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Cultural Governmentality and the Momentum of Religious Rituals in Taiwan: A Religio-Cultural Evolution of Popular Religion

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Abstract: Taiwanese popular religion has encountered significant challenges due to the sweeping social changes accompanying the modernization of Taiwanese society. This paper seeks to uncover the distinct dynamics at play, focusing on the transformation of procession troupes, which are an essential part of important religious events known as divine processions: a common collective ritual among local worship communities in Taiwan. Two pivotal external forces have surfaced, providing traditional procession troupes with opportunities for revitalization amidst what had been waning relevance. The first is the narrative of cultural heritage advanced by the public sector, and the second is the commercialization trend of the troupe market. The interplay of 'cultural coding' and 'commercial coding' has emerged as a key factor in maintaining the relevance and operations of traditional procession troupes in contemporary times. The analysis in this paper reveals that the modern evolution of popular religion is grounded not in its religious core but rather in the cultural significance of its rituals amidst the broader process of 'culturalization of religion'.

Keywords: popular religion; ritual primacy; cultural heritage; secularization; Taiwanese religion; culturalization of religion

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1. Introduction

As a non-Western society, Taiwan is navigating the path toward economic capitalism and political democratization, a journey often seen as integral to Westernization. In this context, how local traditional religions confront the challenges posed by societal changes offers a unique perspective on religious evolution amidst Western modernization, diverging from the conventional notion of secularization. This dynamic reveals the intricate interplay between tradition and modern governance, showcasing the distinctive traits of Taiwan's traditional religions. This paper investigates the progression of popular religion, which is the religion of the majority of Taiwan's population and highlights the notable influence of ritual importance.

In Taiwan's contemporary administrative framework, religion is seen as a field of political governance that is influenced by the production of social science knowledge. A principal policy in this context involves the official registration of certain religious events or rituals as cultural heritage. This policy reflects the government's approach of encouraging the 'culturalization of religion', a strategy aimed at influencing and legitimizing the public's understanding and perception of popular religion practices. By labeling religious activities as cultural heritage, the state not only preserves these practices but also frames them within the broader context of national culture and identity, potentially altering how they are viewed and practiced by the public.

This paper investigates how Taiwanese popular religion responds to the culturalization process. In examining the religion's response, we uncover new forces driving its evolution, forces originating from beyond the realm of traditional temple organizers. Interestingly, some of these forces stem from the unintended effects of religious rituals that do not necessarily resonate with the rituals' religious essence or function. Using the example

of procession troupes, we illustrate how ritual elements can manifest and support the temples of popular religion in Taiwan. The distinct dynamics observed align with the fundamental nature of Taiwanese popular religion, which prioritizes orthopraxy or ritual primacy over doctrine. This is where we find its core divergence from Christianity, which is predominantly based on a belief system.

The data utilized in this research originate from extensive fieldwork conducted from 2014 to 2019 across various locations in southern Taiwan, particularly in Tainan and Kaohsiung City. This fieldwork was carried out sequentially for three different research projects, all of which are connected to the theme of divine procession.

2. Beyond the Secularization of Christianity

Religious development in the Christian world of modern times has been portrayed as a journey of religious modernization, characterized by the theory of secularization and based on a belief orientation. When Western sociology constructs concepts related to religion, it does so on behalf of the special context of a Christian society. The developmental path of Christian society influenced the sociological construction of the understanding of 'sacred' and its opposite concept 'secular'. In the space between the sacred and the profane, the sociology of religion often chooses to approach the sacred from a secular perspective; that is, it is concerned with the social phenomena that arise around the domain of the sacred rather than the depiction of the sacred domain itself. Taking Weber as an example, in his construction of religious semiotics, he linked the sacred to the origin of capitalism and to which religious semiotic social constructions are related. In his work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber [1930] 1992), Max Weber teased out the concept of elective affinity, but after a certain period of historical symbiosis, the spirit of rational calculation behind capitalism led to the gradual loss of the once-dominant influence of religious semiotics in all aspects of society. Society began to internalize the development of various specific rational calculations. This shift is part of a broader trend towards secularization, a term Weber uses to denote the social changes stemming from this historical evolution. The main ethical question revolves around a faith-centric view of secularization. It denotes the transition of Western Christian societies from being theocratic structures to states where politics and religion follow their separate logics and exist in independent realms. Consequently, many areas of society, including politics and economics, have extricated themselves from the dominance of religious entities and beliefs.

