

Article

Heritage Transmission and Multi-Actor Participation in the Mazu Spring Sacrificial Ceremony Under Tourismization: A Case Study of Meizhou Island, China

Yizhu Wang ¹  and Keisuke Matsui ^{2,*} ¹ Doctoral Program in Geosciences, Degree Programs in Life and Earth Sciences, Graduate School of Science and Technology, University of Tsukuba, Tsukuba 305-8572, Japan; yizhuwang2020@163.com² Institute of Life and Environmental Sciences, University of Tsukuba, Tsukuba 305-8572, Japan

* Correspondence: matsui.keisuke.gf@u.tsukuba.ac.jp; Tel.: +81-29-853-4213

Abstract

This study examines how intangible heritage value is sustained through differentiated participation in tourismized ritual festivals and how visitors retrospectively perceive public presentation. Using the Mazu Spring Sacrificial Ceremony on Meizhou Island, China, as a case, the analysis draws on documents, contextual non-participant observation, and semi-structured interviews conducted in 2021 and 2024 with 38 participants: 30 core interviewees from Temple Board personnel, local residents, and university student performers, and eight visitors treated as an exploratory component. Findings suggest that the Temple Board provides coordination, procedural standardization, and official public presentation; residents connect the ceremony to community life and communicate locally grounded meanings; and students support embodied performance and large-scale presentation. Within the actors and materials examined, procedural authority and formal narrative authority remain concentrated in the Temple Board. Visitors described the ceremony as solemn, sacred, festive, or emotionally moving, while detailed cultural understanding was associated with prior religious knowledge or local explanation. Overall, heritage value appears to be sustained through institutional coordination, embodied performance, local interpretation, and visitor reception. In this case, authenticity appears to be mediated through institutional validation, ritual performance, and local interpretation, while expanded participation does not necessarily redistribute procedural authority or formal narrative authority.

Keywords: Mazu Spring Sacrificial Ceremony; intangible cultural heritage; tourismization; heritage transmission; authenticity; formal narrative authority; multi-actor participation; cultural sustainability



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1. Introduction

Since UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003, social practices, rituals, and festive events have been increasingly recognized as forms of living heritage sustained through community participation and intergenerational transmission (UNESCO, 2003). Festival-type intangible heritage is therefore not a static remnant of the past, but a recurrent social practice embedded in community life, collective memory, and identity formation (De Bres & Davis, 2001; Perry et al., 2020). At the same time, rituals and festive events have become an important focus of intangible cultural heritage tourism research (Nega & Trupp, 2026; Qiu et al., 2022). As such practices are incorporated into tourism, they are encountered not only as community-based traditions but also

as publicly organized, displayed, and interpreted cultural events. This shift can increase visibility and accessibility, but it may also reconfigure the institutional and social conditions under which rituals are maintained, represented, and received. Although existing research has extensively examined stakeholder participation in tourism and cultural heritage, it has rarely addressed how different forms of participation in tourismized religious heritage relate to unequal capacities to shape ritual procedures and officially recognized public meanings. The present study examines this issue through the Mazu Spring Sacrificial Ceremony on Meizhou Island, China.

Tourismization is understood here as the process through which cultural practices are increasingly organized, represented, circulated, and experienced in relation to tourism. This process should not be reduced to a simple opposition between preservation and commodification, because commodification may transform or add cultural meanings without necessarily destroying them, while its consequences also depend on how local actors engage with new forms of exchange (Cohen, 1988; Shepherd, 2002). Tourism-related revaluation has contributed to the continuity and transmission of traditional dance in Ibiza and Formentera (Cirer-Costa, 2024), while musicians in Lijiang regarded both less- and more-commodified performances as capable of supporting their changing cultural needs when they retained meaningful opportunities to engage with their heritage (Su, 2019). At the same time, studies of religious festivals show that tourism may reshape ritual organization, performance, and local understandings of cultural integrity (Suntikul, 2018; Suntikul & Dorji, 2016). Tourismization may also introduce new criteria and competing claims concerning who is entitled to represent a culture as authentic (Quang et al., 2022). These findings suggest that tourism does not simply preserve or commodify heritage; rather, it changes the institutional, social, and representational conditions through which heritage is transmitted and publicly presented. In the present study, tourismization is examined through changes in the ceremony's spatial organization, ritual standardization, modes of public presentation, media circulation, and its broader integration into the island's tourism context. These dimensions provide an empirical basis for examining how the ceremony has been reorganized and represented in relation to tourism development.

