots level (Silvio, 2023, p. 74-75). The question might arise as to why the question of "Touristification" is not included here. While an interesting lens, the division between tourists, pilgrims, and visitors is notoriously blurry, especially in the context of Chinese religions where worship and religiosity are not clearly defined. For instance, many visitors might consider themselves non-religious and engage in incense burning or ancestor worship. As such, "touristification" as a process where places of worship are turned into places of entertainment for "tourists" is implicitly reframed within the question of "commodification" and "marketization." By exploring the surrounding context, processes, and challenges, I aim at participating in the larger discussions on the marketization of religion, and the challenges posed by modernization within popular religions. Following this, I will be asking the following questions: How can we place the hybridity in Longqi Wenheng Temple within the greater context of modernization and change in contemporary Taiwan? What challenges arise from such hybridity and how are they explained and/or reformulated within the larger society?

Market theory and hybridization in the study of contemporary religion

The past hundred years have brought their share of challenges to the study of religions as scholars have tried to account for the changes brought by modernization, including the rise of market-societies. Religious faiths/institutions and the market economy have always been

sybiotically linked, leading to what some have called the “marketization” of religion. The exact definition of this term differs slightly from scholar to scholar, though we might consider “marketization” as the process where religious ties adopt the logic of the market, and institutions compete for their share of them (Palmer, 2011, p. 590). While not a recent phenomenon, scholars from Marx in the 19th century to those in the mid-1960s have contended that the progression of modern market economies, encompassing capitalism, industrialization, and consumerism, would result in the weakening of connections within the religious sphere, ultimately leading to absolute secularization. (Weller, 1999, p. 89).

This mutual exclusivity of religion and the modern market did not pass the test of time. Rather, proponents of the “religious market” theory have pointed out that religion can be seen as a highly dynamized market that considers advancements, the global flow of people, capital, and information; rising and falling with its marketable abilities and entrepreneurship leadership (Pattana, 2010, p. 565; Einstein, 2007). Rather than being replaced by a secular society, religious institutions/faiths propagate using new advancements and transition within consumerist culture leading to their “commodification”. In other words, we see the formation of “an interactive and iterative relationship between religion and market, simultaneously involving both market force commodifying religion and religious institution taking part in the marketplace and consuming culture” (Pattana, 2010, p. 565).

This lens has been used extensively in the study of religions in Taiwan, especially to account for new forms of temple-entrepreneurship and the use of marketing strategies to cater to new urbanites (Pas, 2003, p. 37). The Taiwanese religious sphere has undergone profound transformations in recent decades, leading to its own form of competition, arguably similar to modern market logic (Weller, 1999; Hsiao, 2002). Robert Weller, for instance, argues that recent

developments have led to a “split-market,” with on one hand religious movements that uphold national or global values and spread over large networks; and on the other hand, highly specific and individualized forms of religious services and goods that cater to a population no longer tied to one religious place by ascriptive communal ties. This divide then transfers onto the debate between the upholding of traditional values, and the transformation of practices to fit into modern society (Weller, 1999, p. 84).

The way commodification works and factors in popular trends and globalized culture have prompted scholars to seek ways to account for forms of “cultural mixture.” Among those, “hybridity” is a highly discussed theme within Globalization Studies, along with “hybridization”, the associated process where elements from different cultures are fused or associated together (Featherstone, 1996, p. 117). Within the study of religion, and particularly Chinese religions, this process is often paired with “syncretism,” though depending on the author these two terms sometimes refer to the same thing. As a loose distinction between the two, “hybridization” emphasizes the fragmented origin of the many parts, while “syncretism” emphasizes the interaction between systems. Neither of these processes is new or in Nagatani’s words:

Order emerges from a hybrid situation and grows into a system by undergoing transformation including syncretism, and may dissolve into fragmented parts again.
(Nagatani, 2023, p. 272)

Both are useful for our purpose here; hybridization includes the ability to pick from a range of what McDaniel would call “repertoire” (McDaniel, 2011, p. 9). Syncretic ties then become instrumental in legitimizing the inclusion of such new elements into the pre-existing system.

One thing that both discussants of hybridization and syncretism agree on, however, is that the intermeshing of cultures expands over a range. Here again, what makes the points of this spectrum vary. In syncretism, scholars like DeBernardi proposed a system that went from *syncretic amity* to *fusion*, depending on how much a religious system has accepted and absorbed elements of another (DeBernardi, 2009, p. 141). In hybridization, some may consider it to be a question of consciousness: on one end are the elements that are clearly recognized as foreign, and on the other are those whose foreignness has been erased (Pattana, 2005). Others have worded it as a question of “oddness,” where interactions can be placed depending on whether the introduced elements are “strange,” to whether they have been banalized/accepted (Nagatani, 2023, pp. 276-277). What is strange, odd, or perceived as foreign, however, necessarily acknowledges a double lens since those living in proximity to the phenomenon – or insiders – and those seeing it from the outside – or outsiders – might not share the same view⁴. This idea of insider/outsider is a long-standing problematic, especially in the study of syncretism where the outsider’s gaze was considered able to spot things the insiders could not (Nagatani, 2023, p. 275).

Fieldwork and methodology

This thesis is based on two main elements. The first one is the body of work on hybridization and marketization I have attempted to present in the previous section. Many

⁴ Nagatani’s model, for instance, proposes four points: “syncretism,” or intentional hybridity, where insiders notice some oddness about the imported element but work towards synthesis; “bricolage” (“normal hybridity”), where insiders do not feel odd with the imported elements, and outsiders do to some level, while still recognizing the unity of the system; “hybridity in a narrow sense of the term”, where the outsiders find the new element unharmonious but insiders remain unconcerned; and “separative coexistence,” where both outsiders and some of the insiders see and are concerned by the new element. (Nagatani 2023, 276)

scholars have proposed anchor points to the spectrum of hybridization (Nagatani, 2023; McDaniels, 2011; Pattana, 2010). For this study, I will keep to the idea that hybridization accepts several levels of “oddness” and “embeddedness”, which may vary depending on individuals’ everyday proximity to the new hybridity and the latter’s overall presence in the religious sphere.

The second is my own ethnographic fieldwork at Longqi Wenheng Temple between February and June 2023. During that time, I went to Longqi Wenheng Temple once to four times a week and talked with volunteers and visitors, both regulars and one-timers. I engaged in participant observation, attended events organized at and by the temple, as well as joined in with the communal life that had organized itself in the temple courtyard. I also conducted a series of interviews on-site to ask visitors their opinions on the temple’s decision to include well-known American movie characters. In the end, I received fifteen responses, including one group interview with the volunteers. Most of the interviews were conducted with several participants at once since most people came accompanied.

There are a series of factors to be addressed when it comes to my fieldwork. The most obvious element is my own positionality as a white foreign researcher. In a setting such as Longqi Wenheng Temple, apart from the cosmopolitan buzz of the city, my presence was largely disruptive. Though the volunteers and the regulars eventually got used to my presence, many of the people I interviewed or who were there only in passing were surprised by my presence. I experienced many generous treatments or indulgences that accompanied my status as someone to be “welcomed” in Taiwan. Most people also understood me as close to the temple volunteers with whom I spent the largest amount of my downtime, which no-doubt informed their answers when it came to the replicas. Oral testimonies inherently pose challenges as they are shaped by personal agendas, self-censure, and constructed memories. However, “oral testimony is

sometimes all that we have and it can be accurate, and even when it is not fully accurate it remains meaningful” (Nichols, 2022, p. 11). While I am aware of these problems, the information shared with me remained crucial and informative.

Another important bias was the language barrier. Almost the entirety of the data I collected, with the exception of two interviews with English-speakers, was in Mandarin Chinese (*guoyu* 國語). Though I have trained in Mandarin Chinese both in Canada and Taiwan, I was still only able to ask basic questions and receive simple answers. As such, the research I will be presenting below is limited. With that in mind, I have mostly diverged from trying to explain sentiments or emotions and relied on simpler facts – such as how people had heard about the temple, what they thought of the statues, and why they came here – as departure points for my research. My method thus stands between historical recontextualization, previous scholarly-theoretical perspectives, interviews, and participant observation.

Structure of this study

The aim of this thesis is thus to understand and explore the interactions between marketization, hybridization, and popular religious culture, with a prime focus on the case of Longqi Wenheng Temple.

In the first chapter, I will be replacing Longqi Wenheng Temple within the larger context that informs the specific marketization of religion in Taiwan. The late nineteenth-to-early-twentieth-century period was marked by rapid modernization which, within the religious sphere, translated into new, increasingly market-like ties between individuals and religious institutions. This phenomenon is complex and engages many overlapping processes. Some of those are

particularly relevant to the situation of Longqi Wenheng Temple. Increased mobility, for instance, meant that the main demand for religious services was no longer limited by ascriptive, communal ties, and could (in some cases *had to*) be catered to. Simultaneously, democratization led to a “springtime” in civil society, accompanied by a boom in temple construction. For temples in farther places, like Longqi Wenheng Temple, marketing strategies such as the reformulation of aesthetics to cater to youth culture or having something “particular” that appeals to larger audiences became a timely addition.

Following this, Chapters 2 and 3 observe how Longqi Wenheng Temple negotiates the use of hybridization to further its reach. Chapter 2 will look at the particular inclusion of globalized culture within the temple space. We find two types of aesthetic changes within Longqi Wenheng Temple, the first being the appeal to the Japanese *kawaii*-style, and the second one being the inclusion of American blockbuster characters. The inclusion of these two cultures is not arbitrary; apart from China, the U.S. and Japan exert the most influence on Taiwanese culture, mostly because of their shared history and importance on the global scene. The way their influence is hybridized, however, expands over a range. The *kawaii* aesthetic, despite its importance on the temple grounds, has been completely banalized. The superhero replicas on the other hand are still considered as elements of globalized popular culture and stand as “oddities” within the realm of religious culture.

Chapter 3 will look at how those visual changes are justified within the temple space. The marketization of religious culture and services is a perennial issue that has sparked, over the centuries, many debates around authenticity and change. The same can be found today in Taiwan, begging the question of how Longqi Wenheng Temple explains its inclusion of what are clearly marketing props inside the temple hall. According to various sources, there is an

important element as the American superheroes emphasize values that are similar to Lord Guan's. They are also referenced in connotated terms that further pull them into the religious sphere. Additionally, the replicas are (emphatically) presented as donations, which embeds them into the donor-to-deity relationship, rather than making them strictly part of the economic market.

The final chapter will provide the opportunity to circle back to our starting point: from looking at how social changes affect the religious sphere, I will look at how changes in the religious sphere such as hybridization and marketization feed back into contemporary debates. Altering traditional culture necessarily raises questions of orthopraxy, however in the case of Taiwan they also question the identity link to China and feed into Blue/Green political debates⁵. Though not directly connected to Longqi Wenheng Temple, we may think of two examples that are remindful of the strategies put in place at the temple: the “Malevolent Lantern Incident” which led to the contested inclusion of a manga-style lantern of Mazu during the 2017 Taipei Lantern Festival. The second aspect involves the incorporation of Marvel's Thor as a visual symbol representing social change in a setting borrowed from traditional Chinese popular religion during the 2023 Taipei Lantern Festival.

⁵ The Green/Blue divide in Taiwanese politics references the two main sorts of political coalition in contemporary Taiwan. On the one hand are the pan-Green groups, heralded by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). This side of the political spectrum usually favors both the creation of a distinct Taiwanese identity and Taiwan's independence. The pan-Blue groups, on the other hand, are heralded by the Kuomintang (KMT), which has historically advocated for Chinese unification. Today, however, many supporters of the Blue groups have shifted their discourse towards maintaining the present status-quo.