Is the faith-centric approach of 'secularization' suitable for depicting the religious changes in Taiwan? Some scholars have already reflected that the 'secularization' phenomenon occurring in Western societies has not really occurred in Taiwan (Ting 2004; Chi 2022, p. 8) or that the religious development in modern Taiwan needs another term to describe it (Chandler 2004, p. 75). Might 'laicization' be a concept more in line with the Taiwanese context? In the Buddhist context in Taiwan, for example, Buddhist communities also call for a 'sanctification' of the secular life of common people in their modern development. In this process, laypeople, especially in secular life, become more able to access Buddhist practice activities. As Stuart Chandler describes in his portrayal of Buddhist groups in Taiwan:

> Secularization also incorporates an element of laicization; that is to say, lay and monastic spheres of performance merge. Clerics are urged to return their focus to this mundane world, primarily by instructing lay devotees how to bring an element of the sacred into their lives. The holy life of monastics is secularized while the secular life of laity is sacralized. (Chandler 2006, p. 189)

This presents a different picture of religious development from that of Western society. In this paper, we only focus on popular religion in Taiwan and argue that popular religion is a religion with ritual primacy, which provides a unique perspective on the dynamics of religious development in the modern world.

3. Flourishing Development of Religious Activities in Taiwan

Scholars unanimously note the flourishing of religious activities in Taiwan after World War II. Various indicators such as the growth in the number of temples and churches, the expansion of Humanistic Buddhism within the Buddhist domain, the prevalence of Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism, and the expansion of Taoist sects like I-Kuan Tao's after martial law was lifted all point to the growth in diversity of Taiwan's religious organizations and activities (Pas 2003, p. 37). But does the increased religious fervor in Taiwan signify a religious revitalization?

From the perspective of the economics of religion, this understanding appears accurate, as religious economic theory primarily focuses on the development of religious organizations, emphasizing supply-side pluralism (Stark and Iannaccone 1994; Stark and Finke 2002; Stark 2007, pp. 395–99). In these theories, the decline or growth of religion is measured by the diversity of religious organizations, reflected in their numbers: the flourishing of religious activities indicates the presence and momentum of religious organizations. Therefore, if Taiwan's so-called 'secularization' is accompanied by religious revitalization, it aligns with the discourse of American economists of religion, demonstrating that 'secularization' does not necessarily imply the decline of religion. This seems to provide another example in Taiwan of both material and religious spirit growing simultaneously.

Julian Pas, however, raises the question of whether Taiwan's 'religious revival' really indicates that Taiwanese society has a greater religious commitment. He states, "The external splendor of temple festivals is not proof of stronger religious belief: it can be easily explained as adherence to tradition and folk customs (showing an upsurge of nationalism). . . Religious behavior in and of itself is no proof of religious faith and commitment." (Pas 2003, pp. 44–45).

In his exposition of religious phenomena in Taiwan, Pas presents an interesting encounter between Western and Taiwanese thinking. He observes that in the context of Taiwanese society, religious behavior and religious belief do not necessarily correspond to each other, which is a fresh perspective when considered from the context of Western religious culture. However, at the same time, his representation also inadvertently reveals that his understanding of religion still rests on the core concept of belief: according to his view of religion, only the engagement and fostering of commitment on the level of belief can count as substantive content in a religious revival. Delving deeper into his argument, we can see his core thought more clearly, for example, in his statement that "the decline of organized religion does not mean a decline in spiritual culture; this latter is not per se religious culture!" (Pas 2003, p. 44). This statement aligns with the context in European and American societies.

Just as Pas points out, the vigorous development of pilgrimage activities and religious festivals in Taiwan indeed cannot represent a corresponding purity of belief in the internal cognition of participants. It is easy to observe that many of the lively aspects of these events are due to people participating for the experience, and therefore, these phenomena cannot be easily equated with religious revival (Pas 2003, p. 41). But must we, like Pas, determine religious essence only through the indicators of belief and true devotion? Such a position, still retaining the vestiges of a Western-style conception of religion, is questionable especially in the context of a non-Western society like Taiwan.

Religious rituals and celebrations develop independent of belief cognition. In other words, rituals are not a byproduct of belief and do not necessarily require an internal belief to generate external ritualistic expression. Ritual activities, as expressions, have their own semiotic significance, and semiotic communication can spring from other sources. Both Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence and Victor Turner's (1969) notion of the anti-structure effect in the ritual process touch upon the independent social effect of ritual activities. Therefore, it seems that identifying the attitude individual participants hold toward their participation based on their internal cognition or motivation still leaves us unable to shake off the social effect of ritual activities and the independent existence of these social effects. These lines of thought, constructed from the experiences of non-Western

societies, provide us with legitimacy to understand Taiwanese religion in another way, or it could be said, they offer us the possibility to develop another conception of religion.

