

The Rise of Western Pop Music and Pole Dancing in Taiwanese Traditional Religious Festivals

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Abstract

In traditional Chinese religious festivals, a procession in which the participants, prior to returning home from a holy pilgrimage, would tour to and visit the neighboring villages. This is called *raojing* 繞境 (patrolling tour). The detour is to share the blessings from the pilgrims in order to bring good luck and prosperity to their fellow communities. However, this sacred patrolling has been incorporated with Western pop music and pole dancing in Taiwan to draw crowds and keep them amused for the past few decades. The paper examines the social impact of this particular religious rendition and argues that the accommodation is not a mere ethical challenge but rather a creative one, aiming for preserving a prior ritual order.

Keywords: Chinese religion, tradition, pilgrimage, inspection tour

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The Patrolling Tour in a Traditional Chinese Pilgrimage

In Chinese popular religion, the term, pilgrimage is called *chaosheng* 朝聖 (approaching the sacred) or *yezu* 謁祖 (paying respects to the ancestors) (Figure 1).¹ The idea of a pilgrimage is to pay a visit to a particular temple, a sacred place or a holy mountain, where a soul could be purified, a petition could be granted and a better life could be sought.² This religious procession could be organized by people or interest groups with no fixed date, route or destination, and could sometimes be combined with tourism to stimulate the economy of a specific place. The trip is often conducted in a relatively low profile without trying to draw the public attention.

However, there is another kind of pilgrimage, which is formed by the committee members of a specific religious cult, aiming to pay homage to their ancestral temple on a regular basis. This is normally a much larger religious procession with one or several communities involved. The main purpose of the pilgrimage is to keep the lineage of a specific deity with his/her (ancestral or mother temple). Therefore, it should be as colorful and loud as possible, preferably interesting enough to stimulate the general public's awareness and support.

There are two major events from this kind of pilgrimage. The first is called *jinxiang* 進香 (presenting incense), which is the deity from regional temple presenting incense sticks to pay homage to the ancestor temple upon arrival.³ By presenting incense, which is deemed as a gift in Chinese material culture, the subsidiary temple verifies the kinship of incense fire between the two.⁴ Following the presenting, a ritual named *fenxiang* 分香 (division of incense) is proceeded to have some of the incense ashes removed from the urn of the ancestral temple to be brought back to the regional one. This is a gesture of goodwill, meaning the rewarding from the ancestral temple. This

¹ The term, Chinese popular religion, is borrowed from Meir Shahar and Robert Weller's study of the relationship between Chinese divinity and society, referring to the religious beliefs and practices that are shared by the majority of the Chinese laity without the restrictions of canonical scriptures and have become part of their daily life. For further information, see Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller, "Gods and Society in China", in *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China*, ed. Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 1.

² The trip to a holy mountain or a temple in a holy mountain is called *qiaoshan* 朝山 (paying respect to a mountain), which is used to describe the pilgrimage practices associated with sacred mountains said to have their Buddhist or Daoist origins, see Edward L. Davis ed., *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture* (London: Routledge, 2005), 648

³ It is worth noting that the term, *jinxiang* has often been associated as equivalent to *chaosheng* or pilgrimage, which is not entirely correct. For the Chinese, presenting incense to the mother temple is merely a means of paying tribute to the celestial world. It is the initial part of the pilgrimage, I would argue, not the final result. The end purpose is to gain the ashes from the incense urn of the mother temple, and bring them back to the child temple as an endorsement of authenticity and confirmation of lineage. This kind of re-endorsement is the guarantee of continuing blessings and power from the celestial world. For the power of Chinese incense, see Chang Hsun, "Xiang zhi weiwu: jinxiang yishi zhong xianghuo guannian de wuzhi jichu" (Scent as Substance: the Material Basis of Chinese Incense-Fire Rituals and Concepts), *Taiwan Journal of Anthropology*, 4, No. 2 (2006), 37-73.