Chapter 1. Social changes, “Religious Revival” and marketing strategies

Introduction

This first chapter explores how the societal changes in Taiwan have factored into the creation of today’s religious market, and in turn the use of strategies like hybridization. At first glance, the symbiotic link between market modernity and religious development may seem counter intuitive. Throughout history, from Marx to scholars in the 16th century, many assumed that the ascendancy of capitalism, industrialization, and consumerism would weaken religious ties and eventually lead to absolute secularization (Weller, 1999, p. 89). Moreover, there was a prevalent belief that popular religion inherently opposed “modernity” as defined by Western ideals. In Taiwan, this lead to anti-religious discourses in the political sphere and deliberate attempts to discourage the modernization of religiosity by the ruling party until at least the 1970s (Laliberté, 2004).

Contrary to predictions, contemporary Taiwanese religious culture remains dynamic, actively shaping trends, engaging in debates, influencing political ideas, and contributing to social identities. If anything, scholars have observed a trend toward the marketization of religious ties, accompanied by heightened competition hinging on the capabilities of temple entrepreneurs (Pas, 2003, p. 36-38). In parallel to this, the 1980s witnessed a “remarkable renaissance” (Madsen, 2008, p. 295) or a “religious revival” (Pas, 2003, p. 36), characterized by a surge in temple constructions, a shift toward grandiose projects, and the emergence of new forms of religious ties and organizations. The result can be considered a vibrant religious market, in the sense that new and old religious actors outdo themselves to attract their shares of visitors and believers (Pas, 2003, p. 39).

To better understand this, I offer to highlight three processes that seem relevant to the formation of today's religious market. The first one is the departure from the "civilization of the parish," informed by greater mobility of both people and information (Stolow, 2010, p. 549), which has led to the weakening of ascriptive, communal ties in favor of more personal and individual choices. In parallel to this, and explored in the second part, recent democratization has led to a "springtime" for Taiwan's civil society, including temples and religious organizations, leading to a "religious revival," and thus accrued competition. Together, as we'll see in the third part, those have participated in a reformulation of religion in market terms, as temples find and adopt new strategies such as hybridization to compete for visitors.

1) Changes in mobility: from *jisiquan* to pan-island movements

When looking at changes in Taiwanese society, the most obvious one is the formation of a mobile, increasingly urbanized population. This is a departure from a hundred years ago, when social ties were for the most part informed by the sedentary lifestyle of ascriptive communities and agrarian culture. This had numerous rippling effects on the religious landscape, the importance of which gains visibility when compared with past research on Taiwanese religiosity, in particular the surveys conducted by Okada Yuzuru during the Japanese occupation (Nadeau & Hsun, 2003).

In 1895, China lost the first Sino-Japanese war and ceded the island to Japan. Among the works that remain from this era is the research conducted by Okada on religious life in villages around Taipei in the 1930s. Okada observed that the reach of each cult seemed limited to the boundaries of intermarriage and market exchanges. Different regions of the island worshipped

different deities, and such decisions usually depended on where on the mainland the settler communities had immigrated from. In the absence of family roots: the newly displaced immigrants would join those who had come from the same place, something later scholars have called “guild association.” All of this led to Okada theorizing the concept of “worship circle” (*jisiquan* 祭祀圈), which in later research has been described as:

A group of individuals inhabiting a prescribed area, usually loyal to a particular temple (although some are not temple-based), who maintain shares (*fen*) in the association through the sponsorship of temple construction, festivals, operatic performances, “territorial inspection tours,” and so on. The *jisiquan* is based on common origins (ethnicity) and on surname identity (single-surname groups) as well as membership in a residential community (Nadeau & Hsun, 2003, p. 290).

Thus, these *jisiquan* relied on layers of identity, including, but not limited to kinship, marriage alliances, temple association and festivals, and the worship of a specific god. Religious affiliation was thus highly localized within the limits of space-time and face-to-face interaction.

This concurred with the state of infrastructure at the time, though the next century would be marked by important construction projects. During Okada’s time, the Japanese government began the construction of the first island-wide railroad system, in continuation to the tracks built between Keelung (Jilong 基隆) and Hsinchu (Xinzhu 新竹) at the end of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). The ability to move around the island was instrumental to the colonizers for control over both resources and the population. The Imperial Railway System under Japanese rule added many pushcart and steam locomotive tracks in the more mountainous regions, as well as a north-south axis with two coastal lines for the transport of material and the pacification of Taiwanese

insurrectionists. By 1906, only ten years after the beginning of colonization, the outline of the system that we see today was completed, and by 1945 the Japanese had built several highways, even attempting to cross the central mountain range and connect the eastern and western coasts (Hsu et al., 1980, p. 167).

The post-war Republic of China (ROC) added on those projects with major road and railroad construction. The period between 1978 and 2000 saw the building of ten national highways that connect the whole western coast of the island. Hsu, who wrote in 1980, talks with anticipation of the construction of a rail link in the south, completing the round-the-island network and granting accessibility and connectivity to most of Taiwan's urban centers (Hsu et al., 1980, 193). Today, Taiwan is equipped with the newer Taiwan Railways system and Taiwan High-Speed Rail (THSR), both of which are part of the Taiwan Railway Administration (TRA). For more rural areas, Taiwan counts an extensive system of buses, supplemented by smaller shuttles where needed.

Simultaneously, technological advances have led to a revolution in the realm of media and communication with significant changes. The last century witnessed a transition into a fast-paced, global mediascape (Stolow, 2010, p. 548). By 1998, more than 68% of Taiwanese households held a subscription to cable television. In 1999, more than three million people were using the Internet, leading to the formation of the island's first "Internet tribe" (Hsiao, 2002, p. 56). This was accompanied by significant growth in the media industry, with a dozen private companies providing internet access by the turn of the millennium (Hou & Hong, 2023, p. 73). Recent years have seen a transformative turn to social media, brought by the advent of highly interactive platforms through which content is created, discussed, and shared. Most people today have a Facebook, an X (formerly known as Twitter), or a LINE account. According to the 2012

Digital Opportunity for All report, 74.3% of Taiwanese internet users had a social media account (Hung, 2015, p. 146). Those changes have led to a growing and increasingly globalized visibility of public actors, and their reliance on technologies to advertise themselves across long-distance (Stolow, 2010, p. 548).

The ways changes in mobility (both human and informational) have echoed into the religious sphere are manifold. One significant shift is a departure from what Hervieux-Léger has called a “civilization of the parish,” or “the geographical confines of routine institutional participation and face-to-face interaction, and the localized boundaries of ritual time” (as cited in Stolow, 2010, p. 549). The development of road infrastructure and the prevalence of social media have prompted individuals to view new and more distant locations as “destinations” (Stausberg, 2010, p. 5). Given the size of the island and the state of its infrastructure, it is now possible for people to take day trips or weekend trips to explore temple attractions, participate in festivals, engage in pilgrimages, or simply enjoy leisure activities, even if these locations are distant from their homes.

Simultaneously, such mobility has led to the displacement of both worshippers and places of worship. The knowledge that people could acquire information through media and travel to explore new places, combined with the increasing cost of urban land, motivated many temples to relocate to rural areas (Pas, 2003, p. 37). In addition to this, exponential urbanization has led to the emergence of a new market of uprooted, non-temple-affiliated urbanites. Starting in 1953, the island began a series of economic construction plans, with modern industries burgeoning in the cities and their peripheries. While 26.8% of the population lived in rural areas in 1950, the number had jumped to 78.9% by 2020 (Speare, 1974, p. 302). As Palmer notes:

Since the 20th century, urbanization and the shift away from the sedentary, ascriptive communities of agrarian culture, to the more mobile, unaffiliated populations of immigrant metropolises – as well as the subsequent weakening of communal religious culture, further reinforced by political campaigns and restrictions, has vastly increased the population who lack religious knowledge, culture and community, and thus constitute a vast potential market for those who would provide packaged solutions to unaffiliated individuals. (Palmer, 2011, p. 590)

In other words, for many the choice of affiliation or preferences in terms of temple, became reliant on new factors, such as beauty, interest, services, morality, or reputation, over communal ties. In urban areas, an increasing number of temples started re-packaging their services to cater to more individualistic, market-type kind of relationships by offering the consumption of religions without the hold of customary ties (Weller, 1999, p. 84). This expansion of market logic within the religious sphere was particularly favorable for those who traditionally operated on “client cult” relationships, and thus already had market-types of relationships with their audiences, while other types of institutions went through important reformulations (Palmer, 2011, p. 590).

When looking at Longqi Wenheng Temple, we see that some of the choices around its construction are contingent on these processes. While expanding in the city was too costly, moving to Longqi allowed the temple committee to buy fifty hectares of land and arrange a courtyard that was both spacious and practical. Thanks to the accrued space, the temple could also include amenities, such as a coffee shop, three shaded areas, bathrooms, an exhibition hall, and two parking lots, which in turn augmented its attractiveness. Additionally, despite its location in the countryside, the temple is only thirty minutes by car or by motorcycle from Tainan City

Centre, which is close enough that people can come at their convenience. A bus also runs from within the city to the temple courtyard five times a day, though in my experience I was the only one to stop at that station.

In addition to this, the temple can count on social media to disseminate information about itself. Longqi Wenheng Temple maintains a Facebook page and a website and is easily recognizable in photos and media posts. For instance, one of the volunteers showed me that their temples had appeared on a YouTube video by *Formosa TV News Network* (*Minshi xinwenwang* 民視新聞網), a channel with 1.8 million subscribers that provides daily information. The video, titled “A cement worker becomes a billionaire solely through the divine intervention of Guan Gong? He reveals the legend of ‘Longqi Wenheng Temple’ in Tainan - Formosa News,”⁶ delved into the narrative behind the temple's establishment and showcased images of the replicas in the main hall. Since its posting on January 7th, 2022, the video has garnered 5,855 views. I later interviewed a woman from Pingtung (Pingdong 屏東) who shared that she had decided to visit Longqi Wenheng Temple on her journey north after watching a YouTube video, though she could not remember which one. Other interviewees also highlighted the importance of media in their discovery of Longqi Wenheng Temple, showing me photos of FaceBook or Instagram posts they had seen or created themselves.

⁶ According to the official story, the temple founder, Chen Qingfei, comes from a poor family and got suddenly sick in his early twenties. The strange illness affected his legs, making him unable to walk and heavily reliant on painkillers. This did not stop him from continuing to make daily trips to the Houjia Guandi Temple, a very famous temple in Tainan East District dedicated to the deity Lord Guan. His devotion was rewarded on October 6th 1967. At two in the morning, while Chen was praying at the temple, the hall was overtaken by a brilliant, multicoloured light. A seven-foot-tall figure of Lord Guan appeared before him. Fifteen days later, his legs were healed without him taking any medication. In the following year, Chen ventured into the construction industry, and with Lord Guan's guidance achieved great success, becoming the chairman of the Huanglong Construction Company (Huanglong jianzhu tuandui 皇龍建築團隊), which is at the origin of hundreds of projects in Taiwan.

2) Political push-and-pulls, Religious revival, and insertion in “civil society”

Paralleling this increase in mobility, the past century in Taiwan was marked by further changes to the place of religiosity in the larger society, going from repression under the Japanese colonial rule, to strict control under the KMT, to a “springtime” in the 1980s and the absorption of the middle-class’s ideals.

