

Exploring the Influence of Local Folk Beliefs in Taiwan on Urban and Rural Sustainability

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Abstract

Taiwan is a migrant settlement society. Since the Ming and Qing periods, early settlers continuously crossed the sea from mainland China to Taiwan, gradually forming settlements through clustering effects and developing locally distinctive socio-economic structures and diverse cultural landscapes. These settlers also brought deities from their places of origin to Taiwan and built temples within their settlements for worship. Over time, these temples became important sites in local life, carrying religious, social, and economic significance. In recent years, sustainable urban and rural development has attracted increasing attention, particularly in rural and peripheral areas. This study takes Shuntian Temple, located in Tuku Township, Yunlin County, as its research case. Founded during the Jiawu year of the Daoguang reign in the Qing dynasty, Shuntian Temple is dedicated primarily to Mazu and serves as both a county designated historic site and a local religious center. This study integrates narrative inquiry and fieldwork methods. Through local historical narratives, in-depth interviews, and observation, it outlines the social, economic, and cultural influence of Tuku Shuntian Temple. Taking the temple as the core, this study further connects the Tuku township office, businesses along Tuku old street, and regional revitalization enterprises to construct sustainable urban and rural development strategies centered on local folk beliefs, thereby creating a sustainable ecosystem that brings renewed vitality to Tuku Township. The findings are expected to provide a different perspective for those concerned with sustainable urban and rural development.

Keywords: Taiwanese local folk belief, urban and rural sustainability, Tuku Shuntian Temple

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Introduction

Taiwan is an immigrant society. Since the Ming-Zheng period, early settlers gradually migrated from Fujian and Guangdong provinces to Taiwan for land reclamation and settlement. However, crossing the sea to Taiwan was a life and death challenge for these pioneers. Zhu (2004) described the circumstances of early migration and settlement as follows:

After crossing the turbulent waters of the Black Ditch, the migrant settlers finally set foot on Taiwanese soil. Before they could even catch their breath, they had to immediately begin seeking a livelihood. All their possessions may have consisted of only a shoulder pole with baskets, along with a packet of incense ashes and ancestral tablets carefully wrapped in a cloth bundle.

He further noted:

What awaited them was an alluring expanse of uncultivated land; yet this land was also filled with miasma and disease, threatening the health of newcomers. In addition, living alongside indigenous peoples whose intentions were unknown, as well as competing with settlers from different ancestral origins, constantly kept them in a state of anxiety.

Li (1998) also pointed out that

when immigrants crossed the sea to Taiwan, their navigational skills were limited and they lacked weather forecasting equipment. Moreover, the Taiwan Strait was characterized by rapid currents and frequent typhoons. Therefore, they enshrined guardian deities associated with maritime protection on their vessels, praying for a safe passage to Taiwan. These included Mazu, traditionally believed to protect fishermen, and Xuantian Shangdi, the deity associated with the north star. After settling in Taiwan, they enshrined these deities in temples, where their incense offerings continued without interruption.

Therefore, Yang (2018) argued that temples are the original codes for deciphering the history of Taiwan's development. The deity worshipped in each temple, and the place in mainland China from which the deity's spiritual lineage originated, represent the history of the people who came from that region to reclaim and settle Taiwan. A temple, a community of fellow villagers, a gathering of pioneers, a story of local development, and the historical trajectory of a township, all these, step by step, reveal the original contours of Taiwan's history.

According to population statistics from the Ministry of the Interior, as of the end of 2025, Taiwan's total population was 23,299,132, continuing to show negative growth. The population aged 65 and above reached 4,673,155, accounting for 20.06% of the total population. Based on the definition of the World Health Organization, Taiwan has officially entered a super-aged society (Department of Household Registration, Ministry of the Interior, 2026).

Therefore, amid profound demographic changes, some towns in Taiwan are facing the risk of gradual decline or even disappearance. As a result, sustainable urban and rural development has received increasing attention in recent years. However, throughout the historical development of towns, local folk beliefs have played a significant role in forming community clusters and generating economic effects. Accordingly, this study aims to construct sustainable urban and rural development strategies centered on local folk beliefs, thereby creating a

sustainable ecosystem that brings renewed vitality to townships. This study takes Tuku Township in Yunlin County and its local religious center, Shuntian Temple, as the case for interpretation and analysis.

