

Article

The Development and Modern Transformation of Material Culture in the Worship of Mazu

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Abstract: Based on fieldwork and the analysis of the historical literature, this article studies the development of material culture in the cult of popular goddess Mazu, exploring in particular the materialization mechanisms and strategies deployed by various actors in her worship nowadays. Through the ages, people in China have expressed their religious feelings and experiences in the objects they display, worship, and exchange, as well as in the spaces that they build and inhabit. In this process, religious beliefs are externalized in forms of material culture, including symbols, texts, relics, music, and temples. As a result, these artifacts and places carry individual and collective memories and affects that allow believers to experience religion not only at special events like festivals and pilgrimages, but in everyday life. In modern China, the connotations and forms of material carriers have diversified. The rise of souvenirs and other forms of cultural consumption have transformed the materialization of religiosity. In the worship of Mazu, the relationship between pilgrimage, tourism, entertainment, and the production and circulation of commodities has become increasingly tight, changing the cult's beliefs and their physical expression. That connection also brings social and economic sustenance to the local community. Taking the Mazu Temple in Meizhou as a case, this paper adopts a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach to examine the pilgrimage–tourism–commerce nexus, as well as other contemporary forms of the materialization of her cult.



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1. Introduction

This article explores various expressions of religiosity through material culture in the worship of Mazu, one of the most popular goddesses in China. In particular, I will show the modern transformations the cult has experienced, highlighting the actors and media involved. We shall see that material expressions of the veneration of Mazu play a central role in constructing a modern version of worship. To undertake this task, I will rely on textual sources to illustrate how material objects were foundational in the rise of the Mazu cult and contributed to its orthodoxy throughout the centuries. I will also illustrate modern transformations of the materiality of the devotion to the goddess through ethnographic work I have conducted. This work includes participant observations and interviews with visitors at Mazu's ancestral temple during important religious festivals, such as the day of "Mazu's ascending to Heaven," and the 24th "Meizhou's Mazu Cultural Tourist Festival".¹ In order to obtain a wide variety of opinions, I interviewed tourists who are not Mazu believers, as well as Mazu devotees on pilgrimage. In addition, to gain a view from "the top," that is, from institutional religious actors, I sustained extensive personal communications with members of the temple association, including some in leadership positions. This juxtaposition of sources—textual and ethnographic—will enable me to place the current dynamics in their longue durée context.

While the study of religion and materiality has gained significant prominence in Religious Studies in the last couple of decades, its rise can be traced back to Daniel Miller and Christopher Tilley's studies in the 1960s.² Rejecting philosophical idealism, Miller argued that the material world is not a superstructure separate from the social world: it both precedes and makes possible the existence and communication of human concepts. In other words, materiality is not just the expression of social identity and cultural concepts, as both of these are constructed and reconstructed in the historical and emplaced interactions of humans and material objects. Moreover, borrowing from Marx's notion of praxis, Miller pointed to the fact that individual and collective identities are crafted as we produce and handle material objects. In this sense, the study of the material world is indispensable to our understanding of culture, society, and religion (Miller 1987, 2007).

The 1980s witnessed the development of a variety of interdisciplinary approaches to materiality, including social anthropology (Tilley 1990, 1991), social psychological analysis (Dittmar 1992), and religious studies.³ In religious studies, new perspectives have emerged, focusing on the "material economy of the sacred", following the "life of the religious object" from production to consumption (passing through circulation), and analyzing conversions back-and-forth from sacred objects like relics to commodities, including souvenirs (See Morgan 2010, p. xiii; see also Morgan 2019). Likewise, Manuel Vásquez characterizes the task of the materialist approach in religious studies as exploring the material (in the sense of being enacted by historical and embodied individuals) "practices of materialization and dematerialization", as well as the material infrastructure, that make it possible for an object, place, event, and/or performance to be experienced as religiously efficacious; that is, as a potent, meaningful, affective, and transformative reality, a reality that is often felt by the religious practitioner as transcending its material, immanent moorings (Vásquez 2020, pp. 11–12).

Throughout the Chinese religious landscape, traditions have been marked by a variety of material objects and cultures, such as temples, images, rituals, and texts. Traditionally, research in the field of Chinese religions has primarily focused on literary sources, prioritizing canonical texts in classical languages (Fleming and Mann 2018). This focus on literary evidence has been particularly dominant among Chinese scholars, and it still holds sway over the field. However, the study of materiality in Chinese religions has gathered some momentum. For example, Benjamin Fleming and Richard Mann have integrated material evidence in their explorations of a variety of cultures in South, Southeast, Central, and East Asia.⁴

The reciprocal constitution of individuals, community, and religious objects has attracted some attention in Chinese religious studies. For example, Scott Habkirk and Hsun Chang have explored how incense in traditional Chinese religion serves as a material medium to construct and maintain religious identity in local communities. Through incense and other related objects, individuals of a Chinese temple community generate shared religious emotions and memories, not only intensifying personal experiences of the divine, but also affirming communal religious identity (Habkirk and Chang 2017). Another case study of the construction of a temple in Ox Horn (niujiao) village of Mazu Island, conducted by Wei-Ping Lin, demonstrated the important role of religious materialization in transforming and reestablishing social relations. Specifically, in the process of working together to build a community temple, people from different generations negotiated conflicting ideas and interests and redefined their original social relationships, thereby establishing new shared values and a sense of community (Lin 2017). While these studies bring to the fore the social role of religious materiality, they do not examine the new developments in religious material culture and the latter's increasing interaction with religious tourism.

Every year, thousands of pilgrims and visitors travel across China to a myriad of religious sites, generating a sizable economy that involves not only relics/souvenirs but also a hospitality industry (Zhang 2021). According to the statistics of the Ministry of Tourism, there are over 3000 religious tourist sites throughout China. Over 40% of the total in the list of national tourist sites are connected with religious or cultural tourism.⁵ In

the case of Mazu worship, there is a vast material religious infrastructure that enables the flow of pilgrims and visitors, bringing believers and nonbelievers into contact and thus transforming the way in which the devotion is experienced. More importantly, religious tourism also has a significant impact on the social and economic viability of the communities that have key Mazu sites. However, scholars in Chinese religious studies have not paid enough attention to these topics. Neither the literature on religious tourism nor that on religious materiality has dealt with the interlinkage between religious tourism, material culture, and social and economic profitability, especially in the Chinese religious context. I intend to address this gap with a focus on the role of tourism in the worship of Mazu.

The modern transformation of religious materiality in Mazu worship is part and parcel of significant changes in the Chinese religious landscape due to changes in the socio-economic context, a new religious policy by the central government, and the dramatic growth of religious tourism. In response to these new changes, Mazu worship has been increasingly commodified, becoming the locus of cultural attraction, as religious sites associated with the devotion seek to appeal to larger numbers of visitors. This is certainly the case for the ancestral temple at Meizhou, which is commonly known as the original place of Mazu worship. This temple provides a good window into the development of religious materiality in China, allowing us to see the characteristics of this phenomenon and highlighting different agencies and mechanisms involved in the modern transformation.

This article builds upon but goes beyond previous studies to explore transformations and expressions of material culture in the worship of Mazu in contemporary China.⁶ More specifically, I will focus on tourism and the development of a cultural and creative industry at the ancestral temple of Mazu in Meizhou Island. The key questions I will pursue are: Have the material expressions of Mazu worship changed in modern times? If so, what are the factors that have contributed to these changes? What can we learn about the current dynamics of the religious field in China from the Mazu case study?

To answer these questions, I will first sketch a brief history of the devotion to Mazu, highlighting its expression through traditional material media and culture. Secondly, I will move on to the discussion of modern transformations of material culture in Mazu worship, identifying agents and social forces behind the process of transformation. The third part of the article will focus on the ways in which the new forms of material culture in Mazu worship interact with local economic and tourist systems through an interdisciplinary analysis. In this section, I also offer a model to explore this interaction. Finally, the conclusion argues for the need to develop a dynamic and interdisciplinary perspective on material religious culture in the modern Chinese religious context, one that studies the complex relations among religion, tourism, and economic development.