The Japanese approach to colonization was informed by a strategy called *kominka*, or the “Japanization” of colonial subjects. To this effect, and until Japan’s defeat at the end of World War Two, Chinese-Taiwanese culture faced many limitations. It was forbidden to teach or use indigenous languages such as Hokkien or Fujianese and the education system was changed to teach Japanese language and history. Religious culture was not a target at first, except for temples that were identified as places of resistance and burned (Weller, 1987, p. 39), but the repression picked up in the 1930s, when the first generation of Taiwanese had been raised and educated in Japanese, and the build-up to the war effort led to further pressure on Japanization. At its highest point, it led to the removal of deity images from numerous popular temples, some of which were burnt while the finer ones were taken to Japanese ethnological museums (Weller, 1999, pp. 48-50). Simultaneously, the government proposed the promotion of local gods into the Shinto Heaven and emphasized Japanese Buddhism. Festivals were similarly restricted, though many communities retained their practices by disguising them as athletic competitions. The Dragon Boat Festival in the 1920s, for instance, was framed as a competition between villages to grab the best prizes from high towers (Weller, 1999, pp. 48-50)

The Japanese hold on the island slipped when Japan ended up on the losing side of World War II. In 1945, Taiwan was returned to the Republic of China (ROC) as one of the thirty-five provinces. The ruling party at that time, the Kuomintang (KMT, Guomindang 國民黨), soon found itself back into a civil war against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and lost. In 1949, the CCP established the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the mainland, and the KMT, led by Chiang Kai-shek 蔣中正, fled to Taiwan to regroup. The KMT imagined its situation as only transitory and worked on keeping its legitimacy as the sole representative for China, especially on the international scene and in the eye of its ally against the communists, the United States. Among other things, this meant presenting themselves as a strong “modern” nation. The implications of this were significant: for the next thirty-eight years, the KMT kept strong control of the island by establishing martial law and a series of restrictions on political action, freedom of speech, and civil liberties. This effort to “modernize” Taiwan included keeping any other suspiciously large institutions from interfering, which in the religious sphere meant that strict measures were taken against any religious institutions, cults, and sects that overstepped the bounds of the manageable (Laliberté, 2004, pp. 39-40).

This started changing in the late 1970s, as those same religious institutions became involved in social welfare through charity missions and health institutes. As one of many departure points, in 1976 the provincial governments tasked all temples to carry out charity work. While in the past, the task of taking care of one's own had been laid on extended families, the aforementioned increasing mobility and complexity of Taiwanese society meant that families could no longer meet such needs. To cut its expenditure, the state turned to temples to carry out this same work, going as far as sponsoring those they considered efficient enough. Buddhist and Daoist religious organizations started growing while solidly anchored into civil society and in

good partnership with the government, albeit slowly (Madsen, 2008, p. 318). The real take-off happened after the lifting of martial law in 1987. In Madsen's words, those years marked a true "springtime" for Taiwan's civil society as most restrictions on free association were lifted. People took part in all manners of social engagement from the political to the religious and the philanthropic.

Within religious life, this participated in what scholars have called a "religious revival." Groups like the Buddha Light Mountain (Foguangshan 佛光山) and the Buddhist Compassionate Relief Charity Foundation (Fojiao ciji cishan shiye jijinhui 佛教慈濟慈善事業基金會, also known as Ciji 慈濟), for instance, grew rapidly, operating hospitals, and medical schools and engaging in philanthropic activities. This is significant: as mentioned earlier, at this time Taiwan was emerging from a regime with a strong rationalist edge, and a clear aim to secularize the island. To some extent, this is still the case today, with a modern education system that discourages the influence of religion and "superstition" (Pas, 2003, p. 44). However, these "springtime" decades saw the re-emergence of religious organizations in a way that made them conciliable with modern state, science, and technology, and thus also able to answer the social problems and dilemmas presented by an increasingly fast-paced, mobile, urban, and industrializing society (Madsen 2008, p. 297). This form of "rational-ethical" religiosity became particularly popular with the middle class, with less emphasis on rituals and mysterious doctrines, and a focus on the believer's responsibility in the world. We may for instance think of "this-worldly" Buddhism, or "reform" Daoism, which both explain the rationale behind their mission in terms of ethics, rather than doctrine. The Enacting Heaven's Business Temple (Xingtiangong 行天宮) in Taipei, for instance, holds the discourse that its deities and statues

have no efficacy, rather they are examples of moral virtues to be followed (Madsen, 2008, p. 304).

This concurrent development of the middle class and the reformulation of religious ideals has been powerful in securing new patronage and investments for temples, directly participating in the exponential growth of religious sites. In terms of numbers only, statistics from past and present governments show an augmentation in registered temples going from 3,700 temples in 1939 to 9,707 in 2001 (Pas, 2003, p. 37). As for those new temples, the possibility to build out of the city allowed for projects of unprecedented scale, like the Orthodox Mazu Lu'Ermen Temple (Lu'Ermen Tianhou Guan 鹿耳門天后宮), standing on the outskirts of Tainan City. Those same decades saw the formation of many pietist sects, characterized by an emphasis on single-deity cults, regular meetings, a strict selection of devotees, spirit-possession or spirit-writing sessions, textual analysis of Confucian and Daoist classics, and a greater moral that sets them apart from the rest of society. Many of those movements seek expansion through sponsorship or the production of magazines, but also through the involvement of business investors. A prime example of this is The Way of Unity (Yiguan Dao 一貫道), a renown sect with over one million followers in 1999 (around 5% of the population in Taiwan at the time), and which boasted the patronage of Zhang Rongfa 張榮發, one of the island's wealthiest men. The Way of Unity sect has some deep reach into the restauration business, with control over most of the vegetarian restaurants in Taiwan (Weller, 1999, p. 92).

In other words, the democratic turn in the 1970s participated in Taiwan's religious revival. Not only were restrictions on religious culture lifted, but the way religiosity was understood was shaped by progressive involvement with both politics and charity work, making

it apt to deal with the concerns and aspirations of modern Taiwanese society. The result was a sharp increase in religious projects, adding new actors to the religious market.

3) Attracting visitors in an era of competition: from marketization to hybridization

As previously discussed, increased mobility of both people and ideas has prompted many to view new places as “destinations” (Stausberg, 2001, p. 5). Simultaneously, the array of choices has continued to expand with the construction of new temples and projects, or through improved accessibility to existing ones. For the majority, the way they consider religiosity has shifted towards the convenient, the ethical, or the individualistic, rather than being tied to ascriptive affiliations (Palmer, 2011). In an increasingly market-oriented economy, the challenge is how to effectively market oneself. Considering that people's religious choices have become more personal and intricate, the ability to attract a diverse range of visitors depends on addressing a myriad of these demands. In his study of Buddhist tourism McDaniels (2017) notes:

The sites that are thriving usually offer not only delight and spectacle that attracts visitors, Buddhist, and non-Buddhist, local and foreign, but also opportunities to listen to sermons and perform basic rituals. They also are usually in areas that offer other shopping, dining, and entertainment options for local and international tourists so that they can attract people looking for a variety of activities for families (especially those with young children). The more geographically isolated places often must have bigger spectacle displays to attract people from greater distances. (p. 9)

This ability to market itself is thus particularly relevant, especially for temples like Longqi Wenheng Temple which do not enjoy the same visibility as those in the city and rely on media

and infrastructure to make their presence known. The temple is situated in the district of Longqi, on the other side of Guanmiao 關廟 from Tainan City. The closest township, Longqi, is some fifteen minutes away by car or motorbike. Though the district holds its fair share of local touristic landmarks⁷, the local economy relies on forestry more than on any other sector, with 90% of the area designated as hillside conservation forests. Outside of the straight line of the highway, the terrain is hilly and gold-dusted, made of mudstone, sandy soil, and thick with bamboo. In other words, though situated on a practical route the temple is fairly isolated from other attractions, making it particularly important that it presents itself as a convenient space of leisure, spectacle, and ritual.

The few locals from the nearby townships of Longqi and Guanmiao are not likely to be bothered by this. The temple is for them a space for communal ties and thus answers the main condition of locality. Families and residents from Tainan City, however, might be harder to persuade as the temple enters direct competition with those that are in the city – especially when said city already hoards the most temples out of any other on the island, many of which are nationally famous (Lee & Chung, 2015). One strategy might be festivals. A survey in 2007 found that festivals ranked second to exhibitions in the Taiwanese favorite “cultural activities” (Chang & Liu, 2009, p. 900). In that aspect, Longqi Wenheng Temple is well-known. The Longqi Pineapple and Bamboo Shoot Chicken Festival (Longqifenglihaosunji 龍崎鳳梨好筍雞), for instance, welcomes local agriculturists and artisans every year so that they can present their products. The event is a major local attraction for inhabitants of Longqi, Guanmiao, and Tainan

⁷ Among those, the Longchuan Wollastonite Hiking trail offers a 365 panoramic view of the Grass Mountain Moon World, with reknown sunrises, sunsets, and starry skies. To the south is the Huxing Mountains, tiger-shaped and towering over its valley, addled with a red suspension bridge; and nearby the Da Keng Farm with a direct view on the central mountains.

and is co-organized by the Tainan City Government's Agriculture Bureau and Longqi District Farmers' Association. Among the attractions are theatrical performances, craft tables where one can learn to weave pineapple or square-shaped charms, and a lot of pineapple products, one of the specialties of Longqi. During this time, the two parking lots are entirely full.

However, such activities usually happen sporadically and don't justify visits from long-distance travelers who might have similar activities closer to their place of residence. When it comes to catering to visitors outside of Tainan County – usually Taichung 臺中 and Taipei – the strategy relies on specialness. For that, a visual change such as the inclusion of American replicas allows for rapid diffusion and engagement on social media platforms. This “hybridization” process, or the assemblage of elements from various origins, works as an “oddity,” a departure from what can be seen in other places. Multiple individuals expressed the belief that without the statues, the temple might not attract as many visitors. Geneviève Gamache (2018), who worked on the Thai Temple of Wat Rong Khun, a Buddhist temple that includes in its murals characters like Michael Jackson, Neo from Matrix, Spider-Man, and many others, describes this type of experience as follows:

What is available, to all visitors, is a superficial, yet highly stimulating, experience based on consumerism: consumption of the images but also the objects for sale (p. 113).

Indeed the reaction to the replicas is swift excitement, visible in the big smiles and impressed faces when passing the entrance, and the obligatory photoshoots where posers imitate Iron Man's raised hand, or Hulk's hunched pose. Supplementing this, the *kawaii*-version of Lord Guan provides further engagement, especially for the children. Its non-threatening and familiar aesthetic makes him seem more approachable than the more stern-looking deity-images (Silvio,

2023, p. 90). Furthermore, his “cute” face can be taken home as a souvenir by purchasing one of the many merchandise sold around the temple, such as plushies, face masks, paper toys, and other commodities. All of this participates in making Longqi Wenheng Temple a competitive and unique place of leisure within the growing market of popular religion.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have contended that the inclusion of marketing strategies in Longqi Wenheng Temple can only be explained by taking into consideration the larger societal transformations that have characterized recent Taiwanese history and their effect on the religious market. Though the actors and circumstances are more numerous than the ones I’ve been able to present above, I have tried to single out a few major processes, namely the increasing mobility of people and ideas, and the reformulation of religion to fit within the new civil society leading to a time of “Religious Revival”. All of this participated in the progressive marketization of religious ties and accrued competition in the religious market. In this context, the ability to engage in effective marketing plays a crucial role in the appeal of temples such as Longqi Wenheng Temple. While local visitors are likely to retain communal ties to the temple, others who come from farther away will be motivated by curiosity, spectacles, and convenience. Surprising aesthetics can thus be a useful strategy to capture interest and motivate long-distance travelers. In Longqi, this manifests as hybridization, incorporating both movie replicas and *kawaii* deities, a strategic combination that broadens the temple's appeal and fosters engagement with all sorts of audiences.