Taiwanese Folk Beliefs

According to Lin (1991) definition, “Taiwanese folk beliefs refer to all supernatural beliefs of the Han Chinese in Taiwan, as well as the ideas, rituals, organizations, activities, objects, and related matters associated with such supernatural beliefs.” As the social core of settlements, folk beliefs provide shared values, foster a sense of belonging among group members, and strengthen social cohesion. In many traditional settlements, temples serve as important places for leisure, entertainment, gatherings, and discussions of public affairs, becoming symbols of community cohesion. The development of many cities is closely related to religious sites, which have become centers of local economy and culture.

Folk beliefs also perform a moral-regulating function. Concepts such as karmic retribution, the cycle of life and death, and the worship of deities and ancestral spirits help regulate people’s behavior and maintain social order. From this foundation, temples further developed into local economic centers, as the gathering of worshippers contributed to the emergence of prosperous markets and commercial districts. Temple organizations often play a governance role in traditional settlements by mediating disputes among residents and presiding over community affairs. Religious customs within settlements influence residents’ behavioral patterns and help maintain social stability. Accordingly, many settlements conduct religious rituals to pray for peace and safety; for example, Mazu belief in coastal settlements emphasizes maritime safety. The myths and legends of folk beliefs endow settlements with distinctive historical and cultural identities. Religious activities, such as temple fairs and deity processions, promote the transmission of local culture and become important features of settlements. Through worship, festivals, and rituals, communication within the community increases, thereby promoting solidarity and strengthening collective identity.

Urban and Rural Sustainability

With the intensification of globalization and urbanization, contemporary cities are facing multiple challenges, including overpopulation, resource depletion, environmental pollution, and social inequality. Against this backdrop, sustainable development has become an ideal goal pursued in the construction of future cities. “Sustainable development” is one of the most important global issues of the twenty-first century. In 2015, the United Nations announced the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Among the 17 goals, Goal 11 focuses on sustainable cities and communities, aiming to build cities and rural areas that are inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. Therefore, sustainable urban and rural development is concerned not only with the construction of infrastructure, but also with the improvement of the social environment. It seeks to reduce the urban-rural gap, enhance the quality of living, and ensure that every resident can enjoy an accessible and equitable living space.

In order to address such issues as Taiwan’s declining total population, the excessive concentration of population in metropolitan areas, and the imbalance between urban and rural development, the Executive Yuan established the Regional Revitalization Board. The board is composed of representatives from central government ministries, local governments, private-sector leaders concerned with regional revitalization, as well as scholars and experts. The National Development Council is responsible for overall planning, coordination, and

integration of regional revitalization resources across ministries, thereby ensuring the implementation of regional revitalization initiatives.

To further strengthen the momentum of implementation, the government approved the Plan to Accelerate the Promotion of Regional Revitalization (2021–2025) in 2020. Subsequently, it proposed the Plan for Building Sustainable and Inclusive Regional Revitalization (2025–2028). With sustainability, public welfare, and mutual prosperity as its core principles, the plan promotes key initiatives so that high quality local revitalization ideas can receive government support. It also seeks to cooperate with other countries in jointly promoting Taiwan's achievements in regional revitalization.

Furthermore, local old streets connected to folk-religion temples are economic centers formed through the clustering effects generated by the establishment of local religious centers. The formation of many old streets in Taiwan is closely related to temples, religious spheres, market economies, festival activities, and the gathering and movement of people. Temples are not merely religious sites; they often serve as centers of local public life, social interaction, and cultural transmission.

In recent years, driven by regional revitalization, the initiative of “old street revitalization” has taken historical districts as its core. Through the revitalization of culture, industry, resident participation, and local characteristics, such initiatives seek to restore vitality and sustainability to local communities. Since 2017, Taiwan has promoted the “Regeneration of Historic Sites” project, which attempts to take historically significant sites as its core, improve the surrounding living environment, and strengthen residents' sense of place and local identity. Within this context, local folk beliefs can be regarded as an important core of “old street revitalization.”