2. The History of Mazu Worship and Its Expression through Traditional Material Cultures

This section will explore the rise and evolution of Mazu worship through the use of traditional forms of material culture, including images, devotional and liturgical objects, architecture, and sacred spaces. While all of these forms of materiality have enabled people to communicate with the goddess, the ancestral temple, as the original sacred space of Mazu worship, the text entitled *Tianfei xiansheng lu*, incense as a liturgical object, and Mazu statues have been especially crucial in the expression of religious emotions and beliefs.

According to historical accounts, Mazu's ancestral temple at Meizhou originated from a small shrine and later developed as a splendid temple complex. Historical sources from the Song dynasty illustrate this rise and transformation. According to *Shengdun zumiao chongjian shunji miaoji*, compiled by Liao Pengfei in 1150, Mazu lived at Meizhou Island and, after she died, local people established a small shrine to memorialize and worship her (Li 1995, p. 2). According to "The Record of the Founding Temple in Meizhou Island" (Jiang and Zheng 2007, p. 80), Mazu protected a merchant and his ship, enabling them to return home safely. To repay the numinous intervention of the goddess, the merchant donated a

large amount of money to enlarge the shrine into a temple in Meizhou (Jiang and Zhu 2011, p. 90).

The process of the refurbishment and enlargement of Mazu's ancestral temple complex in Meizhou is recorded in historical accounts written in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The temple eventually developed into a large complex that included a gate (*shanmen*), "the Palace of Celestial Empress" (*tianhou dian*), a dressing tower (*shuzhuang ge*), a "Facing Heaven" garret (*chaotian ge*), a drum and bell tower (*zhonggu lou*), and Taizi Palace (*taizi dian*). Each building of the temple was linked to a divine manifestation of the goddess, as shown in the *Record of the Sagely Manifestation of the Celestial Consort* (*Tianfei xiansheng lu*).⁷ For example, the story "Pushing over Waves to Help Ships Cross a Storm" (*Yonglang jizhou*) hallows the reconstruction project launched by Commander Zhou, who established the incense pavilion, the drum and bell tower, and the temple gate, as an act of pious gratitude to Mazu's divine protection in assisting Ming military ships.⁸

Similar narratives, in which individual devotees contributed to the enlargement of Mazu's ancestral temple as an expression of religious piety and gratitude for the goddess's protection, appear in different contexts. The establishment of the Facing Heaven Pavilion (*chaotian ge*) by Commander Zhang, the construction of Taizi Palace by the Grand Governor Yao Qisheng (1623–1683), and a local devotee's sponsoring of the Dressing Tower stand out (Ibid). These three episodes share several elements. First, the goddess's divine and efficacious manifestation in time and space, shaping the material world, was the key reason for an intensified piety. Second, the devotees used materiality—in the form of elaborate temple reconstructions—as the means to publicly express this piety. In other words, materiality has been essential to the rise and spread of the devotion to Mazu.⁹

In addition to the construction of the Mazu temple, another traditional way to materialize the worship of Mazu was the composition of texts concerning her. One of the most well-known hagiographic texts documenting various mythical stories about Mazu's salvific power is the *Record of the Sagely Manifestation of the Celestial Consort* (*Tianfei xiansheng lu*). *Tianfei xiansheng lu* is attributed to the monk Shi Zhaocheng (c. 1644), the abbot of the Mazu temple at Meizhou Island in the late Ming dynasty. However, scholars of the period believe that this text was actually compiled and revised by a group of literati from the local community.¹⁰ *The Record of the Sagely Manifestation of the Celestial Consort* is important in the cult of Mazu because other extant texts on Mazu's hagiography and myths are mainly based on it. For example, a later Qing version of Mazu's hagiography, entitled *Record of State Conferred Heavenly Empress* (*Chifeng tianhou zhi*, 1778), was elaborated and developed on the basis of *Tianfei xiansheng lu*. Another pictorial version, *Pictorial Record of Sagely Manifestation from Holy Mother of Celestial Empress* (*Tianhou shengmu shengji tuzhi*, 1826), includes a series of pictures that vividly paint mythical stories originally recorded in *Tianfei xiansheng lu* (see Jiang and Zhou 2009, p. 485).

The above hagiographic texts were written by Confucian literati in classical languages and are considered to be important historical sources for the historical study of Mazu worship. Scholars have stressed the special role of these literary texts in shaping the dominant narratives about and popular perceptions of Mazu.¹¹ Despite this insight, they have ignored the essential sense of texts as material objects that do not just provide accounts of the religious history of Mazu worship, but also carry group memory and communal religious experiences. For example, the *Pictorial Record of Sagely Manifestation from Holy Mother of Celestial Empress* was written in a simple language with illustrations that facilitated access by non-educated audiences, thereby further disseminating Mazu's cult throughout late imperial China. Here, the appeal was not simply one of conveying the stories of Mazu's miracles, but of touching the senses, allowing people to feel the goddess's power more directly. In other words, texts like the *Pictorial Record of Sagely Manifestation from Holy Mother of Celestial Empress* allowed believers to develop a stronger emotional bond with Mazu, and to have visceral experiences that could be shared with other devotees.

As one of the traditional forms of material culture in Mazu worship, the texts themselves became the material objects worshiped by individuals and groups of people. For

example, the Qing version of Mazu's hagiography, *Chifeng tianhou zhi*, was worshiped by the local community at the Xianliang port of Putian (see Zhang 2020). The Ming version of *Tianfei xiansheng lu* is consecrated and conserved in the museum of Mazu culture (*Mazu wenhua zhanlan guan*) as one of the most precious material objects (See Figure 1). Likewise, the *Pictorial Record* has been enlarged and exhibited in the museum of Mazu culture. In sum, hagiographic texts are not just the most influential literary sources in the formation of dominant narratives in Mazu worship, but also essential material objects worshiped by Mazu devotees.



Figure 1. The hagiographic texts in the Museum of Mazu Culture. Source: author's own photograph.

The above review of the history of Mazu's ancestral temple at Meizhou and Mazu's mythical hagiographies illustrates the material dynamics of temple buildings, texts, and the interaction of the two. In all of these cases, the construction of the temple buildings as a form of religious materialization became the most visible way to glorify the goddess and to bolster her sacred power and prestige, which, in turn, enabled the spread of devotion. In a process of mutual constitution, the enlargement and elaborateness of the Mazu temple, the crafting of mythical narratives, and the strong belief in the salvific power of the goddess went hand-in-hand with her rising status as an efficacious sacred figure. This tight connection between the glorious stories of Mazu's miraculous power on behalf of her devotees and the latter's gratitude expressed through wood and stone in subsequent enlargements of her ancestral temple have contributed not only to the promotion of Meizhou as the primary sacred site for the worship of the goddess, but also to her popularity. The economic and political nexus here is clear, for only economically and politically influential devotees had the resources to materialize their gratitude and piety in this manner.

However, a third traditional expression of material culture in Mazu worship is the image of Mazu, particularly materialized in her statues. According to David Morgan, images serve as "an effective means for conveying messages because they can be easily reproduced in a variety of media, [and] work among literate and illiterate audiences." (Morgan 2021, p. 88). In the case of Mazu, images of the goddess have been produced in different media, such as stone, clay, and wood, starting from the Song dynasty. A wooden statue of Mazu, enshrined in the Bedroom Palace (*Qindian*) of the Meizhou ancestral temple, is commonly believed to be the golden body (*jinshen*) or true body of Mazu.¹² This statue was crafted with a movable head as well as hand and feet joints to make it more human-like (see Figure 2). This soft body allows the statue to be easily dressed up with the empress robe, the royal diadem, and beaded shoes appropriate to Mazu's title as the Celestial Empress. We see here how materiality makes it possible for believers to experience the full presence of the sacred: Mazu as an embodied goddess. As the *Temple Inscription of Meizhou Ancestral*

Temple (Meizhou zumiao miaoji) has it, this statue was the one sitting in the sedan that was carried by devotees during religious processions and presented at key religious rituals, during which individuals and the local community paid respects and offered incense to it (Jiang and Zhu 2011, p. 339). As the material embodiment of Mazu, the statue is believed by the devotees to be the goddess' presence, with efficacious power. Praying in front of the Mazu statue during the religious procession and other religious events is the most effective way to communicate with the goddess and trigger the strongest emotions.