These processes depend on multiple actors occupying different institutional and social positions. Recent heritage and tourism research has increasingly adopted stakeholder and multi-actor perspectives, recognizing that organizers, communities, practitioners, performers, tourism businesses, and visitors may all participate in the production of heritage tourism (Aas et al., 2005; Dragouni & Fouseki, 2018; Wu et al., 2025). Related work on festival experiences has further emphasized that events are co-produced through differentiated forms of involvement rather than by a single organizing body alone (Alexiou, 2020; Chen et al., 2020). Community-oriented heritage research, meanwhile, has drawn attention to the importance of local participation in sustaining culturally meaningful practices and representations.

These perspectives have substantially broadened analysis beyond single institutional actors, but participation is often treated as a relatively broad category. Less attention has been paid to the distinction between participating in the transmission, performance, interpretation, or reception of heritage and possessing the authority to determine ritual procedures or officially recognized public meanings. Yet these dimensions need not coincide. Institutional organizations may provide procedural continuity and coordination; locally embedded actors may connect a festival to community life and communicate situated cultural meanings; performers may support its embodied enactment and public visibility; and visitors may receive and reinterpret these presentations. The key question, therefore, is not only how participation and transmission functions are distributed among different actors

but also whether these differentiated contributions are accompanied by a corresponding distribution of procedural authority and formal narrative authority.

Heritage studies provide a basis for analyzing this distinction between participation and authority. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2014) conceptualizes heritage as a form of metacultural production created through naming, selection, display, and institutionalization. Smith (2006, 2011) similarly understands heritage as a cultural and political process structured by memory, identity, and power. Her concept of authorized heritage discourse (AHD) draws attention to the disproportionate capacity of professional institutions and representative organizations to define legitimate heritage meanings (Smith, 2006; Waterton & Smith, 2010). However, such institutional authority should not be understood as complete control over all local or individual interpretations. In a museum case in Hangzhou, governmental organizations, museum planners, curators, and craft masters co-produced authenticity through negotiation and compromise (Fu et al., 2015). In Chinese heritage tourism more broadly, touristification has also been identified as a central AHD theme operating across multiple spatial and institutional scales (Jin et al., 2024). These studies suggest that participation, cultural contribution, and authority should be treated as related but analytically distinct dimensions.

In the present study, procedural authority refers to the capacity to determine ritual sequences, standards, personnel, and modes of participation, and is identified through evidence concerning the formulation and formal codification of ritual procedures and performance standards (including music, dance, and costumes), the allocation of ceremonial roles, and the specification of participant numbers and configurations for different scales of ceremony. Formal narrative authority refers to the capacity to produce, authorize, and circulate officially recognized interpretations of the ceremony's history, meaning, and public cultural significance, and is examined through institutional texts, official explanations, public communication, tourism-related materials, and other authorized forms of public representation. Possessing such authority does not imply exclusive control over cultural meaning: residents, performers, and visitors may generate, communicate, or reinterpret meanings through their own experiences and interactions without possessing the institutional capacity to authorize those interpretations as official representations.

Authenticity remains important within this process, but it is not treated here as a uniform visitor judgment or as a directly measured individual attribute. Rather, the study approaches authenticity as a mediated and socially situated issue (Belhassen et al., 2008; N. Wang, 1999). Cohen and Cohen (2012) distinguish cool authentication, involving explicit and formal acts through which authorized agents certify something as genuine, from hot authentication, an implicit, reiterative, and participatory process through which authenticity is socially and affectively affirmed. This distinction complements, but does not duplicate, AHD. AHD identifies the structural distribution of authority—who is entitled to define legitimate heritage—whereas authentication identifies processes through which ritual legitimacy and cultural genuineness are formally validated or socially affirmed. In this study, cool authentication is used to interpret institutional designation, ritual codification, and official claims. Hot authentication is used more cautiously as a sensitizing concept for examining embodied enactment, cultural affirmation, continued narration, and subsequent participation. Participation itself is not treated as evidence of hot authentication. Rather, participation is interpreted as a possible form of hot authentication only where the accounts indicate an emotional, interpretive, or identity-based affirmation of the cultural or religious significance of the heritage practice.