Therefore, promoting old street revitalization with local folk beliefs as the core is significant in that it reconnects local society with cultural memory through temple organizations, festival activities, resident participation, youth returning to their hometowns, the adaptive reuse of old houses, local narratives, and traditional industries.

Accordingly, when temples are able to establish collaborative relationships with local governments, community development associations, old street businesses, schools, youth groups, nonprofit organizations, and other actors, they can jointly form a cultural ecosystem. Such an ecosystem helps transform old streets from mere tourism-oriented spaces into a core strategic component of sustainable township development.

Research Method

This study integrates literature analysis, narrative inquiry, and fieldwork methods. First, it begins with an in-depth understanding of the cultural and historical background of Tuku Township and Tuku Shuntian Temple through historical documents. It then adopts narrative inquiry to conduct oral history on Tuku Township and Tuku Shuntian Temple, beginning with the childhood and adolescent memories of local elders in Tuku Township.

Kim (2016) pointed out that oral history has been a primary mode of communication throughout human history, transmitting collective memory and history across generations through spoken language. It can reveal how people understand the past, how they connect past personal and collective life experiences with social contexts, how they link the past with the

present and the future, and how they use past experiences to interpret the life and world surrounding them.

The interview participants in this study are divided into four categories. The first category consists of local elders, with the aim of reconstructing the historical development and local cultural significance of Tuku Township and Tuku Shuntian Temple through their life experiences and memories. The second category consists of business owners on Tuku Old Street, with the aim of understanding the relationship between commercial activities on the old street and local beliefs, as well as their influence on the local economy and culture. The third category consists of regional revitalization business owners, with the aim of exploring how regional revitalization actions are connected with local culture, beliefs, and economic development. The fourth category consists of officials from the Tuku township office, with the aim of understanding the policy measures adopted by the local government in relation to sustainable urban and rural development and local cultural governance.

The Case

Tuku Township is one of the 20 townships, towns, and cities in Yunlin County, Taiwan, and consists of 17 villages. Geographically, it is located at approximately 120°24' east longitude and 23°44' north latitude, with an elevation of about 19 meters. It borders Huwei Township to the east and Baozhong Township to the west. To the south, it faces the Beigang River, while to the southwest it borders Yuanchang Township. To the north, it is adjacent to the New Huwei River and borders Lunbei Township. The terrain of Tuku Township is slightly elongated and rectangular in shape, gradually widening toward the south. The land is flat, with a broad area in the southern part of the township. The total area of the township is 46 square kilometers (official website of Tuku Township Office).

The development of the Tuku area can be traced back to the Yan-Zheng period. At that time, “Daqiutian,” one of the “Ten Fortified Settlements” established by Yan Siqi, included the area of present day Tuku. During the Dutch colonial period, according to the *Diary of Fort Zeelandia*, Tuku was recorded in Dutch as “Docowangh.” During the Qing period, Tuku served as a trading center for the surrounding 23 villages and occupied a strategic position along the north-south transportation routes connecting Lukang, Beigang, and Yanshui Port. In earlier times, due to the narrow and low-lying condition of the old street, dust would rise on sunny days, while the roads became muddy everywhere on rainy days. As a result, pedestrians passing through often had their clothes and trousers covered with yellow mud. The settlement was therefore called “Tuku Village,” literally meaning “muddy trousers village,” which later evolved into the name “Tuku.”

During the Japanese colonial period, Tuku Village was established under Huwei District, Tainan Prefecture, and was later upgraded to Tuku Street. In 1945, after the Republic of China government took control of Taiwan, Tuku Street was reorganized as Tuku Township under Huwei District, Tainan County. In 1950, Tuku Township was reassigned to Yunlin County.