Figure 2. The soft body statue of Mazu. Source: author's own photograph.

Another prominent traditional expression of material culture in Mazu worship is the use of incense. In the Chinese religious landscape, the use of incense in religious ceremonies and events is very popular. First and foremost, incense, incense ash, and incense burners are considered crucial media to interact with spiritual beings. To burn incense is to open communication with the deity. Just like burning incense during the formal greeting of honored visitors is considered proper etiquette, 'burning incense is an invitation (to the god)' or 'a polite formality' and 'a signal of respect', 'to open communication' (Stephan Feuchtwang 2001, p. 133). Moreover, because of its wide access and portability, incense serves to bridge the gap between the sacred space of temples and the secular spaces of devotees' daily lives in Chinese religious traditions.

Second, burning incense is also a vehicle to build a religious community (Habkirk and Chang 2017, p. 158). Incense ashes are considered the foundation to establish a new temple through the ritual tradition of "dividing the incense" (*fenxiang*) or "dividing efficacy" (*fenling*) (Schipper 1990; Ter Haar 1990; Sangren 1993). Namely, devotees and ritualists who are responsible for building a new temple branch have to go to the ancestral temple to perform the ritual of *fenxiang*. Through infusion with the ancestral temple's incense fragrance, the statue enshrined in the newly established temple is sacralized and gains efficacy and miraculous powers from the deity of the ancestral temple. In addition, incense ash from the ancestral temple's burner is believed to carry the temple's spiritual power. By bringing these incense ashes to the new building, the new temple also builds a strong affinity and connection with the ancestral temple.

The Mazu ancestral temple established the tradition of dividing the incense as far back as the Song dynasty. Through dividing the incense, Mazu worship "flourished all

throughout Fujian province, and later spread all over China.”¹³ Through the material medium of incense, a complex system of belonging was established in which the new temples and enshrined statues were put into a subordinated position vis à vis the mother temple. With new temples created in the Chinese diaspora, a large and transnational religious community has been built and maintained through the material connection of the circulation of incense and incense ashes.¹⁴ We see here how Morgan’s suggestion to follow the life of the sacred object is helpful to our understanding of religious efficacy.

Incense and burning incense are commonly used in daily worship or sacrificial ceremonies dedicated to Mazu because they allow individual devotees to have more effective communication with the goddess. To be more specific, the smell of incense and incense smoke serves as material media to trigger the worshippers’ visual and olfactory perception, thereby intensifying their spiritual experience and drawing them together in a special community of devotion and memory. During my fieldwork on Mazu’s ancestral temple at Meizhou Island, devotees on many occasions mentioned that they believed the fragrant smell of the incense smoke would attract the goddess and convey their respect and love for her. Morgan makes a similar point regarding material offerings in general: “religious practitioners transfer living or useful things and convey respect to gods or spirits in order to secure forgiveness, favor, or benefit from the forces that can affect events in human life.” (Morgan 2021, p. 95).

Material expressions of Mazu worship in history have not just been limited to the four aspects that I discussed in this section. Other objects have been crucial in the historical development of Mazu worship, such as inscriptions, sacrificial offerings in the ceremony, divination blocks, and inscribed boards. Nevertheless, the ancestral temple complex, Mazu statues, hagiographical texts featuring on Mazu, and incense and incense ash have been essential material media for devotees to express their religious beliefs and values. As these forms of materiality sustain powerful personal and collective memories and spiritual experiences, they constitute and have transformed individual and community identities, forging enduring social relations that link the local, regional, national, and transnational.

3. The Transformation of Material Culture in Mazu Worship in Modern Times

In modern times, Mazu worship has experienced salient transformations due to social and political changes. As we will see, the material expression of traditional Mazu worship has been transformed in terms of the scope of the devotion and the media used by devotees. These changes stem from the tight interaction of religious traditions with the rapid growth of tourism and cultural industries. In this section, I will discuss this interaction, showing how it has transformed religious sites, sacrificial ceremonies, religious performances, and statues connected with Mazu, as well as the image and place of the goddess in Chinese culture more generally.

First, religious spaces associated with Mazu have been dramatically transformed. This has included not only the renovation of the traditional temple complex and the enlargement of the temple complex, as in the past, but also the construction of the Heritage Park of the Celestial Consort’s Home Place (*Tianfei guli yizhi gongyuan*). As we saw, Mazu’s ancestral temple evolved from a simple shrine to a splendid temple complex in the late Qing dynasty. Unfortunately, this Qing-style temple was destroyed during the cultural revolution. In 1978, Lin Zhicong, the leader of the temple association, along with local people, initiated a reconstruction project seeking to reproduce the traditional buildings, particularly the western wing of the ancestral temple. I have argued in my study of transnational religious tourism and Mazu worship that this reconstruction process was an attempt to recover origins. By reproducing the temple as it was at its height, the temple association wanted to establish an unbroken link with the original place of Mazu worship, “further legitimizing the temple as the undisputed inheritor of ancient religious tradition.” (see Zhang 2021, p. 6). Thus, what we have here is a modern “re-founding” of religious tradition.

The transformation of material culture in modern times is not just limited to the recovery of traditional styles, but has mainly been manifested by the enlargement of

temple complexes to accommodate the growing number of religious tourists and visitors. According to the *Temple Inscription of Meizhou Ancestral Temple*, the temple association launched the construction of the southern wing of the temple complex as a response to an official proposal made by the local government to establish the national tourist resort of Meizhou Island. The southern wing of the temple complex was based on the blueprint designed by Tsinghua University, following the traditional Song style. This newly built, pseudo-classic temple architecture occupies over 320,000 square meters, including the Efficacious Compassion Palace (*lingci dian*), the Celestial Empress Palace (*tianhou dian*), the Timely Salvation Palace (*shunji dian*), a temple gate, the Great Memorial Building (*dapai lou*), the Praying Blessing Palace (*qifu dian*), a drum bell tower (*zhonggu lou*), the Celestial Empress Square (Tianhou), a theatrical stage, and an exhibition hall of Mazu culture.

What is important to note here is that while these new spaces are “religious” in the sense that they are associated with Mazu and her devotion, they do not have explicit ritual significance. Rather, they are primarily “cultural” spaces which have become very popular with pilgrims and tourists because they have either natural or historical significance. This is certainly the case for the “Potala Palace on the Sea”, which is meant to honor the majesty and beauty of the Meizhou landscape. In turn, the exhibition hall of Mazu culture displays objects related to the worship, such as her relics, antiques, paintings, and calligraphies. The visitors I interviewed at the hall told me that they were attracted by the showcased artefacts that illustrate the history of Mazu worship and manifest the essence of Mazu culture. After visiting and viewing these objects, they felt more connected to the goddess.¹⁵

In addition to the enlargement of the temple complex, the construction of the Heritage Park of Mazu’s Home Place exemplifies the transformation of material culture in contemporary Mazu worship. The construction project of Heritage Park was initiated in 2010, consisting of three main parts: the Celestial Consort’s Home Place (*tianfei guli*), the Museum of Mazu Culture Origin (*Mazu yuanliu bowu guan*), and the Peace Tower (*ping’an ta*). The Celestial Consort’s Home Place, built in pseudo-Tang architecture, materially manifests Mazu’s living environment and her later deification. In my interview with the Vice President of the Temple Association, Wu Guochun, he admitted that the construction of Mazu’s home place serves as a cultural media for visitors and Mazu devotees to understand Mazu’s life story, expressing the historical and humanistic connotations of Mazu beliefs and culture. The Museum of Mazu Cultural Origin was designed to showcase the historical origin of Mazu’s birth at Meizhou Island through cultural relics, pictures, statues, and three-dimensional animation. Through the multimedia of light, sound, and vision, the museum serves as a material channel to legitimize, if not spread, the spirituality of Mazu worship. The tourists I interviewed who were not Mazu devotees indicated that the multiple expressions of the goddess’s culture did encourage their interests in her worship and increased their respect for her.¹⁶ When I asked a family of tourists who came to Meizhou Island because they were originally attracted by the area’s natural and cultural attractions whether the historical objects generated any religious feelings for them, one of the members told me:

We are tourists from the north part of China. We came to visit Meizhou Island because it is a popular national tourist site. When we visited the Heritage Park and the Museum, I was impressed by the cultural heritage of the goddess, such as the texts and antiques, through which I became familiar with the history of the goddess worship. My little daughter was impressed by the animation. I am a Buddhist who does not believe in Mazu. After visiting these places, I got to know the goddess and felt a strong feeling of respect to the goddess and her great compassion.