Chapter 2. The hybridization process and the influence of Japan and the U.S.

Introduction

As I have shown, the ability to market itself is an instrumental factor in the attractiveness of temples like Longqi Wenheng Temple. But how can we explain the choice of including American superheroes and Japanese aesthetics? How can we explain the specific influence of these hybridities within the temple space? In the introduction, I have argued that hybridization could be imagined as expanding over a spectrum of the “odd” to the “banalized,” depending on both individuals' proximity to the hybridity and the latter's overall presence within a particular sphere. The situation at Longqi Wenheng Temple allows us to observe both sides of the spectrum, and thus see the different ways Japanese and American cultures can be used to further a temple's reach.

This chapter will thus take a closer look at the hybridization process. First, I will be placing American and Japanese influences in their historical context. Both countries have shared history with Taiwan, especially in recent times, leading to their prevalence in the Taiwanese mediascape and popular culture. Then I will turn to how their popularity has shaded into different types of hybridity. Beginning with the *kawaii* aesthetic, their arrival into the religious sphere can be traced back to the 2010s “toy-god” craze, where popular deities were reformulated as “cute” figurines to be bought in stores. Today, they remain crucial elements of marketing, but have become “banalized.” As for the movie replicas, their preponderance relies on their uniqueness and the bold use of foreignness. Their inclusion references well-known movie characters for quick visual consumption. The statues are not meant to be normalized, but to remain as “hybridities.” Their “odd-ness” is thus engineered and sustained.

1) The competing influences of Japan and the United States in Taiwan

Japan has a special place in Taiwanese popular culture, derived both from shared history and geographical proximity. Namely, part of its influence on Taiwan can be traced back to the colonial era (1895-1945). Despite the violence of Japanese colonialism, many islanders retain an exceptional warmth towards their former occupier. Leo T.S. Ching attributes this to the Japanese empire's use of "intimacy." This term in colonial study serves to draw attention to the nature of the relationships between the colonized and colonizers, emphasizing how said relationships were regulated by, or alienated from, their participants (Lowe, 2015, pp. 15-18). In the East Asian context, Ching argues that "intimacy" was the basis of Japan's colonial desire, as the country sought to control its affective union with colonial Taiwan. Policies prevalent at the time emphasized discourses such as "Harmony between Japan and Taiwan" (*naitai yuwa*) or "Intimacy with Japan" (*shin nichi*), which for instance led to practices such as marriage between Japanese policemen and daughters of aboriginal tribes (Ching, 2001, p. 119). More generally, the "Japanization" policy (*kominka*) had the goal of purging any semblance of Chinese-ness to facilitate the integration of Taiwan into the Japanese Empire. This took the form of control over the education system, language, and the limitation of religious practices outside of Shintoism and Japanese Buddhism⁸. After fifty years of effort, however, the "Japanization" led to mixed results. From the perspective of the colonizer, the process had failed even with an entire generation of Taiwanese born and raised according to the colonial agenda. Despite that, the ideology had significantly transformed how colonial subjectivity and identity had been articulated and represented. Works of Taiwanese literature published at the end of the colonial era show, for

⁸ See Chapter 1, part 2.

instance, that a clear distinction was maintained between the colonizer and the colonized. The same body of work, however, bears witness to some level of anxiety within parts of the Taiwanese society at not having succeeded in becoming a complete “imperial subject.” This ambivalence towards Japan would go on to become the rationale behind many subsequent discourses (Ching, 2001, p. 132).

When the KMT arrived, one of its first policies was to shake the Taiwanese out of their “submissive state” and return them to “Chinese-ness.” Many islanders saw this arrival as a second invasion. The following decades were brutal, marked by repression such as “The 228 Incident” on February 28th, 1947, when the KMT military cracked down on a major demonstration, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths and arrests (Yueh & Cheng, 2023, p. xv). The period eventually earned the name “The White Terror” and lasted until Chen Kai-shek’s death and Taiwan’s progressive democratization in the 1980s. According to some, the violence of this period could be another factor explaining the Taiwanese longing for the Japanese era: the image that remained was of smoother times, and the idea of Japan as a developing force, notably responsible for Taiwan’s pan-island transportation system (Yueh 2023, p. 91).

At the same time as it tried to eradicate the influence of Japan, the KMT favored the diffusion of American media. The U.S. gained immense soft power after World War Two, imposing a cultural quasi-hegemony globally. In Taiwan, the influence was particularly felt after 1949, with the arrival of the KMT. At that point, the party’s main objective was to present itself as a modernized and secular state, in line with its ally the United States. This approach also aimed at legitimizing its place as the sole representative for China despite its exile from the mainland. From the mid-1940s onwards, the KMT government claimed its position as the “Free China”, emphasizing the Chinese roots of Taiwan, both in terms of culture and population. For

instance, junior high school textbooks before 1997 allocated 95% of their content to the KMT-ruled China in the section “Getting to Know Taiwan” (Yueh, 2023, p. 97). At the same time, American media flooded the Taiwanese mainstream with comics, music, Rock’n’roll, TV programs, and much more, a cultural turn that deeply influenced the generation that grew up in the 1960s (Silvio, 2018, p. 9).

Despite the KMT’s best endeavors, however, Japanese influence remained dominant throughout the 20th century. Even when partially banned, Japanese media such as fashion magazines, cartoon animation, TV shows, and popular music were imported into Taiwan and distributed illegally (Yueh, 2023, p. 93). This escalated into the 1990s, which is usually thought of as the beginning of Taiwan’s “Japan-mania”. This period and the 2000s saw the rise of Japanese soft power on the global scene. In Taiwan, it took the form of an enthusiasm for Japanese TV dramas in the 1990s, beginning with *Tokyo Love Story*. The mini-series aired in 1992 on STAR TV, a foreign television company that broadcasts its programs in Asia, and was a mega-hit. Following its success, companies started distributing all sorts of media products that were “Made in Japan” (Yueh, 2023, p. 93). Today we see in Taiwan the general popularity of all things Japanese, from films to manga, music, and computer games, but also through the adoption of the *kawaii* aesthetic, especially by young women. This is reflected through a wide range of elements, from behaviors like cute poses or the V sign to fashion such as skirts typically worn by Japanese highschool girls. This same period has also seen the rise of an immense community of Japanophiles (*hari* 哈日 in Chinese, composed of the Taiwanese Hokkien term *ha*, meaning “to desire,” and *ri* which refers to Japan in Mandarin), consuming and circulating Japanese products (Yueh, 2023, p. 93). At the same time, both animated characters and animated-like aesthetics

have entered all layers of society, from metro cards to plushies for political elections, to security signs, or news channels (Silvio, 2019, pp. 1-2).

2) *Chibi* and changes in aesthetics

When visitors approach Longqi Wenheng Temple, their initial encounter with the temple is likely to be the giant billboard situated along the roadside. On this billboard is a *chibi* rendition of Lord Guan, red-faced and holding his halberd (*guandao* 關刀)⁹, beckoning them to make a stop at the next exit. This kind of portrayal can be observed in most places of worship around Taiwan. Mazu Lu'Ermen (Lu'Ermen Tianhou Guan 鹿耳門天后宮), a very famous and influential temple complex north of Tainan city, includes many signposts with cute representations of the sea goddess Mazu 媽祖, giving indications as to how to pray, or where to find a particular room or facility, sometimes accompanied by her two attendants, Qianliyan 千里眼 and Shunfeng'er 順風耳¹⁰. One may also find an adult-size statue of the Monkey King (Sun Wukong 孫悟空), a famous Chinese hero¹¹, for children to take photos with. At the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage in February 2023, every temple group had on their T-shirt their respective “chibi” version of the sea goddess Mazu, creating a collection of unique yet stylistically similar designs.

According to Teri Silvio (2019), there is a general process of “cutification” of deities in Taiwan (p. 88). This term refers to the re-stylization of popular gods in a *kawaii* way, usually in

⁹ The *guandao* is a pole weapon with an arched blade at the tip, used in some forms of Chinese martial arts. Its creation is often credited to Guan Yu, the historical general who then became Lord Guan. He himself wielded the Bluegreen Dragon Crescent Moon Halberd (*qinglong yanyue dao* 青龍偃月刀) (Ter Harr, 2017, p. 156), a massive blade rumoured to have weighed anywhere between 18 and 100 pounds (Bane, 2020, p. 80).

¹⁰ Those two generals are in, some myths, demons that have been pacified by Mazu. Shunfeng'er can be translated by “Ears that Hear what Comes on the Wind” and Qianliyan by “Eyes that See a Thousand Miles” (Nadeau, 2012, p. 375)

¹¹ Sun Wukong is one of the main characters of the famed novel *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji* 西游記), published in 1592 and attributed to Ming dynasty author Wu Cheng'en 吳承恩 (approximate date 1500-1580)

the Japanese *chibi* or *neoteny* style. Originating in manga culture, these styles imitate a child's proportions by featuring a head that is the same size as the body, along with larger eyes and simplified clothing. The resulting depiction is something that elicits feelings of attachment and deep emotional response. This kind of “cutification” efforts within the religious sphere can be traced back to Family Mart’s Good God Figurines (*Hao Shen Gongzai* 好神公仔) series back in 2007 (Silvio, 2019, p. 88). In July of that year, the chain commissioned the company DEM Inc. to produce a series of cute miniature vinyl figurines of Buddhist and Daoist deities as part of their reward program. The series was incredibly popular, leading Family Mart to estimate a 20 percent increase in profits for that quarter (Silvio 88). The experience was repeated in December 2007, 2009, and 2010, each time with much success. DEM Inc. describes its creations as follows:

Our team at DEM believed that in order to surpass Hello Kitty’s level, figurines needed to have a local flavor to touch the hearts of consumers. Therefore, we strongly emphasized Taiwan’s spirit and local culture as the primary design concept for the first series of figurines. Nevertheless, under the influence of traditional customs, the need for spiritual comfort had increased throughout the years and has become a trending lifestyle.

Consequently, the first step was to design a series of Taiwanese mythical gods that would correspond to the Kidult culture and trend. Each character had a unique style that would also communicate the traditional culture to the younger generation. (Dem Global, 2023)

These Family Mart figurines thus already held in their design the idea of hybridization between religious elements, here coined as traditional or local, and Japanese influences found in youth culture. What they created was an aesthetic turn that factored in the popularity of Japanese aesthetics, effectively communicating with younger generations. Attracting a younger audience

has been a persistent challenge for Taiwanese religious sites, many of which have experienced a decline in attendance over the past century (Silvio, 2023, p. 90). Following the success of the “Good God Figurines,” numerous folk religious temples recognized these *kawaii* deities as an innovative means to attract or connect with the youth and commissioned their own cute versions of deities to sell as souvenirs or to display around their temple premises. In Longqi Wenheng Temple, the “cutified” Lord Guan serves that same purpose.



Figure 1. A large size kawaii-version of Guan Yu, Longqi Wenheng Temple - side exhibition hall, 2023. Photograph by the author.

As we can see in the image above, the *chibi* version retains the main elements that make Lord Guan recognizable from afar, like the long beard and the red face¹². Even more significant, its large eyes, small nose and child-like proportions render it approachable, playful, and comparatively less stern than the austere depictions of the deity-images.