4. Popular Religion in Taiwan: A Religion with Ritual Primacy

In Taiwan, popular religion is intricately linked with community rituals that are chiefly directed by local worship communities. These community rituals play a crucial role in forging and articulating a collective sense of local identity, ethical principles, local traditions, and the socio-political framework. As 'Mazu cults', festivals, and the 'ritual sphere' are viewed as the most extensively researched facet of Taiwanese popular religion (Katz 2018, pp. 42–44), ritual primacy characterizes popular religion in Taiwan. This religious fabric consists of a network of worship communities with a strong local focus that operate autonomously but are also organized within a clearly defined regional temple hierarchy. The current placement and spread of these village temples mirror historical migration patterns and settlements rather than contemporary administrative boundaries. Some hold a cross-village domain and exercise jurisdiction over several smaller public temples and a plethora of private shrines, anchoring religious practices to the community's historical roots and cultural lineage. Beyond the local community, there are also mobile worship groups and major regional or cross-regional temples that act as pilgrimage centers for their daughter temples scattered in different regions (Jordan 1986, p. 266). Taiwanese popular religion shares commonalities with other orthopraxic religions in the world (Bell 1997, p. 191), yet it is distinguished by its unique, multi-dimensional characteristics.

For adherents of popular religion, their dialogues and concerns are not centered on abstract 'beliefs' but rather are focused on the practicalities of ritual execution, such as the correct procedures for specific occasions, the appropriate times for these rituals, and the methods of their enactment. Over time, many ritualistic practices have evolved to meet social demands or have been shaped by the routines of communal life. Consequently, these practices are not just outward manifestations of inner faith; they are ingrained, customary actions validated by the community's social framework. Weller's study on ritual disguise characterizes the fact that ritual can work as a tool of political resistance and is essential to cultural identity politics (Weller 1987, pp. 36–37). Belief often emerges from the practice of rituals, with these ceremonies acting as a conduit for individuals to forge personal connections with the divine. Therefore, the interpretation and comprehension of the relationship between individuals and deities are highly subjective and can differ dramatically among people. It is posited that, in the local societies of Taiwan, rituals represent the public activities of the community, whereas beliefs are a matter of private domain, subject to individual interpretation, lacking any overarching system of governance. In essence, the 'collective consciousness' fostered by shared identity through communal ritual activities pertains more to a communal sense of duty towards these rituals rather than a common system of beliefs. Without a formal structure for governing and controlling the belief system, there is room for individuals to cultivate their own interpretations of the ritual system's significance. Traditionally, these interpretations are transmitted via the fluid medium of oral tradition.

Taiwanese popular religion itself has faced challenges in recent years due to social changes that have come along with the modernization of Taiwanese society. Factors like declining birth rates, rural depopulation, and an aging demographic—byproducts of Taiwan's modernization—have eroded the unity of local communities. It has become increasingly prevalent for many local temples to engage or employ ritual groups from outside their own communities due to the lack of ritual practitioners among the locals. This trend has led to a dilution of local identity and a relaxation of the traditional norms that once restricted the involvement of outsiders in local ritual groups, with cross-regional movement among ritual practitioners now more common. There is a gradual but notable decline in the local population's sense of responsibility towards their temples that is compounded by the aging of temple staff and the disengagement of youth, who struggle to connect with the religious roles and identities.

During the onset of Taiwan's industrialization in the 1980s, popular religions were often viewed by the government as outdated and at odds with the country's modernization efforts. Consequently, traditional temples saw a decline in their ability to instill a sense of pride among the younger population. However, this situation began to change with the deepening of political democratization and the rise of localization discourses in Taiwan since 2000. The evolution of popular religion rituals is always subject to the local context and continues to undergo 'indigenization'. This common phenomenon has been linked to the formation of cultural political identity (Katz 2003, pp. 162–65). Since 2000, the unique political effects on popular religion have taken the form of modern cultural discourses based on modern governance. Various localization narratives have sparked public interest in local traditions, such as conventional festivals and widespread local rituals. Governments at various levels have started to acknowledge local elements as cultural assets, providing favorable conditions for local temples to reassess their religious and cultural significance. Consequently, local rituals have garnered public interest, albeit unintentionally at first. The ritual elements and festivities of popular religion began to be appreciated, for example, itinerant festivals, ritualistic performances, and the production techniques for creating various ritual objects. The contemporary understanding of cultural heritage inherently carries value for the public. This shift has presented an opportunity for popular religion to restore its positive image, one that is culturally respected and politically recognized.

5. Implementation of the Cultural Heritage Policy: One Impetus for Religious Culturalization

Since UNESCO established the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* in 2003 (UNESCO Convention 2003), the discourse of intangible cultural heritage has had global effects. Internationally, the social impacts of registering cultural heritage have taken diverse forms: some landscapes registered as World Cultural Heritage sites have become popular tourist spots with involvement from the tourism industry, and many cultural activities in these areas, including religious ceremonies (Kwasniewski et al. 2023, pp. 8–10), have become key points of observation and experience arranged by the tourism industry (Kang 2009; Zhu 2018; Chang 2021, pp. 181–82).