Other non-believing tourists told me that they could feel the spirituality of Mazu as “a goddess with great compassion”. In other words, even if these tourists do not believe in or worship Mazu as a divinity, they come to hold in high regard the values that her hagiography expresses through their interaction with her relics and the texts about her.

Regarding the Mazu devotees I interviewed, the sacred materialities at the temple deepened their devotion.¹⁷ Ms. Cai appreciated the exhibition of historical relics, feeling that they gave her a fuller sense of Mazu's history, from her human life to her deification, from the Song dynasty to modern times. After viewing these relics and the objects connected with the devotion, she felt a stronger intimacy with the goddess. Mr. Zhang, a devotee from Hainan, said that material objects manifest a sense of the goddess' power and status through which devotees' beliefs are reinforced.

For instance, the Peace Tower is 9 floors and 48 meters high, symbolizing Mazu's authority as the Celestial Empress of the ninth heaven. The tower's height is not the only important thing, for it serves as a canvass onto which Mazu's history and cultural significance can be projected. This is illustrated by the carved pictures on the tower's bottom, which depict popular religious practices dedicated to Mazu at Meizhou Island, such as the greeting of the new year, the sending off of *Shunfeng er* (Mazu's attendant god), forbidding fishing, *guadou* (hanging the blessed money), *huanhua* (exchanging flowers with Mazu for babies), making red buns, and eating noodles for longevity.¹⁸ At nights, during religious holidays and special events, a dazzling three-dimensional light show of the history of Mazu worship is projected on the tower (see Figure 3). According to a local government report (2020), this light show, named "the light show of peace tower at the home place of the celestial consort" (*tianfei guli ping'an ta xiu*), is designed to enhance night entertainment for tourists and pilgrims.¹⁹ Thus, not surprisingly, the tower has become one of the most popular tourist spots on Meizhou Island at night, attracting thousands of tourists and pilgrims.

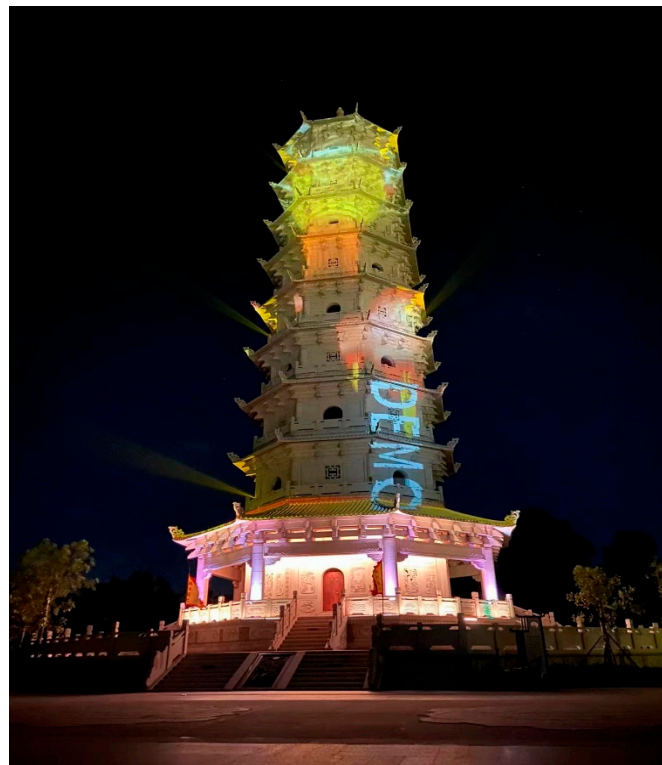


Figure 3. The light show at the Peace Tower. Source: the author's own photograph.

The second aspect of the modern transformation of material culture in Mazu worship is the revival of sacrificial ceremonies and other religious performances. In the history of Mazu worship, the imperial governments developed the official ritual tradition of sacrificing to the goddess twice each year, in the mid-months of spring and autumn. The officially standardized tradition has some basic ritual structures similar to those of sacrificial rites dedicated to national deities, including preparation, "welcoming the goddess", the

first sacrifice, the second sacrifice, the final sacrifice, and “bidding farewell to the deity”.²⁰ To establish its religious authority as the original place of Mazu worship and, thus, the goddess’ preminent pilgrimage site, as well as to enhance its appeal to tourists, the temple board sought to restore the “original”, the official sacrifice ceremony. In 1993, the renewed official sacrifice ceremony was performed on the stage as the main event of the first tourist festival of Mazu culture (*Mazu wenhua lvyou jie*). Since then, the official sacrifice to Mazu at Meizhou has been closely connected to cultural tourism, as it is always performed during Meizhou’s Mazu Cultural Tourist Festival.

As a modern expression of material culture in the Mazu tradition, the restored official sacrifice integrates some innovations into the traditional ceremony to meet the needs of devotees and increase tourist appeal. First, the sacrifice ceremony of the Meizhou temple adds some modern music and dancing elements, in effect staging it as cultural performance and entertainment. For example, the performance of *yuewu* (dance with music) is a modern version of the traditional sacrificial dance, *bayi*. *Yuewu* are solely performed by 20-year-old female dancers whose gentle and graceful dancing postures symbolize the female image of a compassionate sea goddess, “a beautiful young girl who saves people in the sea”.²¹ Moreover, the music used in the revitalized sacrificial ceremony was composed by modern musicians Lin Hanzu and Zheng Ruilin, adapting some melodies from local music. Second, to increase the entertainment and aesthetic aspects of the performance, the contemporary version of the ceremony involves a large number of female actors, including dancers to simulate the beautiful goddess, female cantors and ritualists with beautiful body gestures, and a woman with a nice voice who functions as a host. Through my interviews with these female actors, I learned that they are local college students who receive a year of training. Only those with good posture and the appropriate heights and weights are selected to be on the stage. Third, to increase tourist attendance, a small-scale sacrificial ceremony is held every Sunday morning. In this way, tourists and pilgrims who did not have chance to attend the large-scale performance on Mazu’s birthday, “Ascending to the Heaven Day”, and the Mazu Cultural Tourist Festival can still experience the “glamour of traditional culture at the ancestral temple”, as the Vice President of the Temple Association, Wu Guochun, expressed. More importantly, the restored official sacrifice of Mazu reconfigures the local religious rituals into performances that resonate with regional and national heritages, following the guidelines of the United Nations’ Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). As such, these “folklorized” religious rituals provide a way for the central government to promote national unity and pride. I will discuss this “folklorization” in greater detail in the next section.

In addition to the sacrificial ceremony as a religious performance, the temple association has also created a night entertainment performance, “Auspicious Atmosphere of Meizhou” (*xiangrui Meizhou*) (see Figure 4).²² This song and dance show combines popular religious practices with some traditional and modern music elements, including local religious practices, playing with flower lanterns, swaying sedan chairs, singing by the local opera of Puxian, and alternating ten voices and eight musical instruments (*shiyin bayue*). To emphasize the religious aspect of this show, it also includes a solo performance of *Yuewu*, the sacrificial dance.