⁴ Incense sticks are used by Chinese as a symbolic form of food, which is regarded as an offering or gift to communicate with gods, ghosts and ancestors. For the functionality and symbolic meaning of gift exchange in Chinese society, see Jiang Jun, "Cong renlei xue shiye kan mingdai fenggong tixi: guanyu liwu de fenxi" (The Grant and Tribute System in the Ming Dynasty From the View of Anthropology: Analysis of Gift), *Harbin xueyuan xuebao* (Journal of Harbin University), 25, No. 9 (2004), 22-26.

kind of gift exchanging ritual further seeks for the endorsement and infusion of spiritual power from the divine.⁵

The patrolling tour (*raojing* 遶境 or *chuxun raojing* 出巡遶境), on the other hand, is another major event of this kind of pilgrimage. It focuses on the deity's way to and back from the ancestral temple. The tour is more of a community based ceremony, which can be interpreted as a neighborhood watch program from the spiritual world during the tour.⁶ The term, *raojing*, literally "borders crossing patrol" refers to an intentional detour to the neighboring communities in order to share the blessings from the spiritual world. That is, prior to and after the returning from the ancestral temple, the deity would deliberately take a roundabout route, visiting his/her neighboring villages from one to another in order to make sure that the areas close by to his/her jurisdiction is also well established. The neighboring villagers would in return welcome the divine with passion and enthusiasm, accompanied by exotic dances and music performances to light up the crowd or *renao* 熱鬧 (crowd time), which is a Chinese expression, meaning to put on a good show to draw in more noisy and hot crowds.

Therefore, it is not surprising that on the route of the patrolling tour, the deity is often greeted by the surrounding communities with a series of spectacular fireworks, skittery Chinese traditional music, and luxurious dance performances to gain the stamp of this worldly approval, and in the name of summoning the blessings from the otherworldly.⁷ Furthermore, some regional altars would set up temporary platforms along the site to house their patron gods to support their communities and to proclaim their lineage from the spiritual world as well (Figure 1). In addition, street vendors would also join the ceremony taking advantage of the procession by selling food or event merchandise to the worshipers or onlookers (Figure 2). The community based religious ceremony would then turns into a genre of socialization and communication, sharing common interest between the real and the imagined of which both are materialized to construct a noisy-hot public sphere.⁸

⁵ Denis Byrne, *Counterheritage: Critical Perspectives on Heritage Conservation in Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 124.

⁶ Lin Mei-Rong, *Mazu xinyang yu taiwan shehui* (The Belief of Mazu and the Taiwanese Society), (New Taipei City: BoyYoung Culture, 2006), 15.

⁷ *Beiguan* along with *Nanguan* (South Pipes) are two distinct and dominant traditional music genres in Taiwan. For the differences between *nanguan* and *beiguan* music, and the development of *beiguan* music in Taiwan, see Jian Shangren, *Fuer mosha zhimei: taiwan de chuantong yinyue* (The Beauty of Formosa: Taiwan's Traditional Music), (Taipei: Xingzheng yuan wenhua jianshe weiyuanhui, 2001), 134-142 and 195-196.

⁸ For the materialization of the Chinese popular religion, see Lin Wei-Ping, *Materializing Magic Power: Chinese Popular Religion in Villages and Cities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).



Figure 1: Some regional altars would stage alongside the route of the patrolling tour.
Source: Photograph by Min-Chia Young, 2015.



Figure 2: Street vendors would crowd around to celebrate the religious procession.
Source: Photograph by Min-Chia Young, 2015.

The Changes and Transformations of the Taiwanese Patrolling Tour

For most Han Chinese in Taiwan, they are migrants from the southeastern coast of China, especially the area called (Southern Min), which roughly consists of residents from Fujian, Guangdong and Hainan. Hence, Taiwanese retain a strong Southern Min culture.⁹ For them, presenting incense to the ancestral temple to pay tribute to the divine and bringing incense ashes back to the child temple as an endorsement from the spiritual world are parts of the Chinese tradition. This kind of tradition is required to house various types of *yige* 藝閣 (opera stage or parade float) and *zhentou* 陣頭 (parade performing troupe) to increase the heat and noise of the crowd time.¹⁰ These splendid performances can be deemed as the result of the collective effort of the public masses in their quest for a better life in this life and the life after.