This “god-toy craze” reached its peak around 2010, but cute deities have not vanished from the religious landscape. Instead, it seems that the era of the “deity-toys” has firmly embedded them there, to the extent that they have become commonplace. Their origin is clearly rooted in the popularity of Japanese culture, however, their hybrid origin is no longer a factor of “oddness.” Today, it is common to encounter cute versions of gods and goddesses on volunteers’ T-shirts, pens, greeting cards, advertisements, souvenirs, or even inflatable balloons during festival days (Silvio, 2019, p. 90). Therefore, the *kawaii* aesthetic change can be viewed as a marketing process that has become thoroughly integrated into the religious sphere, reaching a state of “banalized hybridity.”

3) The attractiveness of new characters in the temple space

At the fundamental level, the movie replicas share the same goal as the *kawaii* deities: they both aim to market Longqi Wenheng Temple to wider audiences. However, their approaches differ significantly: while the *kawaii* deities are commonplace and foster emotional attachment, the movie replicas rely on being “out of place,” creating a sense of surprise and amusement. This

¹² Guan Yu’s beard is frequently praised in the *Legend of the Three Kingdoms*, which signifies his good character. Likewise, he is known for his ruddy face, which has become one of his many characteristics in iconographic works.

is contingent on factors such as their recognizability as characters from popular culture and their bold foreignness as symbols of American culture.

Marvel and Transformers are, undeniably, widely recognizable figures. Some may have encountered them through TV shows aired on Cartoon Network Taiwan or Disney Channel Taiwan, as is the case with the temple founder's grandson. Others may have experienced these characters through the blockbuster movies that have dominated global popular culture over the past decade. After all, “We are living in the age of superheroes, and we cannot deny it” (McSweeney 2018, p. 1), the new millennium has seen the unprecedented proliferation of the superhero genre and its distribution worldwide. In Taiwan, blockbusters from the MCU, namely *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), *Iron Man 3* (2013), *The Avengers* (2012), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), all figure in the Taiwanese top 25 box office. As for the *Transformers* franchise, *Transformers* (2007) and *Revenge of the Fallen* (2009) rank 6th and 16th on the Taiwanese box office. Accordingly, it is the MCU heroes that we find in Longqi Wenheng Temple, poised on the socles that bear their movie's name: as shown below (Figure 2), the Captain America we see in the back hall is the one from *Winter Soldier*, sporting the face of the actor Chris Evans. The Thor replica standing in the same room, has *Thor: The Dark World* imprinted on the base. The statues of Optimus Prime and Bumblebee (Figures 3 and 4), two main characters of the Transformers franchise, were brought into the temple in 2014, right as *Transformers: Age of Extinction* was being released. Their inherent recognizability and their popularity ensure their place in the cultural repertoire of younger generations, who are likely familiar with the original works through a variety of media. In addition to this, as shown in the photos below, the statues are massive. The smallest ones, the Iron Man replicas (Figure 5) and

the Captain America are taller than a regular man, while the Transformers Statues as well as Hulk Buster and Hulk (Figures 6 and 7) are several meters high, quite literally hulking above the visitors. They are also positioned in evidence within the two main halls which, I've been told, is a strategy to ensure people will enter the temple and not admire the replicas from the outside.



Figure 2. Photo of Captain America (MCU), Longqi Wenheng Temple - rear hall, 2023. Photo by the author.



Figure 3. Photo of Optimus Prime (Transformers), Longqi Wenheng Temple - main hall, 2023. Photo by the author.



Figure 4. Photo of Bumblebee (Transformers), Longqi Wenheng Temple – main hall, 2023. Photo by the author.



Figure 5. From left to right, photo of Iron Patriot, Iron Man Gold, and War Machine (MCU), Longqi Wenheng Temple - main hall, 2023. Photo by the author.



Figure 6. Photo of Hulk Buster (MCU), Longqi Wenheng Temple - main hall, 2023. Photo by the author.



Figure 7. Photo of Hulk (MCU), Longqi Wenheng Temple - main hall, 2023. Photo by the author.

Moreover, the statues maintain their surprising effect by embodying foreignness and globalized culture. The post-World War II era has witnessed the rise of an international culture, primarily dominated by the United States and often referred to as the “McWorld” or as the “McDonaldization” of the world (Hsiao, 2002, p. 56). Contrary to initial fears, this phenomenon hasn't resulted in complete homogenization, although certain elements of popular culture are

more widely distributed and consumed than others (Berger, 2002, p. 3). In some cases, the consumption of such elements is “non-sacramental,” or as Berger puts it, “sometimes a hamburger is just a hamburger” (Bremer, 2002, p. 7). However, in other cases, the foreignness or cultural hybridity of an element is precisely the point and becomes part of an active engagement with global modernity. This is evident here: beyond their ties to highly popular blockbusters, the replicas serve as a general reference to American culture, simultaneously highlighting their hybrid nature and imbuing them with a sense of “out-of-placeness.” In my interviews, the Americanness of the statues was frequently framed in direct opposition to the traditional, Taiwanese, or Chinese aspects of the rest of the temple. Additionally, interviewees often asserted that things from the “West” obeyed different rules. Statues like those in the temple could never become deity-images or gain efficacy on the basis of being “American,” and thus obeying rules that are outside the scope of the Sino-Taiwanese religious sphere. In some instances, they were presented as the “heroes from the West,” while Lord Guan was seen as the “local” heroic figure.

Those two elements are important in understanding both the hybridization process behind the inclusion of the replica and how this factors into their specialness. As an example, during my fieldwork in Spring 2023, several tourist buses started making stops at the temple. Upon investigation, I found that these buses were part of a tour organized by a travel company in Taipei. It catered to Taiwanese individuals seeking to explore lesser-known gems on the island, deviating from the usual tourist hotspots like Jiufen 九分 or Taroko (Tailugexiagu 太魯閣峽谷). Longqi Wenheng Temple was not only on their road but also possessed the quality of being “special” (*tebie* 特別), and “amusing” (*youqu* 有趣), with the replicas being both popular and surprising. Upon entering, many of the visitors harbored shocked expressions, laughed, and posed with statues. Their reaction echoed what I had learned from my interviews, which is that

everyone knew who the replicas were and what they represented, or at the very least people knew that these were “foreign”, American, or out of place. The juxtaposition of Lord Guan and other deities alongside famous American movie characters created an appealing backdrop for photoshoots, offering visitors a unique space for worship, distraction, and a more satisfying overall experience compared to other stops like gas stations or conventional temples.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown the different ways in which global culture is used in Longqi Wenheng Temple to broaden its appeal. American and Japanese cultures are particularly relevant as they have been present and disseminated broadly over the past century. Among the strategies used, we find the “cutification” of the gods following the example of Family Mart’s Good God Figurine. This has left a deep imprint on popular religious culture, which today frequently incorporates *kawaii* aesthetics. A second one is the inclusion of popular figures into the temple space, which in the case of Longqi Wenheng Temple are American blockbuster characters. The movie genre they are derived from stands as the epitome of globalized American culture while also being major hits in Taiwan. Unlike the *kawaii* characters, their presence fosters emotions of surprise or amusement. Both of them thus stand as different types of hybridization, from being “embedded” to being “odd”, all the while providing the temple with the ability to maintain engagement with its visitors.

However, while pointing out the foreignness of the movie replicas, several informants also pointed out how some of these heroes shared characteristics with Lord Guan. In other words, though we might consider the movie replicas as on the less hybridized side of the

spectrum, this doesn't entirely divorce them from logical connections to the temple. Rather, as we will see now, their success as marketing strategies is as reliant on their surprising nature as it is on their reasonability.

Chapter 3. Keeping Longqi Wenheng Temple within boundaries

Introduction

Though the marketing efforts outlined above have encountered large measures of success, the temple also must navigate potential worries and debates. While marketization or commodification are not new processes – some scholars trace examples of it to at least the Song dynasty (Palmer, 2011, 589) – history is riddled with accounts of people who condemn or deplore such practices, usually on the grounds of artificiality and lack of authenticity. To this day, the acceptance or rejection of commerciality is a question of identity. For some, marketization is proof of bad practice, sometimes even superstition, while otherworldly ideals such as destitution or hermitage are the marker of a “correct” way to engage with religion (Palmer, 2011, 584).

As an example of such debate, Hu Sheng Glass Temple (Boli Mazu Miao 玻璃媽祖廟) in Changhua was inaugurated in 2012 and became famous for being made of more than 70,000 pieces of glass. This was an audacious project, bringing together sixty-six companies that specialize in a variety of materials and was supposed to bring the world’s attention to the Taiwanese glass industry and craftsmanship. Today, in addition to the transparent walls, one can find a Glass Divine Sedan Chair, a Glass Mazu Boat, a Mobile Glass Temple, and other objects, all flamboyantly lit by numerous led banderols. The site is reportedly magical: under the setting sun – Changhua stands on the west coast – it turns into a “House of mirrors, jeweled pure land” (Hatfield, 2019, p. 264).

At first glance, this seems to be a solid marketing technique that should further the creator’s, an entrepreneur called Jackson Lin, expressed project of making a commercial success

and a “world-class tourist highlight” (Hatfield, 2019, p. 272). However, there has been some local resistance. First of all, while few have objected to the switch in the medium when it comes to the walls, there have been some discussions among local image specialists as to whether a statue of the deity (*shenxiang*) could be made of glass. In many cases, statues of deities are made of wood¹³, which allows both the presence of a cavity within and interaction with smoke and other fumes inside the temple. This is significant since part of the materialization of divine efficacy is through the presence of the five human viscera in the form of a small packet placed inside the statue¹⁴. As for fumes, smoke, and other flammable substances, they contribute to the interaction between humans and the unseen world, protecting the temple or transferring value from one world to the other. Glass is thus a challenging new medium: it is transparent, not very fumigable, nonporous and inflammable, a set of liabilities that makes it unable to articulate crucial aspects of popular religious practice (Hatfield, 2019, pp. 276-277). This led to some discussions in the neighborhood, with one local image specialist arguing that “deities cannot enter glass,” and that the temple was “hopeless” (Hatfield, 2019, p. 279).

This is but one of the many marketing projects that ended up as contentious. In general, the marketization of religion is a deep and emotional process, which has been used to both further and denounce religious institutions. Every temple project treads the fine line between what is supposedly appropriate as a business model, and what isn’t. Building on D.J. Hatfield’s research on the Husheng Glass Temple, we might ask ourselves: What causes temples like Longqi Wenheng Temple’s marketing project to cohere, while others “languish among the

¹³ Other media include clay, paper, metal and stone though there is general preference for fragrant wood in Lukang (Hatfield, 2019, p. 276).

¹⁴ In Lukang, this typically takes the form of a packet with five types of grains, five metals or minerals, five strings of five colours, and one living creature; all of which are collected by the ritual specialist (Hatfield, 2019, p. 275)

bargain bins of kitsch, fakery, or demagoguery?” (Hatfield, 2019, p. 267). While the *kawaii*-deities are old enough to be accepted as parts of the popular religious landscape, the movie replicas maintain their efficiency as marketing strategies thanks to their oddness and obvious hybridity. How does the temple justify the presence of what is considered by everyone as an obvious marketing choice?

Based on the interviews I have conducted, and the explanations given on Longqi Wenheng Temple’s website, this hybridization process appears to rest on two syncretic ties. First, the temple and the visitors alike emphasized the thematic link between the main deity Lord Guan, and the American superheroes. Both stand as paragons of courage and loyalty and are overall considered mighty protectors, making the statues “on-theme.” Additionally, a clear emphasis is put on the statues’ status as donations, securing their placement in the temple as part of a “gift”-based relationship with the deity rather than purely a marketing strategy. These two elements make the replicas cohere with the wider system.