Shuntian Temple in Tuku Township, together with Beigang Chaotian Temple to the north, is regarded as one of the two major Mazu temples in Yunlin County. Regarding the founding and historical development of Tuku Shuntian Temple, the *Yunlin County Gazetteer* records:

Shuntian Temple is located on Tuku Street, twenty-two li west of the county seat. The temple consists of four sections. In the front hall, a statue of the Mazu is enshrined,

while in the rear hall, a statue of Guanyin Bodhisattva is worshipped. In the Jiawu year of the Daoguang reign, local residents Wu Keji and Chen Bihu donated funds for its construction. They also allocated two sources of revenue, namely the sweet potato grain tax and the rice-measure tax from the street, to support the temple's incense offerings. In the second year of the Xianfeng reign, the temple had fallen into disrepair; official Chen Chengqing undertook its renovation and added ten corridor rooms. In the twelfth year of the Tongzhi reign, Chen Shijun initiated donations and added another ten corridor rooms on the right side.

Shuntian Temple is dedicated primarily to Mazu, commonly known as Tuku Mazu. The temple is a county-designated historic site and a local religious center. Over the past three hundred years, it has undergone several restorations; however, it could not fully withstand the passage of time. In 2022, the temple authorities and the government jointly launched the largest historic-site restoration project in its history.

Tuku Shuntian Temple is renowned for the sayings “Beigang manifests divine power, while Tuku brings stability” and “Tuku Mazu blesses those beyond the local community.” These expressions represent the miraculous deeds and divine power of Tuku Mazu in protecting local residents and worshippers.

Tuku was once an important transportation hub in Yunlin, connecting routes from the south to the north, and was marked by prosperous commercial activity. In earlier times, food and drink were not provided along pilgrimage routes. To prevent the continuous flow of pilgrims heading to Beigang from having difficulty finding meals, worshippers would invite one another by saying, “Let's go to Tuku to eat and shop.” This tradition has allowed Tuku, even after more than a century, to retain a distinctly traditional Taiwanese flavor, along with rich and charming historical culture and distinctive long established shops.

In modern times, however, after stations on the main north-south railway line were established in Douliu and Dounan, Tuku gradually lost its geographical and transportation advantages. Although it has now returned to a state of quietness, its former glory still remains in the shops along the old street and in its ancient temples. These beautiful historic buildings are like time machines frozen in place, standing amid a rapidly changing urban landscape and waiting for travelers to visit, linger, and savor the charm of this old town.

According to information from the Yunlin County Household Registration Portal, the population of Tuku Township has shown a year-by-year decline over the past decade. As of February 2026, the population aged 65 and above accounted for 16.34% of the total population. However, through the efforts of the local government, the number of people moving into the township has shown a growing trend over the past three years.

Results and Discussion

Based on the above research design, this study interviewed a total of seven participants. The interview and observation results were organized, summarized, and analyzed, ultimately leading to the construction of sustainable urban and rural development strategies centered on local folk beliefs. A total of seven strategies were identified, as follows:

- 1 Strategy for preserving religious culture: Establishing a database of Tuku Mazu belief and local memory

This strategy proposes the establishment of a “Tuku Mazu belief and cultural database,” which would include temple architecture and cultural artifacts, stories of Tuku Mazu belief, miraculous accounts, festival rituals, local legends, memories of local elders, stories of old street businesses, and residents’ life experiences. The contents of this database can be transformed into materials for cultural tours, local education, exhibition planning, and tourism interpretation. The purpose of this strategy is to prevent local memory from disappearing with generational change, while enabling the cultural value of Tuku Shuntian Temple to be systematically preserved, translated, and transmitted.

- 2 Strategy for local historical narratives: Transforming personal life experiences into shared local memory

Through the method of narrative inquiry, the personal life experiences of local elders, old street business owners, regional revitalization business owners, and residents are transformed into the shared local memory of Tuku Township. Accordingly, different narratives can be integrated into a “Tuku local story map,” connecting the temple, old street, shops, historical spaces, and regional revitalization sites. This strategy enables the local development of Tuku Township to be situated within a clear cultural context, while allowing visitors, younger generations, and local residents to reunderstand the value of the place.