In recent years, many studies on cultural heritage have gradually shifted from focusing on heritage and cultural preservation to discussing what can be done and what can be changed in regards to recognized heritage and culture (Howard 2003; Ashworth et al. 2007; Lowenthal 2015) and how cultural heritage can transform the social, economic, and cultural life of a place, reshaping the locality's image (MacDonald 2003; Herzfeld 2005; Smith 2006; Xu et al. 2022, p. 572). The reason for this shift in research approach is that the discourse on cultural heritage resembles a web of power supported by various actors. The power not only comes from the state through preservation acts but also from local authorities and preservers. The preservers of cultural heritage are embedded within this network of power, measuring and evaluating how to respond from their own perspectives. The certification of cultural heritage bestows various forms of capital on the recognized assets, including social, economic, and symbolic capital. The state, local authorities, and local preservers engage in practices to serve their own interests (Xu and Tao 2022, pp. 12–13). The certification of cultural heritage is essentially an act of cultural expertise and governance, enabling the certified assets to effect change at the social and cultural levels. The development of popular religion in Taiwan echoes this perspective.

Following the enactment of the Cultural Heritage Preservation Act in 2006, government entities across Taiwan have been systematically initiating the registration of intangible cultural heritage since 2009. This has prompted local cultural practitioners and aficionados to embark on quests to attain intangible cultural heritage designation in a way reminiscent of treasure hunting. Such activities have not only heightened awareness among community groups about the advantages of obtaining this emblematic designation but have also played a role in fostering communal unity and reviving a shared local identity. Temples with historical significance often garner considerable cultural recognition and support

from historians and local authorities, especially during festive occasions. This recognition frequently sparks debates on the relative merit of the ideals of preserving tradition vs. pursuing innovative development. Once a temple is formally listed as a cultural asset, it faces restrictions that can limit its potential for modernization and innovative changes. This is particularly evident in the case of temples designated as historical sites, where any unsanctioned repairs or changes to the structure are prohibited, leading to friction among those in the temple community who are looking to modernize and expand through innovative means. An illustrative example is the Denan Temple in Beidou, Changhua County. Designated as a third-grade historic site in 1985, the temple's management committee later sought to renovate the site to boost its appeal and utility. However, its status as a historic site barred any substantial modifications, causing considerable controversy and opposition to its historical designation. In response to these challenges, in 1988, the Ministry of the Interior acceded to requests to remove the temple's historic status, marking Denan Temple as the first instance in Taiwan of a declassification of this nature (Lin 2011, p. 113).

Conducting a cultural valuation of religious rituals is essentially the discursive production of 'culturalization of religion'. On the surface, this process simply confers contemporary cultural significance on traditional ceremonies; however, it also brings several deep-seated consequences: (1) Viewing ceremonial activities as culturally preservable objects may inadvertently fix their evolution within a rigid format, curtailing their adaptability in response to modern sensibilities or sacred traditions. (2) Official recognition or even deliberate promotion of the cultural significance of these activities by local communities amplifies mutual scrutiny, fueling both rivalry and collaboration among temples. Starting in 1990, with local government incentives and attention to community events, the combination of traditional rituals and contemporary performances began to appear under the encouraging label of 'cultural festivals'. Numerous temples have since integrated conventional temple fairs with innovative cultural expressions, developing into lively activities similar to carnivals and parades, with this approach gaining more traction post-2005. Temples that may not qualify for cultural asset registration have nonetheless been able to garner cultural symbolism and tourist interest through 'created traditions'. When ceremonial activities are experienced and regarded as touristic objects, it signifies that these activities are no longer just a part of the subjective life experience of the observers but are objectified into a cultural form in the eyes of others, becoming an object of cultural gaze, as only in this way do they possess touristic and observable value; thus, these events must produce a self-perception that starts from the viewpoint of others. In essence, an inter-regional interplay of observance is manifesting within the sphere of popular religion, signaling a departure from the earlier paradigm of autonomous regional ritual development. This emerging pattern of inter-regional impact, fostered by shared references, is becoming more intricate and variegated.

As of now, twenty-two folk customs have been designated as objects of important national intangible cultural heritage in Taiwan[1]. Various celebratory events of folk beliefs have been consequentially registered as intangible cultural heritage of different levels. This reflects the discourse on localized culture in Taiwan's intangible cultural heritage that has followed the deepening of localization discourse more generally since 2000. Many temples have begun to actively evaluate the historical religious activities they host for their potential to be registered as intangible cultural heritage. Among the many temples I have come in contact with, there are two types of motivations for seeking registration: one is to obtain symbolic capital through 'recognition' by national or local governments; the other is to acquire the crown of 'cultural heritage' in a competitive environment with other temples, to highlight their own cultural uniqueness and historical value. This crown is particularly attractive to temple groups that have been in a historically competitive relationship.