1) Theme as a syncretic link

Generally, the themes found in Taiwanese popular temples are imported from China and encapsulate narrative, symbolic, and thematic elements that reflect the teachings and sentiments of previous generations, as well as Chinese values (Lee et al., 2015, p. 377). The narrative depictions in temple imagery frequently draw inspiration from historical novels and tales portraying gods and spirits. Decorative motifs likewise align with the deities venerated in the temple, evident in both narrative depictions (e.g., statues and carvings) and non-narrative forms

(e.g., auspicious patterns and apotropaic objects). When doing interviews, several participants mentioned that outside of the obvious touristic appeal of the statues, the Transformers and Avengers statues made sense because they embodied similar qualities as Lord Guan, namely strength courage, and heroism. This, in turn, made them reasonable insertions as decorative objects; in other words, they were “on-theme.” To better explain this, we need to look at the story of Lord Guan, the ideals he embodies, and how this is translated into temple aesthetics.

Lord Guan, or Emperor Guan, (Guandi 關帝) is one of the most revered Chinese deities, of the same importance as the Buddhist bodhisattva Guanyin 觀音 (Ter Haar, 2017, p. 1). The Buddhists know him as Sangharama Bodhisattva (Qielan pusa 伽藍菩薩), the protector of the Dharma, while the Daoists revere him as Holy Lord/Emperor Guan (Guan shengdijun 關聖帝君). When he is not the main deity of the temple, he is sometimes the door god, protecting the inside from evil influences. In terms of other titles, one may encounter him as Lord Guan (Guan gong 關公); but also Protector of Taiwan, Emperor with Vast Benevolence (Hu Tai En Guang Di Jun 護台恩廣帝君), and in the case of Longqi Wenheng Temple, Holy Emperor of Culture and Balance (Wenheng shengdijun 文衡聖帝君).

His popularity does not stop at the divine. As is commonplace in Chinese religions, Lord Guan was originally a human called Guan Yu 關羽. Guan Yu is a famous figure in Chinese culture and has accumulated popularity as a historical person, as a literary hero in the famous *Romance of Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo Yanyi* 三國演義), and as an overall recognizable character across all media platforms (video games, movies, series, books). Though there have been some authorial liberties the account of Guan Yu’s “historical” life can be found in the *Record of the*

Three Kingdoms (*Sanguo Zhi* 三國志), written by Chen Shou 陳壽 in the third century¹⁵. To summarize, Guan Yu was a general under Liu Bei 劉備, founder of the Shu-Han 蜀漢 state, during the war that opposed the three warlords Liu Bei, Cao Cao 曹操 and Sun Quan 孫權. In his lifetime, he accomplished much military prowess and remained a paragon of loyalty and courage.

Three anecdotes can help us understand his later characterization as a deity. Firstly, there is his solemn pledge of brotherhood with Liu Bei and their comrade Zhang Fei 張飛, during which he forged a bond that would sustain his lifelong loyalty to the Shu state. Secondly, there is his capture by his enemy Cao Cao. The latter treated him with utmost respect in the hope he would join the ranks. Guan Yu decided to repay this kindness by fighting bravely for Cao Cao in the next battle, however, he would not join the warlord, refusing ranks and titles to honor his pledge to Liu Bei. Impressed, Cao Cao eventually let him go. Thirdly, there is his tragic demise in 219 (or early 220) after he was tasked to besiege Cao Cao's armies at Fan (Fancheng 樊城). Those latter were already weakened because of a flood, yet Guan Yu could not take the city, was betrayed by two of his generals, saw the morale of his troops diminished when their wives and children were all executed, and was ultimately captured together with his son Guan Ping 關平. The two were beheaded on the banks of the local Ju River (Juhe 洵河). For lack of descendants¹⁶, Guan Yu's cult fell into the public domain, rather than being a familial matter.

¹⁵ In the *Record of the Three Kingdoms*, Guan Yu and his master Liu Bei are presented as a virtuous party. However, it is sometimes argued that the author Chen Shou, as a former servant of the Shu, could hardly put forth the less pristine motivations of Guan Yu and Liu Bei, who for all intent and purposes were more of an opportunistic gang (Ter Haar, 2017, p. 6)

¹⁶ A comment by Pei Songzhi on the *Record of the Three Kingdoms* in the fifth century says that the son of a general who had been killed by Guan Yu later exterminated the extended Guan's family, adopted or blood related (Ter Haar, 2017, p. 2).

The specifics of his cult traversed the centuries, shaped by personal and communal experiences and memories (Ter Haar, 2017, p. 2). We can, however, trace some recurring titles and roles. One of them is his role as a guardian of moral values, called on as a witness to sworn statements and alleged punisher of those who committed injustice (Ter Haar, 2017, p. 220). As an enforcer and because of his military prowess, he is worshipped by both soldiers and members of the police forces, but also by the triads and other criminal organizations. As mentioned earlier, he is also the Guardian of the Dharma in Buddhism. His influence further extends beyond the realm of martial affairs as he is the presumed source of numerous revealed scriptures¹⁷ such as the *True Scripture to Awaken the World by Imperial Lord Saint Guan* (*Guansheng dijun jueshi zhenjing* 關聖帝君覺世真經), and the *Scripture of Imperial Lord Saint Guan Illuminating Saintliness* (*Guansheng dijun mingsheng jing* 關聖帝君明聖經). Because of these characteristics, we find some recurrent elements in Emperor Guan's temples. First, he is generally accompanied by his historical character's sworn brother Zhang Fei, and his son Guan Ping. Second, the themes emphasized in his worship are benevolence, knowledge, martial prowess, loyalty, and bravery (Lee, Tseng, Liu 79). Lord Guan himself is often featured with his legendary Bluegreen Dragon Crescent Moon Halberd (*qinglong yanyue dao* 青龍偃月刀)¹⁸, though his role in literature sometimes leads to finding a large wooden brush on his altars.

Around those themes alone, he resembles the bulk of the Hollywood superheroes present in his hall, or rather the superheroes resemble him. Apart from their evident role as vectors for American soft power, the superhero genre is built as an extension of fairytales, appealing to

¹⁷ Revealed scriptures are texts that have been dictated by gods or immortal to human, often through spirit-writing. They became an important socio-religious phenomenon in late-Ming dynasty, participating into the creation of an entire subgenre of texts to be circulated, learned, read, or recited.

¹⁸ See footnote 4.

moral virtues, and telling stories about people who are larger than life and powerful (McSweeney, 2018, p. 268). Some of those aspects, like the ones mentioned above, are resonant with the ones found in Chinese societies. At a surface level, the Avengers are the “World’s Mightiest Heroes”, or “Earth’s Defenders,” upholding truth and justice with strength and selfless acts. Though they commit disturbing acts of self-righteous violence, the way they are framed remains generally heroic. As such they can be included in the temple’s hall without disturbing the overall theme. As one of my interviewees supplied: one is a hero from China, and the others are heroes from America, they are the same but from different places.

This becomes even more visible when looking at the specific words used to describe the statues on the temple’s website. The words employed are religiously connotated, such as *hufa* 護法, literally Dharma protector, which is also one of Lord Guan’s roles in Buddhism. In another place they are referred to as *shouhu* 守護, or guard, while other sentences indicate a protective role of the statues vis-à-vis the main deity such as “It seems as if the movie characters are protecting the Holy Emperor Guan.” Commonly, deities would be accompanied by protectors; as just mentioned, Lord Guan is himself a door god or *hufa* in some cases, and a main deity in others. The Sea Goddess Mazu, for instance, is accompanied by two horrifying demons Qianliyan 千里眼 and Shunfeng'er 順風耳. Giant robots like Optimus Prime and Bumblebee or creatures like Hulk are physically not too different. What these words hint at is a more playful association between the perception of those superhero replicas and the traditional protectors found in popular temples.

2) Looking at the question of donations

In many cases, the funding for renovations, artworks, and valuable items stems from donations. As underscored by the temple's website, this is also the case for the superhero replicas. The initial statue was given by the founder most innocently, an "act of childish delight" that would serve to attract more children to Lord Guan. The following ones were from devoted worshippers attempting to stay on-theme with the founder's gift by expanding on the gallery of superheroes. As one woman touring Wenheng Hall told me, usually one would offer a vase, money for repairs, and grandiose goods to celebrate the god and make people look in wonder, such as beautifully carved ceilings or murals. However, following Chen Qingfei's inclusion of statues in the temple, and considering the attractive pull those had, donors took to buying life-size models to show their appreciation to Lord Guan.

This status as donations is significant: first, it shows that the expenses, especially for such unconventional additions, were not made with the community's money. Second, it inscribes the presents into the logic of a gift-relation with the deity, or what Palmer (2011) has called the "gift-market". "Gift-markets" are at the center of Chinese religion. It is a type of relationship between the devotee and the deity that rests on favors and gifts (Palmer, 2011, pp. 574-577). For instance, temples would often arise from an individual or a community trying to thank a deity for their help. Donations follow the same principle: an individual might pledge to make a vow, committing to express gratitude if a particular issue is resolved. This may take the form of offering contributions or monetary donations, participating in temple festivals by contributing labor or materials, or actively promoting the deity's name widely. In the case of temple festivals featuring opera troupes, one may also vow to sponsor a specific number of opera performances

(Chau, 2011, p. 557). Ritual expenditure thus involves the transfer of money into this-worldly luxuries for gods, would they be temple reparations or amelioration, parades, foods, spectacles, etc. For donors, the question becomes what to offer to the god that will be satisfactory.

As a corollary, donations are a central indicator of a temple's efficacy since they are given in return (or as a promise in exchange) for the deity's favor. The deities with the most recompenses must be the ones who have performed the most miracles, so the temples with the most lavish or grandiose decorations must be the ones that are the most efficient (*ling* 靈, *lingying* 靈應, *lingyan*, 靈驗) (Hansen, 2024, p. 61, Chau, 2011, p. 557). Or in Sangren's words:

Wealthy people must be worshipping the most efficacious deity, otherwise they would not be wealthy, wealthy temples must be wealthy because thankful people are repaying the goddess for making them wealthy, hence wealthy temples must be more *ling*.
(Sangren, 2003, p. 685).

For a temple, showcasing its wealth is thus also a way to honor its deities and attest to their efficacy. To this effect, one may find donor tablets on the walls, which catalog in a visible manner the donations and donors to the temple. Interestingly, Longqi Wenheng Temple's committee engages in a similar practice, boasting on one side the incredible price and traction of the statues, and on the other emphasizing their status as donations. This can be seen on the temple's website, which through an archive of newsletters traces some of the developments including the progressive inclusion of statues inside the temple space:

The temple authorities explained that this Transformers figure was a gift from a construction company's young boss. The figure was valued at approximately 400,000

Taiwanese dollars, and they also mentioned that later in mid-July, there would be another display featuring Bumblebee at the temple (Wenheng Hall, 2013/08/08).

The temple management emphasized that both Iron Man and Transformers were donated by others and did not use any temple funds. Similarly, the Green Giant Hulk and the Hulk Buster were also donations, and the temple is currently in the process of identifying the donors (Wenheng Hall, 2015/07/21).

