

Modern Theocracy? When an Incumbent Village Head Becomes New Boss of the Village Land Deity temple: Observation from Residents

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Abstract

Land Deity (aka. ‘*Tudigong*’ in Mandarin Chinese), according to Chinese folklore belief, is a spiritual chief of executive at the grass-roots level that protects every people in his locality, and almost enshrined every community or village in the island of Taiwan. In administrative practice, a village head holds responsibility to accept complaints and suggestions, initiate and hold meetings, handout certificates of various sorts, encourage bill payments and assist filling out of government documents if required. This research proposes a common but difficult local administration paradox phenomenon: if the present village head has elected as a director of the village Land Deity Temple, the village residents, and village head election competitors’ attitude towards whether it harmed their faith purity and connotation of administration fairness under the circumstances of the concurrent village head seeks for a second term. For better understanding and ascertaining the respondents’ perceptions on such phenomena, we draw the implications through focus group discussion, descriptive statistics before the reveal of village head election results, Finally, this study finds a solution to balance the relationship between local administration and belief center.

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Introduction

For human beings, religion can feasibly serve as a catalyst for emotional support and guidance. Indeed, when humans face uncertain situations, the brain can give them fits, but God's revelation can strengthen their beliefs. On the bright side, most believers from every positive religion respect God's advocates or faithful servants to the spiritual immortals. Regarding the importance of religion in U.S. contemporary party politics, Layman (2001) conducted a relatively simple study of doctrinal orthodoxy that is quite useful in explaining variations in voters and political elites' attitudes and electoral behaviors. Layman's research more completely explains social changes that enable changes in political ecology. Abortion, women's roles, pornography, and gay rights, for instance, have often received widespread social attention, and religious groups' positions and opinions have frequently led the government to implement a policy that changes administrative social behavior. For example, Campbell's (2004) study begins with the premise that churches can be understood as institutions that shape their members' behavior. Specifically, different types of churches provide their members with varying behavioral incentives for participation in religious activity, which in turn have systemic implications for participation in political activity. Such implications, according to Verba et al. (1995) mean the capacity to engage in prosaic activities by which people express their voices in the political process—like running meetings or giving speeches. These skills are resources that facilitate political participation because they can be employed in pursuit of political ends.

In those nations or regions with plurality voting systems (also known as majoritarian representation), religious groups with numerous believers have great power of dialog and influence many public issues. Current politicians and candidates usually do not oppose these significant followers under the polling system of one person-one vote. In fact, candidates often even cater to these congregations' needs. Accordingly, this study illustrates a village administration paradox case in Taiwan: The incumbent village head is seeking 2018 reelection and simultaneously taking charge of the village's Land Deity temple—the local belief center. So what are village inhabitants' attitudes toward potentially overlapping spiritual and administrative roles?

This study has three sections: First, an example illustrates relations between the Land Deity temple and the village administration. Next an actual case is presented of village residents' perspectives on potential "role conflict." The final section draws a conclusion from the results and provides subsequent research directions.

The Role of Folk Belief in a Taiwan Village's Administration

Folklore can reveal certain features of a people's geographical, ethnic, and religious attributes. Folklore reflects cosmic and religious beliefs based on observation of evolution and natural seasonal changes, it records people's customs and moral principles in their interactions, and it reveals an individual and family's personal outlook on life in establishing themselves and following their pursuits. When we observe Taiwanese folklore, then naturally, we see the multi-ethnic, multi-religious nature of the people of Taiwan Island according to its geographical position.

Taiwan folklore has four interrelated elements: year, season, festival, and custom. In sum, folklore is closely bound to the natural environment and local climate and is

deeply influenced by seasonal alternation and natural changes. This reveals the relationship between the common folk's knowledge and observation of nature, and their wisdom in adapting to the local environment. It also reveals their attempts to ward off ill luck and evil spirits and call up good fortune. It perpetuates ethnic traditions and regional cultural characteristics.

In Han Chinese folklore on Taiwan, festivals in celebration of deities' birthdays take place conspicuously year-round, for instance, for the Lord of Heaven (*Yu Huang Da Di*) and the Land Deity (*Tu Di Gong*). Most Han people are polytheists, and they worship gods of the kitchen, fire, mountains, rivers, paddy fields, and the snake gods, as well as gods of objects, such as wells, bridges, and so on (Wang, 2015; Tu, 2005). In Taiwan, each village usually has several Land Deity temples, according to the number of residents. These temples also serve as local belief centers and local sources of opinion because numerous inhabitants come there frequently to pray. According to the Culture Resources Geographic Information System database, Taoyuan city has the greatest number of Land Deity temples—493 registered temples distributed in 1,221 square kilometers—ranking first among 22 regions across Taiwan Island (Academy Sinica, 2018).