Shortly before the official launch of the registration policy for intangible cultural heritage, popular religion in Taiwan was already in a relatively friendly social atmosphere due to the gradual deepening of the discourse on political localization. At the same time, greater tolerance emerged for the Minnan and Hakka people to express their native identities and speak their own languages. They were progressively recognized as part of

the local culture. With the initiation of cultural heritage registration by governments at all levels, this 'atmosphere' further materialized and was legitimized, adopting the approach of understanding and governing religion within the cultural category. This is a construction of discursive knowledge, but it is not a discourse produced solely by Taiwanese society. It emerged at the international level, developed and gradually established by relevant scholars, advocates, and power holders in cultural politics. Incorporating religion within the cultural category fits well with modern governance logic, allowing the avoidance of doctrinal dissection and evaluation, and focusing instead on cultural performance for positioning and definition, thereby increasing the feasibility of the corresponding knowledge production. However, this also marks modern society's tendency to understand 'religion' as culture; in other words, 'culture' is the modern society's interpretation and observation of religion from an 'outsider (etic)' perspective. Interestingly, preservers of (religious) cultural heritage must constantly switch between the positions of 'outsider' and 'insider (emic)' and even have to seek a way out amid the tug of war between these two forces, which is precisely the situation of 'religion' in modern society. Faced with society's positioning of themselves within the cultural category, 'religion' must also adjust its own pace in response to these discursive forces.

6. The Cross-Domain Connection between Religion and Art in Religious Culturalization

Since ritualistic elements of popular religion have been categorized as culture according to the logic of modern cultural governance, many other cultural domains have begun to connect with the rituals or festivals of popular religion from the perspective of outsiders, hoping to gain new stimuli in their respective fields through this religion with local cultural labels. Among these attempts to find connections with popular religion, the field of arts is most representative, with several examples in the realm of dance.

Taiwan's famous contemporary dance group 'U-Theatre', for example, kept finding inspiration by observing and experiencing folk rituals in the 1990s. The artistic director, Liu Jingmin, hoped to find the body language of the Taiwanese people through actual participation in 'walking pilgrimages'. Group members joined the pilgrimage journey, seeking new forms of dance art through their experiences. This kind of cross-domain exchange endowed traditional folk religious activities with modern significance. The engagement of 'U-Theatre' is only one of many.

Starting from the year 2000, the discourse on localization in Taiwan gradually deepened, leading the arts sector to more comprehensively seek creative inspiration from local elements, a development that seemed quite natural. However, within these interdisciplinary encounters and mutual inspirations, there is a particularly notable case: the Yi Zi Dance Ensemble from Rende, Tainan. In this case, what we observe is not collision and stimulation across domains but rather a blurring of boundaries.

In early 1992, the famous old Temple, Luermen Matsu Temple in Tainan, gathered more than sixty experts and scholars to collaboratively plan the 'Luermen Cultural Festival', encompassing different aspects such as folklore, art, music, dance, and architecture. A professional dancer, Guo Lingjuan, who had not yet established the Yi Zi Dance Ensemble, was among the invitees, participating in the guidance and planning of the dance aspect of the festival. Starting from 1993 and centered around the Luermen Matsu Temple in Tainan, the Luermen Culture Festival has been held annually and features a series of cultural and celebratory events. Among these, the annual 'Sealing Ceremony' (sending-off-the-gods ritual) at year-end and the 'Welcoming the Gods of Happiness' ceremony in the spring involve ritual dances, many segments of which were originally choreographed by Guo and later annually performed by the Yi Zi Dance Ensemble. These two ceremonies, under the name 'Luermen Matsu Temple's Sending and Welcoming Gods Ritual', were registered in January 2013 as part of Tainan City Government's intangible cultural heritage. This can be seen as a new ritual created on the foundation of old customary beliefs and folklore in the context of modern governance.

The newly created dance arts, with artistic intervention, allowed these ritualistic dances to be incorporated into the domain of traditional ceremonies of popular religion, becoming part of both traditional religious rituals and cultural heritage. More interestingly, as the dance elements became ritualized, the dancers of the dance ensemble also became fixed performers in the temple's god-sending and welcoming ceremonies. This special case shows that artistic intervention can unexpectedly enrich the development of religious ceremonies. Under Taiwan's government cultural governance and cultural heritage discourse, religious ceremonies are conceptualized as culture on the platform of heritage discourse, and the performance of religious rituals is considered a cultural performance. Simultaneously, the lines between artistic performance and ritual performance begin to blur, allowing more entry points for artistic intervention into religion. The cross-domain connection between art and religion, which legitimates and fosters the tradition of popular religion, becomes a new pattern of popular religion's development.