However, sensory and affective engagement does not depend on detailed knowledge of ritual meanings. At the A-Ma Festival, visitors were attracted by sound, performance, decoration, and atmosphere even though many possessed little prior knowledge of the

festival's religious background (Chen et al., 2019). Participation and culturally informed understanding should therefore be treated as distinct outcomes: the former may arise spontaneously, whereas the latter may be facilitated by interpretive support when communicating ritual meaning is an explicit aim of public presentation (Moscardo, 1996). Accordingly, the analysis distinguishes visitors' affective responses to the ceremony from their understanding of its ritual history and symbolic structure. This distinction is important because the study examines not only whether visitors respond positively to the ceremony, but also how they interpret what is being publicly presented. An emotional response such as feeling moved, solemn, or sacred does not in itself demonstrate detailed cultural understanding, nor is a positive evaluation treated as evidence that a visitor perceived the ceremony as authentic. Perceptions of authenticity are therefore identified only where they are explicitly expressed or otherwise directly supported by the interview account.

Existing research has addressed important parts of this problem, but the relationships among them remain less clear. Stakeholder-oriented research has demonstrated the relevance of multiple participants in heritage tourism (Wu et al., 2025), while C.-P. Lin (2021) identifies the differentiated salience of temples, pilgrims, and host communities in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage. Chen et al. (2020) show that festival experiencescapes are constructed through multi-stakeholder participation, and Sontikul and Dorji (2016) examine local perceptions of tourism's effects on the integrity of religious festivals. Community-centered research also demonstrates the relationships among participation, emotion, and authenticity in intangible heritage tourism (Rodríguez Campo et al., 2024). Together, these studies illuminate who participates, how festivals are experienced, and how cultural meanings may be negotiated, but they provide less clarity on how differentiated participation relates to the distribution of authority over the practice itself.

The central gap addressed in this study therefore concerns the relationship between differentiated participation and asymmetrical distributions of procedural authority and formal narrative authority in the transmission and tourism-oriented presentation of religious intangible cultural heritage. More specifically, it remains unclear whether actors who contribute to the transmission, performance, interpretation, or reception of heritage also possess a corresponding capacity to shape ritual procedures or officially recognized public meanings.

The Mazu Spring Sacrificial Ceremony provides a suitable case for examining these relationships. Mazu Belief and Customs, of which the ceremony is an important ritual component, was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009, marking the international recognition of a living tradition originating on Meizhou Island (UNESCO, 2009). The Spring Sacrificial Ceremony is therefore examined here as one contemporary expression of this broader heritage complex rather than as a separately inscribed element. Since its revival, the contemporary ceremony has undergone institutional standardization, changes in performer composition, and an expansion of large-scale public presentation. Previous research shows that the Mazu Ancestral Temple has been reconfigured to function simultaneously as a sacred site and a tourist attraction (Zhang, 2021), while visitor research documents the importance of cultural value and place attachment in tourism on Meizhou Island (Yao et al., 2020). The ceremony currently involves the Board of Directors of the Meizhou Mazu Ancestral Temple (hereafter, the Temple Board), local residents, and off-island university student performers, whose positions differ in institutional status, local embeddedness, and performative role. It therefore offers an appropriate setting in which to examine the relationships among heritage transmission, authentication, authority, and visitor reception under tourismization.

Against this background, the present study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) How has the Mazu Spring Sacrificial Ceremony been reconfigured in the context of tourismization as a religious ritual, a mode of heritage transmission, and a public cultural event?
- (2) How do the Temple Board, local residents, and university student performers contribute to heritage transmission and public presentation, and how are procedural authority and formal narrative authority distributed among these groups?
- (3) How do interviewed visitors retrospectively describe the ceremony's atmosphere and cultural meaning, and what sources inform their understanding?