Chushan Zi Nan Temple, located in mid-Taiwan, exemplifies the coexistence of folklore beliefs and local administration. Numerous devout believers gather at the temple each Chinese New Year for blessings of good fortune and peace. More specifically, the temple has a loan service using “fortune money” (from NTD \$100 to \$600; approximately USD \$3.42 to \$20.50) for worshippers seeking blessings from the Land Deity, the deity to which Chushan Zi Nan Temple is dedicated. If worshippers who have received loans receive the blessings they desire—for instance, making an ideal profit, recovery of physical health, or passing an examination—their loan repayments usually amount to more than they have borrowed (Graham, 2012). Additionally, in working capital, the temple has adequate ability to give back to the community in the form of, for example, newborn subsidies, childcare benefits, tuition waivers for primary and secondary education, and old age allowances. In other words, the temple cares for the people from the cradle to the grave and helps with local government benefits administration. Commonly, the local Land Deity temple plays a role in humanitarian assistance, and, accordingly, it can influence local political ecology. Even so, the head of local government simultaneously acting as head of the local temple is still extremely rare in Taiwan. Often the temple's chairman and management committee are from local gentry, but usually, incumbent politicians are not included.

This study conducted a survey of community residents' opinions about an incumbent village head simultaneously being in charge of the local Land Deity temple and ascertained some interesting preliminary results.

Residents' perception and attitudes about the village head and the Land Deity temple head being the same person

During the 2-week period from January 22 to February 3, 2018, the researcher interviewed qualified voters in village A, located in Taiwan and having 5438 lawful permanent residents, about their attitudes on the current village mayor, who has also become the local Land Deity temple chairman. For the sake of confidentiality, we

issued an open questionnaire via the instant messaging app LINE and obtained 1,000 anonymous responses from two village A voter groups. One was a supporter group for the current village chief and the other for a candidate in the next general election in November 2018. The study received 612 valid responses (approximately an 11.3% response rate). Furthermore, we surveyed undecided residents—“median voters”—through face-to-face interviews to obtain a more comprehensive view of the results.

Of the responses, 533 (approximately 87.1%) clearly stated that they “do not support” the current mayor who has also become the head of the Land Deity temple in village A. One respondent said:

He [the incumbent village mayor] wants to serve another term as the village head. That’s fine, but he must be 24 hours in service, not distracted by doing other things.

This response is echoed in the following point of view. Edward (2017) cites French management theorist Henri Fayol on division of work: “The worker always on the same post, the manager always concerned with the same matters, acquire an ability, sureness and accuracy which increases their output. In other words, division of work means specialization.” According to this principle, a person is not capable of doing all types of work. Each job of work should be assigned to a specialist. Similarly, a competent public administrator should focus on actively exploring governance problems rather than seeking public exposure in other fields.

Another respondent stated:

As we all know, the Land Deity temple has a lot of money, but it’s only dedicated to the Land Deity, or it’s all for the temple. He [the incumbent village mayor] is also in charge of the temple. Who can guarantee he will not be thinking about that money?

Moore (2014; 2013; 1995) believes that from their governments, citizens want some combination of the following which, together, encompass public value: (1) high-performing, service-oriented public bureaucracies, (2) public organizations that are efficient and effective in achieving desired social outcomes, and (3) public organizations that operate justly and fairly, and lead to just and fair conditions in society at large. Although the local Land Deity temple does not fit the traditional definition of a public organization, in this case, the potential exists to barely distinguish between public and private funds because the temple lacks public supervision. In other words, the incumbent village mayor could possibly be questioned because his new position might offer the temptation to use the temple’s finances for campaign expenses.

Conclusion

From this preliminary survey’s results, we obtain the initial conclusion that a public administrator is responsible for maintaining a clear boundary between public service and private interest. Although in this case, village A’s current mayor being simultaneously in charge of the local Land Deity temple does not present a *legal* conflict of interest, it has caused public questioning about blurring public and private interests. After all, the Land Deity temple’s funds come mostly from the same

constituency. This case is worth continued attention beyond just this preliminary survey to provide further valuable implications.

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