7. Procession Troupe as an Example to Reveal the Religious Transformation of Ritual Primacy

7.1. Procession Troupes and Their Function in Local Communities

The religious rituals of Taiwan's popular religion are primarily composed of two types of practices facilitated by local temples: those led by religious professionals and those conducted by community members. The former involves specialized services provided by Taoist priests or mediums who are either hired by temples or offer their expertise voluntarily, performing professional rituals believed to bring good fortune and protection against malevolent forces for the community under the temple's patron deity.

The latter category includes community-led rituals such as 'incense-offering pilgrimages' at the inter-temple level and the 'divine processions' that almost every local public temple organizes regularly, often annually. The divine procession features the presiding deity of a local temple performing an inspection tour of its domain, with the deity's statue securely placed upon a palanquin borne by four or eight bearers and preceded by an entourage of procession troupes (Sutton 2003, pp. 37–41). The procession troupes such as those skilled in martial arts, music and dance are very common in divine processions. Most processions are annual events, but it can also be organized for specific celebratory purposes. The composition of these processions follows a pattern that includes core troupes with a strong affiliation with the temple and is sometimes augmented by supplementary troupes enlisted for particular needs. This organization provides a consistent foundation while also allowing for the flexibility to tailor the procession to the specific requirements of each occasion.

Local procession troupes in Taiwan are not only instrumental in the development of popular religion on the island but also represent a highly unique form of expression among world religions. While religious processions, such as those in Catholicism, do take place abroad during specific festivities like the Purification of the Virgin, Palm Sunday or Holy Week, the Litaniae Majores and Minores, and Corpus Christi, these are conducted in highly institutionalized and regulated environments, lacking the folk ritualistic fervor or the vibrant array of performers found in Taiwan's processions. In contrast, the procession troupe culture within Taiwan's popular religion mirrors popular festive expressions without the rigidity of institutionalized rules. In this sense, the closest Western counterpart to these divine processions would be carnivals; however, Western carnivals have evolved into events with no religious significance, marking a fundamental difference from the temple processions in Taiwan, which retain their religious essence.

The rituals carried out by local lay groups have a complex, multi-dimensional capacity to cultivate a sense of collective identity and communal belonging, going beyond the straightforward concept of 'collective effervescence' as described by Durkheim (Durkheim [1912] 1995). Take the procession troupes involved in divine processions, for instance. The observations of my fieldwork show the procession troupe serves various functions in reinforcing local social bonds while fulfilling a ceremonial role. Primarily because these

troupes perform publicly and in a highly visible manner, the local temples and communities take great pride in the high-caliber performances of their youth troupes. This pride fosters a strong sense of collective identity and bolsters the feeling of connection to their community. Secondly, they allow like-minded locals to gather together and use the temple space for relevant skill training, which also promotes emotional exchanges. This expands the participation of people with different backgrounds and interests in temple activities and strengthens the bonds within the community, enhancing the mobilization energy of the community. Thirdly, temples can showcase their commitment and the significance they accord to a divine procession through the intricacy and grandeur of their local procession troupes. In doing so, a temple elevates its communal stature and reinforces its role as a public institution. Fourthly, procession troupes also act as an important conduit for fostering relationships between temples, especially during regional festivities that involve a network of cross-temple collaborations. Fifthly, procession troupes play a crucial role in the societal fabric by nurturing the growth of their participants and therefore have local public qualities. The transfer of skills is valued as both a method of physical discipline and an avenue for mental and character development.

In Taiwan, procession troupes have traditionally been classified into two types: 'divine troupes' and 'lively troupes' (Sutton 2003; Boretz 2011, pp. 160, 234). Both terms are commonly used by local people. Divine troupes are typically understood to be established under divine guidance, operating according to the wishes of the gods. My fieldwork observations indicate that such troupes engage in more elaborate ritual preparations prior to parades and observe a number of practices related to taboos to maintain their sanctity. Common ritual preparations include the worship of a troupe deity that corresponds to a certain type of divine troupe. Different warrior troupes worship different deities, as do musical and dance troupes. Additionally, the weapons held by warriors or certain instruments of musical and dance troupes are often adorned with charms during these ritual preparations (Sutton 2003, p. 65; Boretz 2011). These troupes often parade to fulfill specific ceremonial functions and thus can also be labeled as 'ritualistic troupes'. Lively troupes, on the other hand, are not associated with divine intentions and therefore are not subject to many taboos or required ritualistic functions. In the intangible cultural heritage registration records at the county and city levels, the troupes that are recognized for their local uniqueness and cultural performances, thus qualifying for registration, are mostly divine troupes. This is evident from the official inventory[2]. Overall, the procession troupes are a vital component of popular religious ceremonies. They serve a social function that strengthens the cohesion of local communities and are of a highly public nature both in terms of their role in rituals and their contribution to communal solidarity.