Determining whether the emphasis on the statues being donations is a deliberate measure by the temple to address criticism against notable marketing strategies, such as the commercial nature of projects like Hu Sheng Glass Temple (Hatfield, 2017), remains challenging. I have mostly come across anecdotal accounts from individuals who expressed disagreement with the inclusion of Transformers and Avengers statues, deeming them wasteful. However, visitors often agreed that the statues brought new people to the temple, which was good for the deity. Moreover, when I inquired about Lord Guan's perspective on the inclusion of the statues, I was told that while he was aware of them, he remained indifferent, placing importance only on what was in people's hearts during their worship. This echoed the discourse I had heard from volunteers, the statues are just here to attract, but the reason *behind* wanting an attraction is to bring more people to Lord Guan as part of the temple's mission to promote his sacred deeds. This also explains why they were placed inside the hall: as one volunteer pointed out, if the replicas were kept outside, no one would come in, which would have defeated their very purpose of the replicas. The growing gallery of replicas not only allowed for word of their temple to travel but also attested to its efficiency. More people meant more opportunities for advocating the temple's ethics, maintaining the temple's property, promoting the temple, and furthering the

gift-relationship with Lord Guan. This inscribed them in the larger process of attesting to a deity's *ling*, generating merit, giving thanks, and promulgating the god's influence among curious visitors.

Conclusion.

Throughout this chapter, I have aimed to showcase some of the ways the American superhero statues in Longqi Wenheng Temple are justified within the temple through the use of syncretic ties. First, by positioning them as protectors, the temple committee pulls the statues into the age-old space dedicated to temple guardians. This is only possible because of the statue's concordance in theme: as strong superheroes and keepers of morals such as loyalty and bravery, they have an acceptable, or at least exploitable link to the martial deity Lord Guan. Secondly, the statues' status as donations makes them part of the system of gratitude, merit-making, and showcasing of efficiency. This is, of course, not mutually exclusive with looking at those statues through the lens of market theory, since they are inscribed into the larger push and pull for clients, and are part of the temple's diversification of its attractive assets. Their inclusion treads the line between being disruptive enough to be attractive and inscribed enough to not be out of place.

Chapter 4: The effects of hybridization in larger societal debates.

Introduction

I initiated this thesis by looking at how larger social trends had had a direct effect on the formulation of contemporary religious culture, leading to situations like the one at Longqi Wenheng Temple. In this last chapter, I offer to look at the reverse process, and how the hybridization of Taiwanese religious culture with American and Japanese cultures fuels back into the larger societal debates. From what I have heard during my fieldwork the inclusion of movie replicas at Longqi is hardly polarized. Despite this, one discussant, a Taiwanese woman in her twenties mentioned some uneasiness regarding the project. She had come to the temple in the hopes of furthering her understanding of Taiwanese culture, which included knowing about religion. To her, the statues felt “slightly offending” since religion as part of Taiwanese traditional culture should not include tokens of others. Her stance is reminiscent of other debates regarding similar hybridization processes, where the inclusion of foreign elements within the religious sphere is reframed as a socio-political and identitarian issue.

At the same time as they indicate a willingness to be playful or trendy, instances of hybridization with globalized culture communicate a departure from traditional Chinese aesthetics inherited from Han migration from the mainland. Changes in religious aesthetics, especially if those changes include elements of Japanese or American cultures, resonate in the realm of politics as one of the many threats to Taiwan’s “Chinese-ness,” and in turn affect pro-reunification discourses (Silvio, 2023, p. 86; Yueh, 2023, p. 91). This is significant: a large portion of the population in Taiwan, except for indigenous groups, are descendants of immigrants from the mainland. For the proponents of reunification, the hundred years the Taiwanese spent outside of the mainland’s immediate rules, first under Japanese occupation, then under ROC

leadership, is not enough to justify its isolation from the “Greater China.” In contrast to this, the ability to absorb elements from globalized culture has been heralded by some politicians and scholars as proof of a “particular hybridity” of Taiwanese society (Chuang, 2011). In this context, the reformulation of deities also takes effect in other social debates, standing in for Taiwanese democratic inclusivity, which indirectly also positions them in opposition to the regime on the mainland.

In this last chapter, I offer to look more closely at this question of “Taiwanese-ness” or “Chinese-ness” in debates surrounding religion and hybridity. First, I will address how scholars and politicians have made use of those terms depending on context or specific goals. Then I will turn to two cases where the hybridization of Taiwanese religion with Japanese and American cultures have found themselves in social debates. Regarding those latter, I will first turn to what has sometimes been called the “Malevolent Lantern Incident,” in which a representation of Mazu in a manga style during the 2017 Taipei Lantern Festival sparked a major uproar. Secondly, I will be looking at another lantern, this time observed at the 2023 Taipei Lantern Festival. The artwork depicted a well-known passage from a Chinese tale that involves the Lord of Thunder, Lei Gong 雷公. However, here Lei Gong was replaced by the Norse God of Thunder, Thor, in his Marvel Cinematic Universe suit. Not so coincidentally, the explanatory sign offered a critique of the original tale and advocated for social change.

1) Taiwanese religions or Chinese religions?

What do we mean when we write “religion in Taiwan,” “Taiwanese religiosity,” or “Chinese religions”? The histories of these terms are tightly intermeshed with the scholarship and politics

that tried to define them, often re-inventing what counts as “religious,” as “Taiwanese” and as “Chinese” depending on contexts and practicalities. To begin with, the study of religion in Taiwan supposes both traditions from indigenous groups and those that were transported and transformed through centuries of migration from the mainland. However, a large number of temples in Taiwan were built by Han settlers during the 15th century so that even today the religious landscape in Taiwan is dominated by traditions that have their roots in the mainland, especially Fujian and Guangdong.

This tie to Mainland China means that for many sinologists in the second half of the 20th century (from American institutions in particular), Taiwan was a window into a China rendered inaccessible by post-1949 politics and the Cultural Revolution. As a result, many scholars from that period highlighted a cultural unity to validate their research as integral to the broader field of Chinese studies, simultaneously obscuring the challenges associated with identifying Taiwanese culture as Chinese (Nadeau & Hsun, 2003, p. 281-282). The 1990s were marked by significant change in that aspect: while Taiwan took a democratic turn and the question of a Taiwanese identity gained traction, scholars like Stephen Murray and Keelung Hong launched an attack against what they argued was an intentional dismissal of Taiwanese distinctiveness, and thus complicity with pro-Chinese politics (Nadeau & Hsun, 2003, p. 282). In the same decades, part of the Chinese scholarship emphasized a specially Taiwanese form of temple organization, while institutes such as the Southern School of Chinese Anthropology and the Academia Sinica highlighted the Han origins of various cultural elements as part of a promotional effort for Chinese nationalism (Nadeau & Hsun, 2003, p. 287).

Today, this question of a religious link to China resonates within the larger debate around the question of Taiwanese identity. An example of this is Mazu, also known as the Goddess Across

the Taiwan Strait. She is one of the most, if not the most, beloved deities in Taiwan, with about eighty percent of the population worshipping her in some form. As such she has been constructed both at the grassroots level and by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) as an icon for new Taiwanese nationalism (Yang, 2004, p. 215). However, deity cults rarely respect the boundaries of political entities: like most of Taiwan's popular deities, Mazu's origins are on the Mainland, in Fujian. According to the story, Mazu is the deified version of Lin Moniang, a powerful shamaness who lived on Meizhou Island, in the 10th century. After her death, the islanders created a temple in her name which to this day remains a very important pilgrimage spot. Traveling to Fujian is thus an integral part of any cult to Mazu, as various temples bring their own localized Mazu to visit the ancestral shrine to replenish their goddess's efficacy, or create new lineages (Weller, 2019, 24). Within the political realm, this makes her appropriation as part of the independence discourse a barbed affair as the goddess is simultaneously celebrated by the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a symbol of the cultural connection between the Mainland and Taiwan (Yang 216).

These debates further gain relevance when it comes to discussing issues such as "hybridization." Some scholars see the localization of American and Japanese culture as a result of a particular "hybridity of Taiwanese-ness," which could be interpreted as a "fundamental feature of Taiwanese culture." For instance, Chuang writes:

The new concept of "Taiwan" is thus a product of the negotiation between globality and locality, and is a hybrid of Chinese, Japanese and American cultures. (Chuang, 2011, p. 2)

According to this narrative, democratized Taiwan has recreated its particular identity around the incorporation and reappropriation of other cultures' influences. As a corollary, Taiwanese culture is unique and distinct from the mainland (Chuang, 2011), or at least actively trying to separate

itself from it (Hsiao, 2002). Whether the common inclusion of Japanese and American elements is proof of a “unicity of Taiwanese hybridity” or not, the discourse has had a significant impact on the Taiwanese socio-political sphere, especially since they bring under scrutiny any kind of “hybridization” process.

Thus, from temple lineages that have their roots in the mainland to pilgrimage routes to deities’ birthplaces, religious ties are active parts of political discourse. With that in mind, it is understandable that the inclusion of new trends, or cultural elements from the United States and Japan would be perceived as an estrangement from Chinese culture.

2) The Malevolent Lantern incident: hybridization in the religious sphere as the ultimate Green/Blue divide

We have previously talked about the trend to include *chibi*-style characters within the temple space. Though seemingly ubiquitous, such changes can (and have) cause both cleavage and outrage. An example of this is the 2017 “Malevolent Lantern Incident”, where the main piece of the Taipei Lantern Festival was a representation of Mazu in a cute, Japanese manga fashion.

To contextualize, in 2010 the Taiwanese artist Wei Tsung-cheng published the first issue of a manga series called *The Apocalypse of Darkness Warfare (Ming Zhan Lu)*, in which Mazu is reincarnated as a sixteen-year-old highschooler named Lin Moniang. In both design and personality, this character fits the archetype of the *meng shaonü* 夢少女, a type of feminine character found in male-oriented manga whose selling point is that they are both innocent and eroticized (Silvio, 2023, p. 76). The Moniang character gained tremendous traction, leaving the

manga/anime fan subculture to enter the larger social sphere as the ambassador for the Ximen Ding 西門町 neighborhood in Taipei¹⁹. She was then chosen by the organizers of the 2017 Lantern Festival to be the face of a twenty-foot-tall lantern. In that version, Lin Moniang did not wear the mini-skirt and tights like in the manga, rather she was dressed in a long Song dynasty-style robe. On the day before the festival, the vice mayor of Taipei completed the rituals of dotting the eyes of the Mazu lantern, a deeply religious step that traditionally invites the deity to inhabit the statue. The significance of this, however, was knowingly altered by giving the task to a civil servant (under the guidance of the head of the nearby Mazu Tianhou Temple) instead of putting it in the direct hands of a religious expert (Silvio, 2023, p. 85). The next day, the lantern was received with mixed feelings by the public, soon sparking a series of debates online as to the appropriateness of representing Mazu, and deities in general, in such a form. On the one hand, more conservative worshippers argued that the character was too sexy, too Japanese, and too commercial. On the other, supporters of cultural and religious reformulation answered that this backlash was due to the older generation's inability to embrace youth culture.

As Terri Silvio points out in her dissection of this incident, love or hatred of this aesthetic turn is one stereotyped marker of leaning Green or Blue on the political spectrum, with Green being generally perceived as pro-Taiwanese independence, and Blue being pro-reunification with China. This was not lost on the manga fanbase, with one fan organization's press conference title after the Lantern incident being: "When Cultural Taiwan Independence Meets Cultural China, Chinese Gods Battle Japanese Ghosts" (Silvio, 2023, p. 87). The same debate can be seen in the very term used to call Japanese-lovers, "*harizu*" (哈日族). The word was largely used by the

¹⁹ Ximending is a popular neighbourhood in Taipei well-known for its vibrant nightlife, shops, Japanese products, and pedestrian area. It is sometimes referred to as the "Harajuku of Taipei," or the "Shibuya of Taipei," highlighting its popularity among youth, tourists and the *harizu* or Japanophile communities.