Figure 4. The performance of “Auspicious Atmosphere of Meizhou”. Source: author’s own photograph.

The third aspect of the modern transformation of material culture in Mazu worship is the reinvention of Mazu statues. The ancestral temple was and is still dedicated to reproducing statues of the goddess from a variety of media, such as jade, gold, shell, wood, bronze, clay, and cloisonné. The modern expression of material culture in Mazu worship is primarily illustrated by the giant stone statue entitled “the Goddess of Peace”. This stone statue, which is located at the highest spot of Meizhou mountain, is 14.35 meters high. It was designed in 1987 by Li Weisi and Jiang Zhiqiang, two professors at Xiamen University, and took three years to mold. Whereas in traditional images Mazu is portrayed in a sitting position, and should not be made of white material nor be exposed outside, for this modern statue, the goddess is in a standing posture, made of white granite stone, and is standing outside. Further, her facial expression is similar to the image of Guanyin (Chang 2013, p. 4). This stone statue is now commonly considered as a standard version of Mazu, widely accepted by devotees and scholars. This is attested to by the stamps issued by the national post office and the signature slogan of the ancestral temple at Meizhou.

The new changes in Mazu’s statues illustrate the shared ideology of commercial, cultural, and religious agencies. First, because of its location above the ancestral temple, “The Goddess of Peace” provides a spectacular view of Meizhou Island, designed to attract tourists and pilgrims. Second, the new statue’s facial expression emphasizes the religious essence of Mazu worship in modern China, full of “grace, benevolence, and philanthropy” (*lide xingshan da’ai*). In other words, the statue is not just a religious object to be worshiped by Mazu devotees, but also a material media to express a universal value, the goddess’s great love and compassion to protect believers and non-believers. Third, since this statue was a gift donated by the Chaotian Palace at Beigang in Taiwan, it is widely considered as a symbol of unification of mainland China and Taiwan. The ancestral temple offered a replica of the statue to the Chaotian Palace in 1992 as a gift in return. These twin Mazu statues now

face each other across the Taiwan strait. In this sense, this statue illustrates the affinity and relationship between the Meizhou ancestral temple and the affiliated temple at Beigang. Indeed, officially named the Straits Goddess of Peace (*Haixia heping nǚshen*), the modern version of the goddess reflects the state's vision of a reunified Taiwan. This image also serves as an important medium to connect Mazu devotees in mainland China and overseas. Following the example of the Meizhou ancestral temple, temples in Guangzhou, Melbourne, and the newly built one in Nigeria have built the same style of statue.²³ Devotees at these diasporic temples frequently go on a pilgrimage to the ancestral temple. Thus, we see the establishment of a temple system and a transnational worship community through the combined use of material culture, media, and travel.

The fourth aspect of the modern transformation of material culture in Mazu worship worth mentioning is the development of cultural products dedicated to Mazu worship. In modern times, the ancestral temple has extended its functions to include the development of a cultural and creative industry, producing a variety of items such as woodcarving decorations, safety pendants, Mazu dolls, and all kinds of products featuring the image of Mazu. All of these products flow to local and national markets. At the same time, the ancestral temple has organized a series of competitions and exhibitions, such as "The Best Mazu, the best Meizhou" (*zui Mazu zui Meizhou*), to encourage and support the development of Mazu cultural and creative products.

The development of Mazu's products is not just a material expression of Mazu culture and the spiritual essence of Mazu worship. It also illustrates the interactions among religion, tourism, and the manufacturing industry. These products transcend the traditional representations, since they are meant to take the devotion beyond temples. For example, different sizes of Mazu statues are crafted to facilitate portability and allow devotees to worship at household shrines. According to Zhang Junmei, the manager of the retail store of Mazu's cultural and creative products, that is the reason why portable products, such as refrigerator magnets with Mazu's image, are particularly popular.

The modern worship of Mazu is not just evident in markets; the goddess is also present online. To attract younger visitors, the ancestral temple live streams events through official accounts on We-Chat and TikTok. As the Vice President of the Temple Association told me, they use Weibo (a micro blog) and TikTok to increase tourist appeal for the young generation and tout the reputation of "the sacred site of Mazu" throughout the world. In my interviews with over 20 young tourists, they all admitted that they had visited these online accounts created by the ancestral temple before making their visit to Meizhou Island. In addition, to fulfill the needs of overseas devotees who could not make their pilgrimage to the ancestral temple during pandemic times, the temple association also created webpages to "pay homage to Mazu online" and "make pilgrimage on-line".

From the perspective of material religion, a variety of materialities, what Vásquez calls the "material infrastructure of the sacred", are now central to the performance of Mazu religious spirituality (Vásquez 2020). Whether we are speaking of architecture, Mazu statues, cultural and creative products, the high-profile sacrificial ceremonies, or websites, these forms of materiality reflect the interaction of religious beliefs and social dynamics. As argued by scholars of material religion, we should "recognize the diversity agencies at work in the production of religious practice, belief, narrative, and ideology." (Morgan 2021, p. 50). As the ancestral temple clearly shows, tourism plays a central role in the transformation, extension, and experience of sacred spaces and objects connected with the worship of Mazu. The religious space is not just renovated and enlarged with the goal of strengthening pilgrims' and devotees' religious beliefs, but also to attract tourists. The same can be said of traditional sacrificial ceremonies, which have been redesigned to appeal to devotees as well as to the tourists who are seeking a cultural experience. Finally, in its size, location, configuration and material use, the newly built stone statue of Mazu atop Meizhou Island symbolizes the tight synergy between spirituality and tourism, combining commercial, cultural, and religious forms and functions.

4. Agencies and Mechanisms Underlying Material Transformations in Mazu Worship

This section will focus on the underlying agencies and approaches through which the material culture in Mazu worship has developed a variety of new forms. As Morgan argues, the study of religion “as a material reality emerges from the recognition of the plurality of agents at work in any event of religious value.” (Morgan 2021, p. 51). As we have seen, the material media of Mazu worship has been extended and integrated into the modern social and economic systems closely connected to cultural tourism. Thus, our analysis of these processes will have to be interdisciplinary, involving a discussion of economics, tourism, and religion.

Let us start with a sketch of the socio-economic context within and outside the ancestral temple since its reconstruction in 1978. Starting from 1986, the temple has been managed by a board with a chairman, marking an evolution from a religious organization managed solely by religious specialists to an entity that integrates religious, economic, and tourist services (Jiang and Zhu 2011, pp. 107–9, also see Zhang 2021). The temple operates and is organized just as a modern enterprise, consisting of different departments with specialized functions, such as improving the temple’s ritual and tourist services, administrating various scenic attractions, and overseeing the production and sale of cultural and creative goods.

These internal transformations mirror and interact with external dynamics in the larger Chinese society. The first factor is the changing economic environment, in particular the rapid growth of the market economy. Scholars agree that the market economy has played a significant role in the revitalization of Chinese popular religious traditions (see Chau 2006; Johnson 2009; Lagerwey 2010; Goossaert and Palmer 2011). Popular or “folk” religions in China comprise a wide variety of local and regional beliefs, practices and fluid forms of organization that amalgamate elements of Daoism, Buddhism, and the worship of ancestors, spirits, and deities. The boundaries that these religions have with established religions and with the cultural milieu at large are often porous. In 2012, the Pew Research Center estimated that 21.9 percent of China’s population (close to 300 million) practiced some version of popular religions.²⁴ By 2020, the World Religion Database at Boston University placed that number at 30.4 percent (over 450 million).²⁵ While these numbers have to be taken with the proverbial grain of salt given the difficulty in measuring accurately an affiliation for such decentralized and hybrid religious phenomena, China observers agree that, following economic liberalization and the reforms I discuss below, the state has been laxer in overseeing popular religions than when it comes to Christianity and Islam because they are considered part of the country’s heritage and identity.