⁹ Lin Wei-Ping, “Virtual Recentralization: Pilgrimage as Social Imaginary in the Demilitarized Islands between China and Taiwan”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 56 (2014), 136.

¹⁰ The term *yige* is used to describe the decorated parade float leading the pilgrims in a traditional religious procession, see Loa Lok-Sin, “Master Puppet Theater Stage Painter Recalls Hard Times”, *Taipei Times*, 16 August, 2011. However, the invention of *yige*, as a novel feature in the Chinese Lantern Festival, was during the Song dynasty (960-1279), a possible influence from the increasing merging of Buddhism and popular beliefs, see Ho Yi-Chin, “Taiwan chuantong yige yishu yanjiu” (The Art Research of Taiwan Traditional Yi-Ge), (Master’s diss., National Taipei University, 2008), 14. The formation of *zhentou*, on the other hand, is a kind of regional folk art performance, sponsored and supported by different communities and societies. It originated from the term *sanyue* 散樂—meaning the performance of extraordinary feats—which was the acrobatic performances during Chinese temple procession, see Zhang Yating, “Taiwan zhentou luogu zhi yanjiu” (The Study of Taiwan Traditional Percussion Group), (Master’s diss., Nanhua University, 2004), 4-6.

In order to maximize the mechanism of these performances to gain more recognition for the spiritual power, these presentations not only need to be energetic, purposeful and splendid for maximum entertainment, they also have to follow the social value and beliefs under the guidance of a materialized view and the rule of engagement for a direct access to a better life is “no pay, no gain”. This rule further goes and changes from time to time and from place to place. Hence, we see the performing stage changes from bamboo structure to a more elaborate aluminum truss framing (Figure 3), the music stretches from traditional Han Chinese style to a more dynamic Western-influenced popular music (Figure 4), and the theme of immortality shifts from still images to energetic child performers, and then from classical opera play to a more exotic pole dancing (Figure 5).¹¹



Figure 3: The performing stage changes from bamboo structure to aluminum truss in a traditional Taiwanese patrolling tour. Source: Photograph by Min-Chia Young, 2015.



Figure 4: The traditional Chinese *Beiguan* music with *suona* 嗩吶 (double-reeded horn), *luo* 鑼 (gong), *bo* 鈸 (cymbal) and *gu* 鼓 (drum) set players (left) and a one-man band with various types of electronic devices playing Western popular music (right). Source: Photograph by Min-Chia Young, 2015.

¹¹ Ho, “Taiwan chuantong”, 19-25. For the record of Taiwan’s first use of paid girls to perform in a patrolling tour, see Tang Zan, *Taiyang jianwen lu* (A Record of Things Seen and Heard in Taiwan), (Nantou: Taiwan wenxian weiyuan hui, 1996), 145.



Figure 5: The performers on a parade float change from innocent children to erotic pole dancers in a traditional Taiwanese patrolling tour. Source: Ho Yi-Chin, “Taiwan chuantong yige yishu yanjiu” (The Art Research of Taiwan Traditional Yi-Ge), (Master’s diss., National Taipei University, 2008), 21 (left) and Photograph by Min-Chia Young, 2015 (right).

These changes and transformations involve a much larger budget allocation and a much sharper power shift in which a regulatory authority can be challenged and contained. One small case study in Taiwan is provided as evidence of how the regularity of the heavenly realm can be interfered and changed by the standard of this material world.

The 2015 Patrolling Tour of the *Yuanqing shizai* 圓慶拾載 (10th Annual Celebration of Full Blessings) in Taiwan

The patrolling tour of the 10th Annual Celebration of Full Blessings in Renwu, Taiwan was an after event following a regional altar’s pilgrimage to Changhua County to pay tribute to the Tian-Hou Temple of Lugang on June 28, 2015. The main purpose of the patrolling tour, as the poster clearly depicted, was to:

恭祝仁武聖瀾會天上聖母前往鹿港天后宮謁祖進香，
圓滿回駕暨會慶拾載平安祈福遶境踩街慶典。

Congratulate the success of Renwu Holy Waves Society’s incense presenting to its ancestral temple, Lugang Tian-Hou Temple, and to welcome and celebrate its returning to perform an inspection tour for the sharing of full luck and blessings to the neighboring communities (Figure6).



