

A Study of the Significance of Folk Religious Beliefs in the Ancestral Indoctrination in Penghu, Taiwan

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Abstract

The Penghu Islands are situated in the middle of the Taiwan Strait and are characterized by unique climate and geographic conditions. Over the centuries, they have been governed by various Chinese dynasties and foreign regimes. During the Qing Dynasty in China, when the situation was turbulent, local scholars noticed a decline in people's morale. They established shrines (Luan Tang) and academies (Shan She) in temples to provide moral education for ancestors based on religious beliefs to promote moral enlightenment among the people. This initiative effectively stabilized people's emotions and influenced the population positively. This distinctive temple belief system is still actively shaping the mindset of Penghu islanders and influencing the island's modernization. This paper will utilize literature analysis and fieldwork to investigate the distinctive temple beliefs in the Penghu area and their educational aspects. The aim is for the findings of this study to enhance the development of Penghu's modern social environment.

Keywords: Penghu, Luan Tang, Temple Belief

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Introduction: The Culture of Temple Beliefs at Penghu

The Penghu temple belief culture reflects the unique historical, geographical, and social background of the region. Penghu, relative to mainland China, is considered a borderland maritime frontier. Throughout its historical past, it has not received significant attention from the country, yet it has been coveted by pirates and major naval powers around the world. According to historical documents, the Ming Dynasty indeed dispatched military forces to Penghu to pursue and eliminate pirates, repelled Dutch fleets twice, and claimed Penghu as territory of the Ming Dynasty (Chen Zongren, 2023).

When the early settlers arrived in Penghu, they encountered a challenging environment with limited natural resources. They brought with them their native folk beliefs and cultural practices, establishing temples to worship the deities from their homeland. These temples served as spiritual sanctuaries and symbols of cultural continuity in the harsh conditions of Penghu. The temple beliefs in Penghu blend reverence for veneration of heaven, ancestor worship, shamanism, pan-spiritualism, and elements of Buddhist and Taoist thought. This folk belief system is characterized by its practicality and utilitarian aspects (Chen, 1994).

During the Yuan Dynasty in the year 1281 AD, a temple dedicated to the Tin Fei (天妃廟) was constructed in Penghu, and it was honored with the title "Protective and Enlightened Tin Fei of the Nation". During the Ming dynasty period (1299~1662), six more temples were constructed in Penghu (Penghu County Government, 1981). In 1624, Penghu had a total of 26 households. By 1644, an additional 82 households had immigrated to Penghu, and from 1661 to 1662, another 83 households moved in. Over several decades, the total population from immigration to Penghu amounted to approximately 1,682 people. The predominant beliefs in various Penghu settlements center around the worship of Guan Sheng Dijun (關聖帝君), Xuantian Shangdi (玄天上帝), and Wangye (王爺) (Cai and Chen, 2023).



Figure 1: The Tianhou temple.

According to the 1910 "Comprehensive History of Taiwan" (臺灣通史), the Tianhou Temple (天后宮), Shuixian Temple (水仙宮), Guanyin Pavilion (觀音亭), and Zhenwu Temple (真武廟) in Magong City, Penghu, were constructed by officials stationed in Penghu during the Qing Dynasty, giving these temples an official character Lian, 1973).

Villages, depending on the deities they worship, generally venerate figures such as Guanyin Bodhisattva (觀世音菩薩), the Jade Emperor (玉皇大帝), Baosheng Dadi (保生大帝),

Xuantian Shangdi (玄天上帝, Wangye (王爺), generals (將軍), and princes (太子). Temples are built to serve the villages, and they have continued to exist to this day because of their perceived efficacy. According to 1981 statistics, Penghu has a large number of temples with magnificent architecture, often costing millions, funded by local residents without official subsidies (Chen Xinxiong, 1994).