The expansion of the market economy in China has opened opportunities and challenges for temple associations. Specifically, in the market economy, the operation and even survival of temples has come to be increasingly self-sustaining rather than depending on donations from devotees, which was the traditional way. Thus, the need to expand financial channels and increase income generated by tourism, as more Chinese people have the resources to travel and engage in pilgrimages, explains why the temple has shifted from a purely religious association to an entity structured to carry out significant socio-economic functions. For instance, in response to the growing economy generated by tourism, the ancestral temple built two large hotels—the Antai and the Qifu—to provide accommodation for tourists.

The second external factor in the transformation of material culture in the devotion to Mazu is the new orientation of official policies. The revival of popular religious traditions, including Mazu’s cult across southeast China, has been made possible in large part by a dramatic shift in the government’s attitudes toward Chinese religions, as exemplified by the implementation of “Document 19” in 1982.²⁶ In Document 19, the official government suggested that organizations and communities with historical religious sites should be aware of their tourist significance: “architecture should be properly renovated, the environment should be fully protected. In this way, these religious sites will become tourist sites with clean, peaceful, and beautiful environments.”²⁷

Adding to the impact of Document 19, the Chinese government has strongly supported the promotion of intangible cultural heritage. In 2003, the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) promulgated the “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.” On the basis of this convention, the Chinese government issued “Suggestions for Reinforcing Our National Efforts to Safeguard the Intangible Cultural Heritage.” (see [Zhang 2021](#), p. 20). This suggestion provides a detailed account of administrative procedures to implement the convention at both the national and provincial levels. Mazu worship was recognized by the Chinese Ministry of Culture as worthy of being included in the national list of “intangible cultural heritage” in 2009. This “cultural heritization” and “folklorization” (i.e., the recognition that the cult is a central part of the everyday life of the people) of Mazu devotional practices have given them legitimacy vis à vis the modern Chinese secular state and enhanced their visibility in the larger society.²⁸

In line with the recommendation by the central government to develop religious tourism, local governments have also played a crucial role in the growth of religious tourism. Specifically, local governments are actively involved in restoring and promoting religious sites in their areas to increase revenue. As shown in its 2020 financial report, the local government of the area in which Mazu’s ancestral temple is located fits this pattern: it has launched several programs to improve the tourist environment of Meizhou Island. For example, the local government of Meizhou donated CNY 10,000,000 to improve the night lighting of the ancestral temple complex and other scenic spots. It also invested another CNY 10,000,000 to support the development of cultural and creative products dedicated to Mazu worship.²⁹ As a result, the year 2020 witnessed a 0.9% increase in tourists and a 0.99% increase in annual income generated through tourism during the pandemic period. In addition, officials from the Putian government, including the mayor of Putian, and the propaganda minister of the province of Fujian, were strongly supportive of the Meizhou’s Mazu Cultural Tourist Festival of 2022.

The third factor in the changing social context is the development of the internet and the popularity of apps in China. The temple association of the ancestral temple is keenly aware of the spiritual and cultural needs of the young generation, and mindful that traditional rituals and material objects like statues may not fit the values and aesthetics of this generation. To attract them, the material culture has to be updated. Thus, the temple association has encouraged the production of goods connected with the cartoon Mazu, the use of three-dimensional animation to disseminate Mazu’s hagiography, and the creation of live-broadcasting platforms.

Overall, the constellation of changing socio-economic and political contexts has contributed to the post-secular transformation of religions in modern China. While religions have not disappeared, or even become privatized, as the secularization paradigm had predicted, there has been a process of rationalization and instrumentalization. We see that the material expressions of Mazu worship have been deeply involved with commodification, tourism, and the preservation of religious traditions as cultural heritage. As Tom Bremer puts it, “commodification involves processes by which the aesthetic desires of the consumer become manifest, if only in the consumer’s imagination, in material objects, cultural performances, and a host of services that consumers utilize”. ([Bremer 2020](#), p. 191). Thus, we see how the religious association at Mazu’s ancestral temple has made use of religious symbols and practices to produce systematically material objects and ritual services that fulfill and create the desires of tourists and pilgrims. In this process, the material objects and services have increasingly become the bases of a modern consumerist religion invested with “transcendent power and sacred significance” ([Chidester 2005](#), p. 3). This does not mean that the authenticity of the tradition has faded.³⁰ Rather, the reconstruction and performance of religious ritual and historical authenticity become the bases for profit and transformation. As Bremer has observed, “religion in highly secularized modern contexts, translates authentic spiritual sentiments into the markets of late capitalism” ([Bremer 2020](#), p. 191). We can say, then, that the materiality of Mazu culture transcends the strict demar-

cations between the sacred and the secular, tradition and innovation, and between past and future.

To summarize the interplay of internal and external factors and among new transformations of material culture, Mazu worship, and religious tourism, Kiran Shinde's model of the dynamics of religious tourism is helpful (Shinde 2003, p. 93; see Figure 5). Shinde argues that the interaction between religious tourists has a direct impact on the host environment. This is because the physical environment, which consists of natural and cultural attractions, as well as local transportation systems and the accommodation infrastructure, serves an intermediary role between, on the one hand, tourists and, on the other, religious institutions, the local economy, and the community (Shinde and Olsen 2020, p. 6). In other words, this model highlights how materiality, in the form of Meizhou's beautiful surroundings, the cultural attractions, and the infrastructure expanded by the temple association, has played a central role in the interplay between tourism and religion at Mazu's ancestral site.

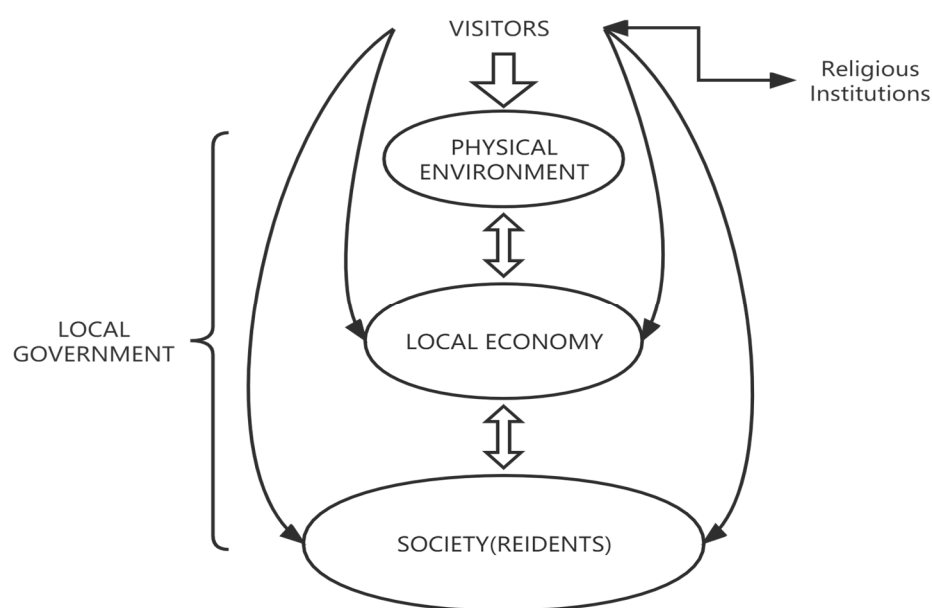


Figure 5. Model of the dynamics of religious tourism. Source: (Shinde 2003, p. 93).

In the case of Mazu worship, with support from the local and provincial governments and the legitimacy provided by a shift in the way the nation-state approaches religion(s), the temple association has dramatically changed the physical environment to meet the needs of tourists and pilgrims. These changes, including the giant stone statue of the Peace Goddess, the construction of the Park of Mazu's Birth Place, the modern performances of religious ceremonies, and the exhibition of cultural and creative products, as well as light shows and the use of three-dimensional technologies, have intensified religious experiences for pilgrims, travelers, and tourists, thereby attracting larger numbers of tourists and increasing the revenue that they bring for the local government. This revenue can then be invested in more physical improvements. The transformative cycle, or rather spiral, then goes on.