7.2. Interplay of Culturalization and Marketization in Procession Troupes: The Shifting Contexts of Ritualistic Practices

In the 1990s, structural changes in Taiwanese society led to rural depopulation, creating a crisis for the traditional management of troupes formed by the younger generation. Coupled with changes in market demand, Taiwan's procession troupes began to transform. Since the commercialization of procession troupes began, it has prompted a shift in temple management strategies. Hiring troupes has never been just an extravagant act for the sake of prestige; it is a necessary part of the etiquette within inter-temple relationships. Compared to the past, when procession troupes belonged to village temples with geographical ties (Boretz 2011, p. 55), temples now, based on my observations of several instances in Tainan, must often manage their mutual relations through sponsoring processions and deploying troupes. This results in greater financial burdens due to this exchange of courtesies. For larger temples, with their diverse and complex inter-temple connections, the volume of such exchanges is naturally high. However, smaller units transitioning from private shrines to regional temples also actively engage in these exchanges to gain recognition in the local temple network, often adopting strategies of expression beyond what is expected to secure their status. Therefore, even smaller ambitious units have a significant demand for such

exchanges. This dynamic has indirectly led temples to seek directors or honorary positions among business owners and merchants with financial clout, elevating the status of those who can 'make a splash' with their wealth within the temple's administrative hierarchy. This change indicates a weakening of local residents' identification with their temples and a gradual disintegration of youth groups.

In response to the current challenges, two pivotal forces have surfaced, providing traditional procession troupes with opportunities for revitalization amidst their waning prevalence. The first is the narrative of cultural heritage advanced by the public sector, and the second is the commercialization trend within the market for these troupes. With the enactment of cultural heritage policies, a number of traditional troupes have directly gained recognition from the public sector as cultural heritage. In addition, as some incense-offering pilgrimages or divine processions are recognized as cultural heritage, this necessitates troupe performances, thereby affirming their role and value. As a result, procession troupes attain a contemporary relevance that transcends their religious origins, ensuring a consistent internal market demand for religious cultural expressions.

Several newly evolving performing arts groups are well-known performing arts organizations often hired for temple fair markets. These groups, founded on traditional elements and combining new types of performing arts, have become professional entities independent of temples through diversified and multi-faceted management strategies. Although they are primarily employed for temple fairs, they also accept invitations to perform at private celebratory events: if hired by temple authorities, they can present (refined) traditional formations; if hired for private celebrations, they likewise have modern performances to offer. Their success lies in their skillful integration of traditional and modern elements. Market-oriented procession troupes have become pivotal in sustaining the operations of religious and cultural practices.

In addition, as the structure of secular society changes, the styles of procession troupes are evolving: when the troupe performers are no longer exclusively from the local community, professional troupes have to be hired instead, and the de-contextualization from the community context of the procession troupes intensifies. In this new development, the arrangement of procession troupes thus tends to emphasize their functionality, such as the ability to enliven the atmosphere, attract followers to create a lively event, or highlighting intricacy and grandeur in the performance. Consequently, the differentiation between 'rituality' and 'artistic performance' can be developed more thoroughly, as the performance arts of troupes can innovate and transform more freely without being connected to the local social context.

Taking gender issues as an example, the original performances of female dance troupes reflected the traditional roles of women in rural life. However, modern de-contextualization has made elements such as 'sexiness', 'beauty', and 'novelty' particularly suitable for cross-regional marketing. These elements have thus become important in attracting local audiences. The parade art style, which is closely integrated with traditional life, faces existential threats and is gradually being replaced because it does not align with modern living situations and aesthetics. In contrast, performances that decontextualize elements of traditional society (sexual representation and beauty representation) leave more room for flexible development. Furthermore, as performing groups evolve, they are not simply discarding old elements. Instead, they transform traditional elements from divine or lively troupes, combine them with modern styles and elements, and develop new performance forms. This process has resulted in greater diversity among performance groups.

In the modern cultural governance discourse, the past distinctions between divine troupes and lively troupes are eliminated, and both are categorized under 'traditional performing arts'. While legitimizing them, it also effectively separates the performance, originally a fusion of taboos and arts, from its broader context, reducing it to an activity that only emphasizes the artistic aspect. This rebranding labels it as a local performing art with modern legitimacy. In another words, in the quest to establish modern legitimacy for procession troupes within these cultural discourses, elements of taboo and divine

inspiration have been understated rather than emphasized. This has led some in the realm of popular religion to voice criticism towards innovative performances. From the religious perspective, the practices of popular religion secure the indispensable existence of ritualistic troupes, which cannot be wholly supplanted by the commercial-type, performance-oriented troupes. Certain ritual functions of procession troupes, such as the protective role of some warrior troupes as guardians of deities, are essential and cannot be replicated by modern, invented troupes. While marketization encourages the artistic stylization of troupes for performances, it does not obliterate their inherent ritual roles in divine processions. The growing secular trend does not fundamentally jeopardize the symbolic status of ritualistic troupes. Both ritualistic and performance troupes are part of a natural progression, allowing for their coexistence within the realm of popular religion.