The Origins and Significance of Shrine (Luan Tang)

During the chaotic late Qing Dynasty period, societal customs were deteriorating, the opium epidemic was severe, and the nation was in turmoil. In 1853, Penghu scholars witnessed spirit-writing activities in Quanzhou and introduced the practice to the Puxuan Society, Magong City, Penghu. They used spirit-writing (飛鸞扶乩) to preach virtues, encourage people to do good deeds, and advise against opium smoking. They hoped that divine beings, like the mythical phoenix of ancient times, would descend to the human world, alleviate the suffering of the people, and bring about a peaceful and harmonious society, relieving the hellish conditions of that time (Juewu Xuanxin, 1978).



Figure 2: Used spirit-writing.

Traditional Chinese scholars established shrines (Luan Tang) and academics (Shan She) within temple grounds, integrating Confucian thought into religious practices to educate and morally guide the populace. This combination of temple worship and Confucian moral instruction continues to be practiced in contemporary society.

Explain this symbol 飛 from the meaning of its characters which representing the action of flying. All characters related to flying are derived from this form; it resembles the posture of a bird stretching its neck and spreading its wings (Duan, 1975).

Explain this symbol 鸞 from the meaning of its characters which representing the essence of a red divine spirit; red in color, with five colors and the shape of a chicken; it produces sounds corresponding to the five musical notes, and when it sings, it brings harmony.

Explain this symbol 扶 from the meaning of its characters which representing to assist with the hand (Xu, 1988; Duan 1975).

Explain this symbol 乩 from the meaning of its characters which representing to divine or consult for resolving doubts (Kangxi Dictionary). "Divination is used to resolve doubts; without doubts, why seek divination? To inquire about doubts, it follows the mouth, commonly written as 'ji'" (乩) (Xu, 1988; Duan, 1975).

Since 1891, when the establishment of Luan practices in Penghu began with the publication of "Juewu Xuanxin" by Lexiantang of Yixin Society, a new foundation was laid for Luan activities throughout Taiwan. By 2001, Penghu had a total of 60 temples with Shrines (Luan Tang) that had produced 241 volumes of Luan Tang scriptures (Zhu, Zhu, Zhu, Zhu, 2009). From the Qing Dynasty to contemporary times, the moral education provided by Shrines (Luan Tang) in Penghu temples has had a profound effect on promoting social stability.



Figure 3: Yixin Society in Penghu

After the establishment of Shrines (Luan Tang), the deities within the temples were assigned specific duties. The participants in the Shrines (Luan Tang), known as "Luan Sheng" (鸞生), also have specific roles and responsibilities. The process of creating Luan scriptures required applying for a divine decree (玉旨) from the Jade Emperor before beginning. The divine decree specified the deadline for completing the scriptures. During the creation process, each article and case had to be publicly proclaimed to the people. Upon completion, the Luan scriptures had to be published and distributed to temples across Taiwan, providing reading and teaching material for people in other regions (Juewu Xuanxin, 1978).

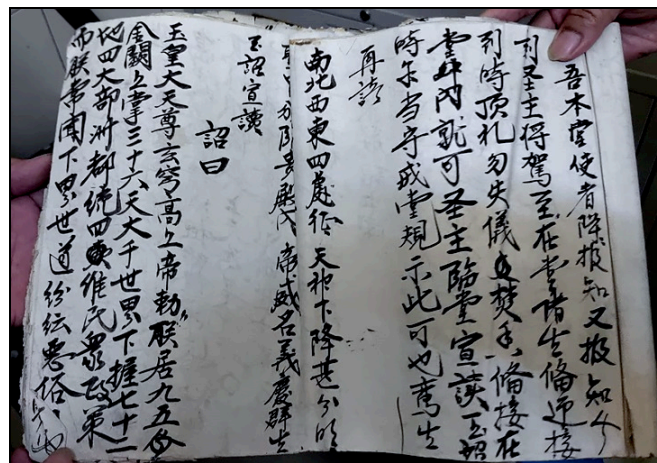


Figure 4: A divine decree.