- 3 Strategy for revitalizing the old street economy: Constructing a belief-based economic sphere centered on Shuntian Temple

With Tuku Shuntian Temple as the core, this strategy connects businesses along Tuku Old Street and establishes a shared old street brand, thereby enhancing the overall recognition of the commercial district. Through joint activities, collaborative marketing, and cross store cooperation, it promotes cooperation among old street businesses. This strategy enables Tuku old street to shift from the operation of individual stores toward the holistic revitalization of the entire district. It also transforms the flow of visitors and the cultural influence generated by Tuku Shuntian Temple into a driving force for the sustainable development of the local economy.

- 4 Strategy for supporting regional revitalization: Promoting youth return and cultural innovation

This strategy encourages regional revitalization businesses and young entrepreneurs to participate in the sustainable development of Tuku Township. Through youth creativity and cultural translation, local traditions can be reconnected with the contemporary socio economic environment. It also promotes collaboration between regional revitalization businesses and traditional businesses on the old street, forming a co-creation model between new and long established shops. This strategy enables regional revitalization to become an important force for the overall cultural regeneration and economic revitalization of Tuku Township.

- 5 Strategy for cultural tourism and in-depth travel: Connecting Tuku Shuntian Temple, the old street, and regional revitalization sites

This strategy constructs cultural tourism and in-depth travel routes starting from Tuku Shuntian Temple. It involves planning cultural walking routes that connect Tuku Shuntian Temple, Tuku old street, and regional revitalization businesses. Local tour guides can be trained to incorporate stories of Tuku Mazu belief, the history of the old street, and cases of regional revitalization into their guided tours. This strategy will help extend visitors' length of stay, enhance the economic benefits of local consumption, and promote the dissemination and recognition of local culture.

- 6 Strategy for public and private collaborative governance: Establishing a platform for sustainable urban and rural development in Tuku

Coordinated by the Tuku township office, this strategy seeks to integrate Tuku Shuntian Temple, old street businesses, regional revitalization businesses, community organizations, schools, and residents to jointly establish the "Tuku sustainable urban and rural development platform." The platform would regularly discuss issues such as cultural preservation, old street revitalization, regional revitalization, tourism interpretation, traffic routes, improvement of public spaces, restoration of historic sites, festival activities, and brand marketing. The focus of this strategy lies in establishing a long-term cooperation mechanism. Through public-private collaboration, Tuku Township can integrate its dispersed local resources into goal-oriented actions for sustainable development.

- 7 Strategy for sustainability education and intergenerational transmission: cultivating participants in local culture

This strategy transforms the experiences of Tuku Shuntian Temple, Tuku old street, and regional revitalization into resources for sustainability education. It promotes collaboration between schools and communities in designing local cultural courses related to Tuku. Students are encouraged to participate in interviews with local elders, field visits to the old street, observations of religious festivals, and the writing of local stories. This strategy also seeks to cultivate young volunteers and cultural tour guides, enabling younger generations to become transmitters of local culture. Through intergenerational learning, local elders, business owners, young people, and residents can jointly participate in the construction of local knowledge. In this way, local folk beliefs become important resources for local education, public participation, and intergenerational connection.

Conclusion

This study takes Tuku Shuntian Temple as a case study to explore the influence of Taiwanese local folk beliefs on sustainable urban and rural development. The findings reveal that local folk beliefs are deeply embedded in local social life and serve multiple functions, including strengthening residents' emotional bonds, preserving historical memory, sustaining cultural identity, revitalizing the local economy, and promoting public participation. As a local religious center, Tuku Shuntian Temple carries the Mazu belief, old street culture, festival activities, and residents' life experiences. It has long been connected with local society, commercial activities, and public life, thereby serving as a core resource for the sustainable development of the township.

This study constructs sustainable urban and rural development strategies centered on Tuku Shuntian Temple. Through the dimensions of religious culture preservation, local historical narratives, old street economic revitalization, support for regional revitalization, cultural tourism and in-depth travel, public and private collaborative governance, and sustainability education and intergenerational transmission, this study integrates the Tuku Township Office, old street businesses, regional revitalization businesses, community organizations, schools, and residents to jointly shape an ecosystem for local sustainable development. Overall, local folk beliefs can help townships establish local identity, create renewed local vitality, and provide concrete directions for sustainable urban and rural development in Taiwan.

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