Nowadays, the development of popular religion is characterized by the coexistence of ritual elements in the religious domain and their contemporary legitimization through both culturalization and commercialization. This modern legitimacy has led to broader social recognition of traditional sacred processions, which are a fundamental activity of popular religion. It implies that the legitimacy of popular religion can be bolstered by secular interpretations of its ritual practices and forms rather than its religious belief.

8. Conclusions

In contemporary Taiwan, how is popular religion able to persist? As a religion lacking a mechanism for 'faith governance', popular religion has not developed new solutions to modern spiritual needs or responses to life's profound questions. The mechanism for spiritual solace within temples remains unchanged from traditional practices, consisting of various blessing rituals performed individually. During Taiwan's modernization, popular religion, once perceived as backward and unprogressive, has unexpectedly gained legitimacy from outside its own sphere through the enactment of modern cultural heritage policies. Interestingly, this externally stimulated force does not directly legitimize the core religious aspects of popular religion but rather affirms the cultural value of the peripheral aspects, such as the techniques of procession troupes and ceremonial activities. In other words, the modern foundation for the development of popular religion relies not on its religious essence but on the cultural value of its rituals. Despite indirectly bolstering the marketization of procession troupes—a change arising from intrinsic religious market demands—this marketization still revolves around stylized competition centered on ritual forms. These new developments suggest that whether it is external forces affirming cultural legitimacy or internal market forces, the critical elements revolve around the value created by ritual objects and forms, not the religion itself. It is through this intricate development that Taiwanese popular religion has found a way to endure within the modern governance environment, even sparking richer developments, such as cross-disciplinary integration with the field of performing arts.

Some might question whether this vibrant development of popular religion signifies a resurgence of Taiwan's folk faith or a deepening of public devotion. Such doubts arise from a faith-centered approach. This paper attempts, however, to show that Taiwanese popular religion, as a religion with ritual primacy, operates and focuses on the substance of ritual practice. Under such a religious operational mechanism, ritual practice can generate religious significance among members, create unique social bonds, and even alter the personal inner cognitions of participants, including the formation of identities related to rituals, belief, temples, and 'popular religion'. However, whether personal inner cognition change is left to individual experience, falling within the private domain. For such a religion with ritual primacy, the true public affairs involve creating and maintaining the continuity and vitality of public ceremonies. This is the concrete manifestation of the ritual-centered characteristic of Taiwanese popular religion.

This paper also highlights the co-constructive relationship between the domain of popular religion and art, as well as that between cultural governmentality (including subsidies for local cultural celebrations, community building discourses, etc.) and the

marketization discourse of commercial operations. Between these seemingly independently developing discourses, there often exists 'mutual embeddedness' and 'poaching' of cultural codes. These symbolic borrowings and cross-domain flows not just reflect (and sometimes not at all) the strategic utilization by the actors involved but are related to the structural correlation between stylistic codes. The connectivity among them allows for the flow of such codes, which, from this perspective, represents a co-construction of different stylistic structures on the dimension of materiality.

The discussions on procession troupes reveal that these transformations of procession troupes are largely influenced by external cultural–political, artistic levels, and market domains as well. These different domains of modern society, through various material aspects of rituals, engage with popular religion in different ways and intensities and, in the process of engagement, simultaneously reinforce each other's legitimacy. From the perspective of the religious domain, procession troupes act as elements scattered across other societal domains, on one hand, triggering secular effects, which involve the 'cultural coding' and 'commodification coding' of ritual elements within the contexts of cultural governance and market forces. On the other hand, the impacts on traditional procession rituals generated by the external connections of 'cultural coding' and 'commodification coding' become a force resisting the traditional structure of the procession domain. The transformations in procession rituals thus unfold in terms of a feedback route. The religious domain itself deploys survival modes that align with modern contexts in this process.

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Notes

[1] See official website of Bureau of Cultural Heritage, Ministry of Culture in Taiwan (retrieved on 1 June 2024): https://nchdb.boch.gov.tw/assets/advanceSearch?limit=12&offset=0&query=%7B%22assetsClassifyType%22:null,%22classifyCode%22:%5B%225.1%22%5D,%22govInstitutionCode%22:null,%22belongCity%22:null,%22belongCityId%22:null,%22assetsClassifyCode%22:%5B%225.1.2%22%5D%7D&sort=id&order=desc&classifyCode=5.1.

[2] See official website of Bureau of Cultural Heritage, Ministry of Culture in Taiwan: https://nchdb.boch.gov.tw/ accessed on 7 June 2024.

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