Centuries of Education and Enlightenment

The Luan scriptures quote the "Qian" and "Kun" from the I Ching, as well as the metaphor of Yin and Yang giving birth to all things. It also references the clarity and turbidity of the "Dao". This is like what is described in the Sequence of Hexagrams from the second canon of the I Ching: "With Heaven and Earth established, then all things are born. With all things born, then there are men and women. With men and women, then there are husbands and wives. With husbands and wives, then there are fathers and sons. With fathers and sons, then there are rulers and subjects. With rulers and subjects, then there is hierarchy. With hierarchy, then propriety and righteousness have their place" (Nan and Xu, 2013). This uses the theory of Yin and Yang to educate people, aiming to restore their innate goodness.

In the Luan scriptures, the five cardinal relationships are discussed: "ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brothers, and friends." It also elaborates on the eight virtues: "filial piety, brotherly love, loyalty, trustworthiness, propriety, righteousness, integrity, and a sense of shame". Therefore, outside of the national education system, direct moral education from the elderly to the young is used to persuade and guide people towards behaviors that are kind, upright, and enterprising, while steering them away from deceitful, wicked, and opportunistic behaviors.

In the Luan scriptures, stories from the Investiture of the Gods are cited to illustrate that people must fulfill their filial duties, perform their responsibilities, and do good deeds. By doing so, they can enter the divine realm after death and become revered and respected deities. At the same time, numerous cases are cited to illustrate that those who commit murder, rape, adultery, fraud, poisoning fish, or slaughtering animals will inevitably fall into hell, face judgment, and endure the suffering of punishment.

Luan scriptures use deification cases to illustrate that practicing filial piety, fulfilling one's duties, and doing good deeds can lead to becoming deified after death.

Luan halls provide consultations for believers on a variety of issues, including illnesses that doctors cannot cure, disturbances caused by evil spirits in homes, spiritual invasions of the body, and selecting auspicious dates for moving into a new residence. These services aim to boost people's confidence and bring peace of mind.

During the 1980s, there were instances in Penghu where a few individuals used the chemical potassium cyanide to catch fish and fry, causing an ecological crisis in the marine environment. Through the moral education provided by Shrines (Luan Tang) and strong enforcement by the government, the trend of environmental destruction was mitigated, allowing for the possibility of regeneration. The educational role of Shrines (Luan Tang) indeed played a significant part in transforming Penghu residents from environmental disruptors into stewards of natural conservation and marine life rehabilitation. This transformation has enabled the sustainable development of Penghu's temple-based belief culture and tourism industry.

When people from Penghu leave their hometown to pursue careers elsewhere, they often bring the main or auxiliary deity statues and ancestral tablets from their original village homes to their new residences for worship and veneration. This practice helps to uphold traditional customs and embodies the coexistence of modernity alongside traditional folk beliefs and culture.



Figure 5: Phoenix temple in Lintou Village, Penghu County, and its branch temples in other regions.

Conclusion

The temple belief culture in Penghu remains present in contemporary times. Temples in each village continue to conduct rituals following ancient protocols, and they regularly train selected school children to become young priests who safeguard the temples. These young priests are trained in Daoist arts or spiritual healing to serve the residents, thus cultivating a unique temple culture in Penghu. These temples also provide spiritual solace to the people of Penghu, promote the unity of village residents, and contribute to grassroots community defense systems, helping to maintain the safety and environment of the villages.

Shrines (Luan Tang) have played a crucial role since the late Qing Dynasty, providing moral education and operating shamanic and medical systems, continuing to be deeply rooted in the traditional memory of the people of Penghu for 150 years. However, in contemporary times, factors such as severe population outflow, industrial and commercial development, higher educational levels, and busy lifestyles among residents have led to a severe shortage of people actively participating in Shrines (Luan Tang) activities. To propagate Luan scriptures and educate the residents effectively, a coordinated effort involving many individuals is necessary. With dwindling personnel, Shrines (Luan Tang) are facing increasing challenges in continuing their operations, raising concerns that this temple-based belief culture may fade away quickly due to insufficient manpower.

According to official statistics from Penghu as of December 31, 2022, there are a total of 96 villages with a population of over 100,000 people. There are also 191 registered temples and religious institutions across various denominations (Penghu County Government, 2023). This clearly shows that the residents of Penghu still have a significant need for and place great importance on temples and their associated beliefs.

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