Although the model of the dynamics of religious tourism is useful in the analysis of the interaction between religious tourism and the host environment, it does not pay enough attention to the role of material objects and culture, including their interactions with other external and internal factors. In addition, the study of the interrelationships between material culture, religious tourism, and the local society should also take into consideration the bigger picture, such as the development of the Internet and online markets. To fill in these gaps, I have modified Shinde's model (Figure 6).

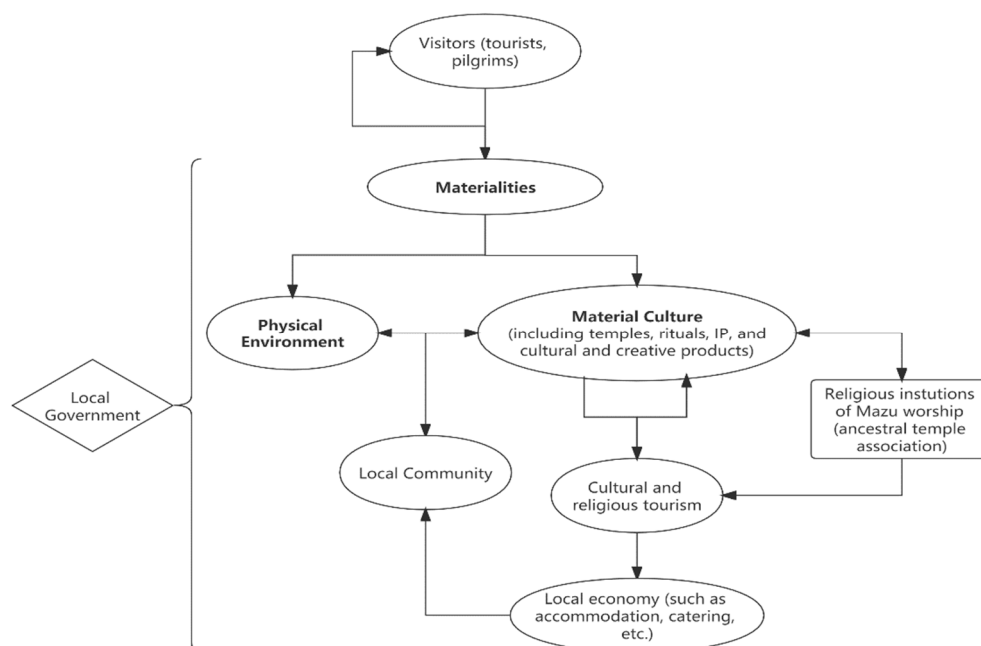


Figure 6. The impact model of agencies and mechanisms in material culture of Mazu worship.

The revised model first emphasizes the crucial role of material culture, which serves as a medium in the integration of Mazu worship with religious tourism. Tourists, the cultural and creative industry, religious institutions, and the local government interact with each other through both the (transformed) physical environment and the material objects of Mazu's devotional cultures. To be more specific, the material culture of Mazu worship has been modified to make the tradition appealing to tourists, both religious and non-religious. Conversely, the development of religious tourism opens new spaces for material culture, in particular regarding the expansion of the Internet and cell phone networks as the material media to express Mazu culture.

Our reworked model also highlighted the agency of religious institutions, which, as we saw in the case of the temple association, play a key role in linking the establishment of authenticity and authority and ritual innovation with the creation of new cultural products and the promotion of tourism. Shinde's original model tended not to recognize this simultaneously "conservative" effect, in the sense of recovering and preserving tradition and the creative role of religious institutions in terms of the dynamics of religious tourism.

In this model of multi-directional feedback, the profits coming from religious tourism and material products serve as financial resources for the religious institutions to consolidate their authority and capacity to innovate. Religious tourism also contributes to increasing the financial revenue of local governments, and reciprocally the local government plays an important role to support and sponsor the development of religious tourism.

In terms of the relationship between religious tourism, local community and economy, religious tourism has had an indirect but significant impact on the development of the local economy, including infrastructural improvements that, in turn, lead to more job opportunities for the locals. Changes in the local economy and society feed back into more development of Mazu material culture, and so on. We saw how a central dimension of the infrastructural transformations is the enlargement of a local hospitality industry. As of today, there are 204 homestay hotels in Meizhou Island, bringing an extra CNY 60,000 in the annual income of the local society.³¹

The growth of the hospitality industry goes hand-in-hand with the rapid expansion in the production and sale of Mazu souvenir items. In fact, Mazu has become the overarching theme for the place and the needs and desires of tourists and pilgrims have come to define the spaces and rhythm of local life. In Mazu's religious procession around Meizhou Island, commemorating the day of her ascension to heaven (4 October 2022), the local government

played an important part in coordinating the bus transportation. Local buses were assigned to pick up pilgrims, tourists, and volunteers and to take them to the temple gate before 8 a.m. Thousands of tourists, pilgrims, and local devotees gathered at the ancestral temple square and picked up blessing flags and sunhats provided by the temple association. The religious procession began at 9 a.m., departing from the ancestral temple, walking around the island, and finally arriving at the blessing boat. During the Mazu procession, all kinds of material objects, such as goddess statues, sacrificial offerings, and souvenirs, were pervasive. Throughout the journey, the local businesses offered snacks, water, and fruits to the tourists and pilgrims for free. Through participating into these religious events, the tourists and pilgrims can certainly feel the spiritual and cultural atmosphere expressed through these material objects.³² In my interviews with the tourists who participated in the religious procession, they all agreed that this coming together amid a profusion of objects related to Mazu generated powerful feelings of great love toward the goddess. Surrounded by bountiful goods during this journey, they came to understand the spiritual meaning of “Mazu blesses you”.

5. Conclusions

The transformations in the worship of Mazu offer a strategic window into the changing roles of religious materiality in the contemporary Chinese religious landscape. Materiality has always been essential to the devotion to the goddess. Historically, material media were created and used to express the devotee’s beliefs and values as an integral part of their religious lives. While it is true that religious devotion has always been connected to politics and economics, as wealthy merchants, influential government officials, and powerful military leaders transformed a local shrine into a large temple complex through their bequests, materiality was primarily a means to express personal gratitude to the goddess and glorify her miraculous interventions. In other words, the temple complex, the use of incense, hagiographic texts, and the Mazu statues, along with other material objects, served principally to forge strong, intimate, and affective personal and group connections between the goddess and her believers’ everyday lives, addressing issues like fertility and protection against disease and misfortunes, and guaranteeing the wellbeing of families. This link contributed to consolidating the ancestral temple as the origin sacred site of Mazu worship.

In modern times, the material expression of Mazu worship has experienced a tremendous transformation due to changes in the way the central government sees religion(s). Following the issuance of Document 19 in 1982 and the government’s endorsement of the UNESCO’s “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage” as a way to strengthen national identity, the previous suspicion and hostility toward religion(s) gave way to seeing their potential for the recovery and preservation of national cultural heritage. This change in the approach from the Chinese central government has legitimized the development of religious tourism, which has also been facilitated by a rapid expansion of the Chinese economy that has given citizens increasing disposable income, allowing them to travel. In turn, religious tourism has transformed the devotion to Mazu and the local economy of Meizhou Island. The materiality of Mazu culture is now deployed in the overlapping worlds of spirituality, religious tourism, and the local socio-economic environment, transcending its traditional roots and character.

We saw how, in the case of the worship of Mazu, these societal changes have transformed religious experiences and practices. The conversion of a local/regional religious devotion into a national/transnational cultural performance through a transformation of materiality and, more generally, the integration of religion and the modern economic system through tourism, has been accompanied by a process of cultural commodification, which tends to “disenchant,” to use Max Weber’s (2002, p. 60) term, traditional meanings associated with Mazu. As we have seen, the modified cultural products of Mazu worship emphasize tourism and entertainment aspects, while diminishing the strictly religious aims. In accordance with the changes in Mazu worship, the temple association has trans-

formed into a socio-economic enterprise. The overriding function of the temple association has increasingly become to develop new cultural products which will attract more visitors and bring more commercial profits. From the perspective of local government, the purpose of its support for religious tourism and Mazu worship is now to develop the local economy and increase local revenues.