KMT government in the 1970s, the beginning of Japanmania, both as a derogative way to mock and denounce “Japan-worshippers” and as part of the broader discourse that the Taiwanese needed to be “re-educated” after their period under Japanese occupation (Cheng & Yueh, 2023, pp. 100-101). The recent decade, however, has seen the popularization of the opposite term, “*tienzhong*” which references someone who is pro-China, or “kissing China’s ass.” This parallels the increasing prevalence of discourses that denounce public affirmations of loyalty to China in favour of loyalty to the new Taiwanese identity (Cheng & Yueh, 2023, pp. 102-103). The question of loving Japan or engaging in aesthetic turns that reflect Japanese culture is thus directly embedded into the Taiwanese identity debates.

3) Religion and social commentary in the 2023 Lantern Festival

The reformulation of deities also takes effect in other social debates, standing in for Taiwanese democratic inclusivity, which indirectly also positions them in opposition to the regime on the mainland (Chen, 2011, pp. 411-412). For instance, stickers with a *kawaii*-Mazu waving a pride flag on it are handed out during Pride month. Moreover, Cheng Chi-wei, the director of one of Taiwan’s largest LGBT NGOs, framed anti-LGBT sentiment in one statement as something Christian. This was portrayed as disrespectful to an island where most of the population had a background in Buddhism, Daoism, or other local faiths, further reinforcing the idea that Chinese religions, as lived in Taiwan, align with social inclusivity (Silvio, 2023, p. 80).

Another instance took place during the 2023 Lantern Festival in Taipei. At that time of the year, several public spaces and parks are used for the exposition of hundreds of lanterns from various artists, with a loose theme around that year’s zodiac sign. That year, one of the pieces

was a lantern named “The Lord of Thunder and the Mother of Lightning” (*Leigong yu dianmu* 雷公與電母), hinting at the famous couple of Chinese weather deities. The Mother of Lightning was clearly recognizable by the mirror in her hand which, according to the myths, she uses to create flashes of lightning. Her spouse, however, was far from the usual depictions. In the mythos, the Lord of Thunder is a blue-skinned creature, with the beak of an eagle (sometimes an owl), clawed feet like a vulture’s, and bat wings in his back. He holds a drum and a hammer with which he provokes the resounding sounds of thunder (Pimpaneau, 1999, pp. 123-124; Van Goidsenhoven, 1971, p. 96). In the 2023 lantern depiction, he had been replaced by the Marvel Cinematic Universe’s version of the Norse God of Thunder, Thor. The blond god was down on one knee and holding a large ring adorned with a red jewel, emulating the characteristic pose for marriage proposals in the West (Figure 8). The accompanying sign read:

In Taiwanese folk tales, the man “Lei Gong” often appears with the woman “Dian Mu.” In these tales, their marriage is arranged by the Jade Emperor²⁰, but their marriage story is complicated. In modern times, with the rising trend of women’s rights, women should have the right to choose who they wish to marry. If you want to obtain the favor of the gods, you must work hard to pursue it rather than taking shortcuts. We all hope for best wishes in the New Year!

²⁰The Jade Emperor (Yudi 玉帝) is highest authority in the Chinese celestial bureaucracy, the latter of which is organized in a system mirroring dynastic China.



Figure 8: "The Lord of Thunder and the Mother of Lightning," 2023 Taipei Lantern Festival, Taipei, 2023. Photo by the author.

To better understand, in the Chinese tale the Lord of Thunder and the Mother of Lightning meet under dire circumstances. Thunder is seen as divine punishment, also the thunder god is not only a deity of the elements but a righter of wrongs, appointed by the Heavens to strike down those who have committed secret offenses or abused their power. One day, as the god had been sent on an errand, he saw a young woman throwing food in the river. Enraged by the waste, he killed her. It was then revealed that the woman was a widow who lived together with her parents-in-law. She gave them all the rice, keeping only the cucumber seeds for herself, and this time she had decided to throw those in the river. Seeing she was a righteous person and unjustly killed, the Jade Emperor decided to rectify the situation by giving her to the Lord of Thunder as a spouse. She became the Mother of Lightning, illuminating the skies with her mirrors to ensure her husband would no longer mistakenly strike innocents (Pimpaneau, 1999, p.124).

The 2023 Lantern proposes a commentary on the tale by raising the Mother of Lightning's lack of agency in her own relationships and linking it to the larger question of women's rights in Taiwan. Traditionally, the place of women in Chinese culture is informed by the Confucian organization of society, which emphasizes their role as mothers and wives, and subordinates them to the men in their entourage²¹ (Lu, 2016, p. 208). In the 1920s and the post-martial law era, liberal feminist movements in Taiwan advocated strongly for gender equality, notably in legislation. Changes in recent years, such as urbanization, democratization, and economic development, have led to new debates around equality of pay, employment opportunities, women's rights to reproductive choices, the prevention of domestic violence and sexual assault, rights for same-sex couples, and the advancement of women into leadership roles and the political arena (Chang, 2011, pp. 9-11).

The way these debates are represented in the lantern context is by proposing a visual twist. The Chinese Lord of Thunder, whose actions led to both his future wife's death and their arranged marriage, is replaced by another figure borrowed from American popular culture, the MCU's Thor. In addition, the Norse thunder god is poised in a position of marriage proposal, kneeling on one knee and presenting a ring, usually associated with romantic love and choice. The strategy is similar to the one in Longqi. Thor's presence within the Chinese tale is justified by his shared theme with the Lord of Thunder. The visual twist, however, is based on the fact that he is a highly recognizable figure and remains unmistakably "out of place." Here, the hybridity is engineered with the stated purpose of circulating a social message: that traditional elements

²¹ The Confucian discourse on women relies on larger considerations, namely cosmic forces (the *yin* and the *yang*) and the relative complementarity of men and women. The way this has been declined within society is complex, though we may retain that women were placed within a set of three subordinations: first to their father, then to their husband, and finally, if widowed, to their son (Lu, 2016, p. 208).

require a re-adjustment to modern debates. Political activism is thus communicated by reformulating traditional culture, here religion, to include global trends.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have explored how the hybridization of Taiwanese religiosity with Japanese and American cultures fuels back into the debates about “Taiwanese identity,” and political activism. To begin with, the question of Taiwan’s ties to China has been a preponderant subject in the study and formulation of Taiwanese religions. While the island’s traditions, for the most part, originate on the mainland, such connections are only partially acknowledged depending on political and personal agendas. This is particularly visible in debates regarding the inclusion of Japanese elements within religious culture. The “Malevolent Lantern Incident,” for instance, provoked all sorts of polarized responses, including outrage, since the use of manga aesthetics was seen as a departure from mainland traditions in favor of Japan. Another example is the hybridization of a Chinese tale with elements of globalized culture at the 2023 Taipei Lantern Festival. The Chinese Lord of Thunder was replaced by the MCU’s Norse God of Thunder, Thor, as a visual representation of the debate on women’s rights. Social change and religious reformulation are thus embedded into an iterative and symbiotic relationship.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have sought to recontextualize and observe the hybridization and marketization of American and Japanese elements within the Taiwanese religious sphere, with a focus on Longqi Wenheng Temple. The past hundred years have been characterized by fast-paced modernization and globalization, which many expected would lead to secularization and some homogenization of culture at a global level. Places like Longqi Wenheng Temple offer another narrative by showing how religiosity is symbiotically, iteratively, and creatively part of such changes. Simultaneously, it showcases how the influence of globalized consumer culture and market societies may raise important points around the question of identity, orthopraxy, and change at the grassroots level. The above chapters explored the larger context that sustains the importance of hybridization and the inclusion of popular culture as marketing strategies, what informed the choice of new elements, and the ways these were included or debated, either within the temple space or in the wider society.

In the first chapter, I argued that modernization led to new market-type ties between the religious sphere and individuals, which in turn led to hybridization as a way to foster attraction. The modernization of Taiwan was accompanied by a shift in the mobility of both people and ideas, leading to a departure from parochial ties and agrarian communities. New cults have become island-wide and appeal to the fast-paced, consumerist, and individualistic habits of new urbanites. Moreover, in the years of repression engineered by the newly arrived KMT, many religious groups have reformulated themselves to fit within the new rational ethics. With the springtime of civil society in the 1970s, religious groups became places of philanthropy, healthcare, and culture, leading to an important “religious revival” on the island. Within this context, it became particularly important to be competitive and attractive to visitors. This is

especially true of temples like Longqi Wenheng Temple, whose position outside of the city makes them both a comfortable place of leisure, but also places them out of sight; hence the inclusion of popular characters and aesthetics to generate attraction.

The second chapter explored the different kinds of hybridity present at Longqi Wenheng Hall and how they tied in with the general popularity of Japanese and American cultures in Taiwan. The aim was twofold: to point out the different ways in which popular culture is implicated and hybridized and to trace back the popularity of the elements involved. The instances we see in Longqi Wenheng Hall differ in that they are on several points of “oddness”. Japanese culture, in particular, has been commonly referenced in the religious sphere through the “cutification” of popular deities. This is embedded into the larger popularity of everything Japanese which can be linked in part to the colonial and post-colonial eras. The shift in representation we see in Longqi and elsewhere, where the deities are represented in a “cute” way is banalized by now, since their arrival in the religious space is a decade old. The superhero replicas, however, are “odd” hybridities, in that they are new strategies that rely on causing surprise and intrigue. They also rely on the popularity of American media, especially the MCU’s and Avengers movies, and the encroachment of American influence during early KMT rule.

Chapter three offered to look at the second half of the hybridization process, which is to make the new element exist and cohere within the pre-existing system. While the Japanese “cutification” process is already banalized and justified as a way to appeal to younger generations, the American replicas are a more unique addition. They are syncretized, nonetheless, by appealing to their theme, heroism, and their status as donations. This kind of explanation is significant to maintain the temple’s credibility since it provides a perspective distinct from that of a mere “marketing prop.” The statues are involved in the temple’s larger

mission to attest Lord Guan's efficacy and bring worshippers to him, thus becoming part of the "gift-market".

Lastly, chapter four was concerned with the larger social debates regarding hybridization. Like any kind of change, such a process has brought forth many discussions, especially around identity politics. In Taiwan, many religious traditions have been imported from the continent and thus constitute a tie to the mainland. Whether or not one should remodel it sparks debates between those who wish to leave the Chinese heritage intact and those who would reformulate it to make it part of a distinctively Taiwanese society. Adding fuel to the debate is the perception that Japan and the United States wield significant influence over Taiwan. Some scholars, politicians, and individuals view Taiwan's capacity to assimilate these influences as evidence of the island's uniqueness. The Malevolent Lantern Incident, for instance, exacerbated this by showcasing the famous sea goddess Mazu in Japanese *kawaii* form during a major festival. Other instances, like "The Lord of Thunder and the Mother of Lightning" lantern hint at similar debates by including American characters in traditional folktales together with pre-existing Chinese deities as a way to militate for social reform.

Hybridization thus remains one of the many ways that local places adapt and reformulate global influences. Rather than being sidelined, religion remains one of the many platforms where debates around modernization, globalization, marketization, and identity take place. There is much to be furthered on this topic. In her discussion of "cutified" deities, for instance, Silvio points out that changes in aesthetics have many ramifications on personal relationships between individuals and deities. According to her, this "cutification of the gods" have led people to experiencing a different kind of intimacy: people don't perceive gods only as powerful entities whose stern faces they find on altars, but also as cute characters with child-like features they can

buy, own and fawn over. It is probable that other changes and hybridizations such as seen in Longqi Wenheng Temple will have comparable effects. The toy-craze, however, has spanned consistently over a full decade. The impact of changes such as the integration of movie replicas may be harder to see and would necessitate more time and more research.

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