Figure 6: The *Yuanqing shizai* 圓慶拾載 (10th Annual Celebration of Full Blessings) hosted by *Renwu shenglan hui* 仁武聖瀾會 (Renwu Holy Waves Society) on June 28, 2015. Source: Photograph by Min-Chia Young, 2015.

In order to gain the full access of divine blessings, the Renwu district's joint communities blasted out the sky with firecrackers, Western pop music, and loads of erotic pole dancers on the parade floats to capture the interest of the crowds (Figure 7). As the Chinese and Taiwanese alike, generally believe that the more human interaction, the more attractiveness and cohesion between the sacred and the profane would be. A myriad of spectacular parade floats leading the way of the religious procession were sponsored by different communities or individuals to compete for the sheer glory of their achievements (Figure 8). Tons of green and artificial materials were implemented in a mixture of old and new fashions to capture the attention of this-worldly and the otherworldly.



Figure 7: Loads of firecrackers blasted the sky of Renwu District in a 2015's patrolling tour. Source: Photograph by Min-Chia Young, 2015.



Figure 8: The parade floats were decorated in a combination of old and new fashions, which look like an exotic edition of the Rose Parade. Source: Photograph by Min-Chia Young, 2015.

The main event of this spectacular procession was the pole dancing on the so-called high-tech *dianzi huache* 電子花車 (electronic flower car or EFC), which is a truck converted into a neon-lit platform for hot noisy Western pop music and erotic dance performances (Figure 9). This unusual feature has its origin during the reign of Emperor Guangxu of Qing (1875-1908), when hiring female entertainers with mini skirt forming a marching band to play Western music and perform exotic stunts in a funeral event to amuse the dead was acknowledged as a sign of wealth and filial piety in Taiwan. It then went further for the Taiwanese to ask these professional entertainers to add more erotic elements, such as stripping or parading naked to their performances during the Japanese Colonial period (1895-1945) to draw more noisy crowds to the funeral to gain more respect from the family members. This was a popular belief due to the generalization that the gods, ghosts and ancestors alike would prefer some sort of colorful entertainments. The idea of the spiritual world would also like to have a little bit of hot and spicy entertainments, though not necessarily endorsed by all social classes, soon spread among the popular masses, making this erotic performance became a must during a funeral, a temple fair or any religious festival. A religious ceremony held on the street without a lot of noise and spicy events could be deemed as a disgrace to the *luzhu* 爐主 (host patron) or community and a disrespect to the otherworldly. Needless to say, any regional altar or society, who eagers to gain recognition and solidarity from their worshippers would not jeopardize their standing in the community for not meeting this novel demand or

creation. Hence, this sensational innovation has become a “soft power” under the guise of Chinese traditional religious performance interacting with modernization and globalization in the Taiwanese society

Conclusion

The need for gods, ghosts and ancestors is universal but the way to approach and summon these spiritual beings is individual. The rise of Western popular music and pole dancing in the Taiwanese religious beliefs demonstrates that the Chinese view of the spiritual world is uniquely structured on a material basis, which allows constant changes and transformations to meet the flow of public interests. These changes and transformations, no matter how exotic they may be and no matter how twisted they may seem, are the soft power of the popular culture, which can cause instrumental effects taken seriously by different parties from privilege class to general public. This kind of cultural summoning or assimilation, be it domestic or intentional, is and has always been a distinct type of the Chinese perception having no difficulty accommodating their own “universal” world. Hence, the change of Chinese traditional music to Western popular one and the transformation of opera performance troupes to erotic pole dancing girls can both be justified as a distinct Chinese way of approaching the divinities.

Although these special religious installments may not seem to appropriate the Chinese traditional dichotomy of sacred and profane perfectly, they are a perfect fit in the contemporary Chinese society, which successfully preserves a prior ritual order, accommodates different parties with different interests, and creates an ambiguous reference between the real (profane) and imaged (sacred) worlds. This ambiguous view of the Chinese religious society, however, further embraces the value of the Chinese popular religion and paves a common ground for people from different societies to look forward and move on in their endless quest for a better life

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