Borrowing from Shinde, I have suggested a model that accounts for the multiple agents involved in this process, as well as for the multi-directional relationships they sustain. The model highlights the centrality of materiality, both human-made and in the natural environment, and the agency of religious and secular organizations in animating the networks of interaction. I suggest that this model might be useful to understand the interplay of other religious phenomena with materiality and tourism in China and beyond.

While the transformation of the materiality of the worship of Mazu is a complex multi-agent and multi-variable dynamic, it has resulted in a process of commodification. We have seen how the material infrastructure of the ancestral site, from the expansion of the temple to the use of electronic media, and changes in the performance of ritual ceremonies to the growth of a hospitality industry and the proliferation of Mazu souvenirs, has been transformed to amplify its entertainment and tourist values. This modern version of Mazu worship has gained great support from local government since it has become an important source of revenue.

It is too early to assess the full impact of this commodification on the worship of Mazu. In the interviews I conducted, visitors to the Mazu ancestral temple felt that the lavish changes in the performances and material culture intensified their religious experiences and brought them closer to the goddess. In that sense, the traditional function of materiality in the devotion persists. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the changes ushered in by the new prominence of religious tourism at Meizhou Island represent a process of “de-sacralization” that has overflowed the referents of traditional practices and beliefs, re-signifying and linking them tightly to expansive “profane” political and economic aims. On the other hand, this commodification has allowed the spread and “massification” of Mazu, and her devotion nationally and transnationally.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Xiamen University (protocol code XDYX2021024 and date of approval 29 September 2021).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ I conducted fieldwork in November 2021 and October and December 2022, and I also participated in Mazu’s ascension to Heaven celebration on 4 October, and Meizhou’s Mazu Cultural Tourist Festival on 17 December 2022.

² See (Miller 1998, p. 3). In Chp. 1, Miller offers a historical review of the study of material culture.

- 3 Scholars in the field of material religious studies include Colleen McDannell (1995), David Chidester (2005), and David Morgan (2005), as well as the more recent elaborations by Manuel Vásquez (2011), Carolyn Walker Bynum (2011), and Brent Plate (2015).
- 4 (Fleming and Mann 2018, pp. 21–38). Dirk Meyer’s article “Bamboo and the production of philosophy: a hypothesis about a shift in writing and thought in early China” discusses the use of lightweight writing materials and the development of a manuscript culture, which marks a shift in philosophical production.
- 5 See (The website of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People’s Republic of China 2022): <https://www.mct.gov.cn/tourism/#/list> (accessed on 26 December 2022). It gives detailed information on the lists of national tourist sites. There are a total of 119 national tourist sites, among which over 47% are related to religious or cultural tourism. Most of them are ancient sites that contain features considered to be of great cultural or religious significance. The statistics show the growing significance of religious and cultural tourism throughout China.
- 6 My previously published article, “Transnational Religious Tourism in Modern China and the Transformation of the Cult of Mazu”, mainly focuses on the role of transnational tourism in the invention of tradition, folklorization, and the commodification of the Mazu cult. It did not explore the transformation of material culture in modern Mazu worship. See (Zhang 2021).
- 7 *Tianfei xiansheng lu* (Record of the Sagely Manifestation of the Celestial Consort), compiled by Zhaocheng (c. 1644). The text used in this paper comes from (Jiang and Zhou 2009, pp. 68–103).
- 8 *Tianfei xiansheng lu*, pp. 96–97.
- 9 Mazu’s case illustrates common patterns in the use of religious materiality in the devotion to goddesses in China. The religious materiality is also significant in the transmission of other Chinese goddesses, such as Guanyin. See (Yu 2001).
- 10 For detailed information on the compilation of *Tianfei xiansheng lu*, see (Zhang 2020).
- 11 For example, the leading scholar in the study of Mazu worship, Li Xianzhang, uses the hagiographic texts to establish the history of her worship. See (Li 1995).
- 12 This statue is believed to be one of the earliest statues handed down from the Song dynasty. It was rescued from the cultural revolution by the first Chair of the Temple Association, Lin Congzhi.
- 13 (Jiang and Zheng 2007, p. 2). The original text comes from Liu Kezhuang’s *Baihumiao shieryun*, “The numinous consort, a young girl, originated from the Meizhou Island through a slice of fragrant incense, through which her worship flourished all throughout Fujian province, and later spread all over China.”.
- 14 For a detailed discussion of dividing incense and its role in constructing a transnational religious community, see (Zhang 2021).
- 15 I interviewed over 10 tourists who visited the exhibition hall of Mazu culture.
- 16 I randomly interviewed over 20 people who were visiting the Museum of Mazu Culture Origin on 4 October 2023. Five of them were tourists who did not believe in Mazu. I asked the following questions: Do you believe Mazu or not? What attracted you to visit these places? What is your impression when you saw the historical objects dedicated to Mazu? Did these objects generate religious feelings or not?
- 17 Miss Cai and Mr. Zhang were two pilgrims from Hainan province. They were pious devotees who participated in the religious procession and sacrificial rituals to celebrate Mazu’s ascension to heaven. I conducted brief interviews with each of them, asking them the same questions I posed to non-believers.
- 18 All these local popular practices, which are closely related to Mazu worship, run throughout the devotees’ life cycle, ranging from childhood to old age. When devotees are children, their money is blessed by Mazu, symbolizing good fortune as they grow up. Married women who want to become pregnant will go to the Mazu temple and exchange flowers with the goddess so that that she will bless them with the birth of babies.
- 19 The website of the national tourist site of Meizhou Island at Putian city on “The economic and social development of Meizhou island in 2020”: http://mzd.putian.gov.cn/xxgk/tjxx/202109/t20210921_1649516.htm (accessed on 26 December 2022).
- 20 The detailed descriptions of the official ritual are recorded in a Qing official text, “Collected Statutes of the Great Qing from the Kangxi Reign” (*Kangxi daqing huidian*), which describes the proper rules, procedures, and material objects to be used in official rituals. *Kangxi daqing huidian* is collected in (Jiang and Zhou 2009, pp. 197–99).
- 21 In my previous research, I made a similar argument. See (Zhang 2021, pp. 12–13).
- 22 The information of Xiangrui Meizhou is based on fieldwork material I collected on 31 October 2021.
- 23 These temples either built their stone statues with their own funding or through gifts from the ancestral temple. See (Chang 2013).
- 24 See <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-folk/> (accessed on 19 June 2023).
- 25 See <https://www.thearda.com/world-religion/national-profiles?u=52c> (accessed on 19 June 2023).
- 26 See (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p. 324). They give a detailed analysis of Document 19 and its impact on religious practices in modern China. Also see (Zhang 2021, pp. 20–21).
- 27 See Document 19 on the website of the “Chinese National Religions”: (The Website of Chinese National Religions 1982) <http://www.mzb.com.cn/html/folder/290171.htm> (accessed on 26 December 2022). For information in English, see (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p. 325).
- 28 On the heritization and folklorization of Chinese religions, see (Zhou et al. 2017).

- ²⁹ On the website of the “the economic and social development of Meizhou Island in 2020”: (The website of the economic and social development of Meizhou island in 2020 (2020 nian meizhou dao jingji yu shehui fazhan zhuangkuang) http://mzd.putian.gov.cn/xgk/tjxx/202109/t20210921_1649516.htm (accessed on 26 December 2022).
- ³⁰ Chidester uses the term “authentic fakes” to make sense of this paradox in the American religious field.
- ³¹ On the website of “the national tourist site of Meizhou island at Putian city” (putian shi Meizhou dao guojia lvyou dujiaqu) http://mzd.putian.gov.cn/ztzl/dsxxjy/202204/t20220420_1719512.htm (accessed on 26 December 2022).
- ³² The information on Mazu’s religious procession around Meizhou Island on the day of her ascension into heaven is based on the fieldwork material I collected on 4 October 2022.

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