By addressing these questions, the study makes three contributions. First, it conceptualizes heritage transmission in tourismized ritual festivals as a relational process through which differently positioned actors contribute to procedural continuity, public visibility, and interpretive accessibility. Second, it approaches authenticity as a mediated process rather than a uniform visitor judgment, distinguishing institutional validation from embodied and participatory forms of affirmation while also separating these processes from visitors' affective reception. Third, it distinguishes functional participation from procedural authority and formal narrative authority, showing that actors may contribute substantially to heritage transmission without possessing an equivalent capacity to define ritual standards or official public meanings. Together, these contributions connect the transmission and authentication of intangible heritage with multi-actor participation, visitor experience, and the governance and cultural sustainability of living religious festivals under tourismization.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Area

Meizhou Island is located approximately 42 km southeast of Putian City, Fujian Province, China (25°08' N, 119°13' E), bordering Pinghai Bay to the west and facing the Taiwan Strait to the east (Figure 1). Covering approximately 14.35 km², the island is recognized as the place of origin of Mazu belief and a major center of Mazu culture. Historically, its economy relied heavily on fishing because of its island location and limited land resources. In recent decades, tourism and service-sector activities have expanded substantially. Meizhou Island was designated a national 4A tourist attraction in 2012 and a 5A tourist attraction in 2020, while the inscription of Mazu Belief and Customs on UNESCO's Representative List in 2009 further strengthened its heritage visibility (Lian, 2010).

Tourist arrivals reached a pre-pandemic high of 6.88 million in 2019, generating CNY 4.3 billion in tourism revenue. The decline and fluctuations between 2020 and 2022 should be interpreted in relation to the exceptional conditions of the COVID-19 period (Figure 2). The tertiary sector's share of local GDP increased from 43% in 2003 to approximately 62% in 2023 (Figure 3). Over the same period, the island's reported population increased to 50,776 by the end of 2023, approximately 35% above the 2002 level (Figure 4). This demographic trend coincided with the expansion of accommodation, catering, and other service activities. By the end of 2025, Meizhou Island had 13 hotels and 693 family inns (Meizhou Island National Tourism Resort Administrative Committee, 2026), with the latter notably concentrated in villages near the Mazu Ancestral Temple. Together, these developments have placed Mazu heritage within an increasingly tourism-oriented local economy and public environment, where religious sites, cultural activities, visitor services, and heritage representation are closely interconnected. This makes Meizhou Island a suitable setting for examining how a living religious tradition is organized and publicly presented under conditions of tourismization.



Figure 1. Study area and key sites on Meizhou Island. Source: authors' analysis based on Amap data; cartography by the authors using ArcMap 10.8 (Esri, Redlands, CA, USA).

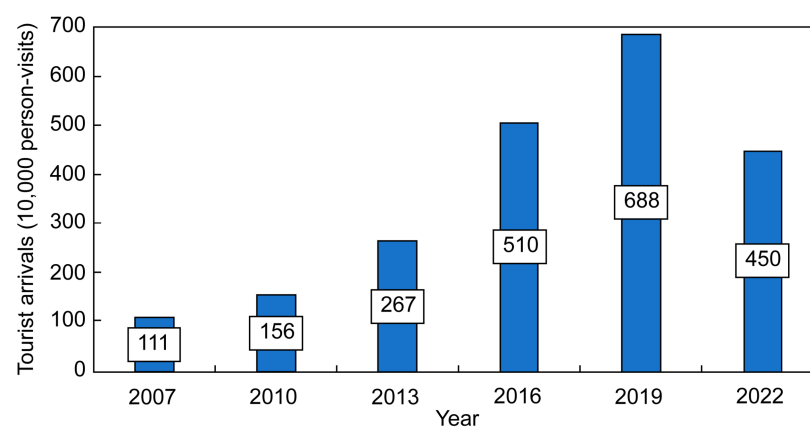


Figure 2. Tourist arrivals on Meizhou Island, 2007–2022. Source: Compiled by the authors from official tourism data published in the annual work reports of the Meizhou Island National Tourism Resort Administrative Committee and supplementary data provided directly by the Committee.

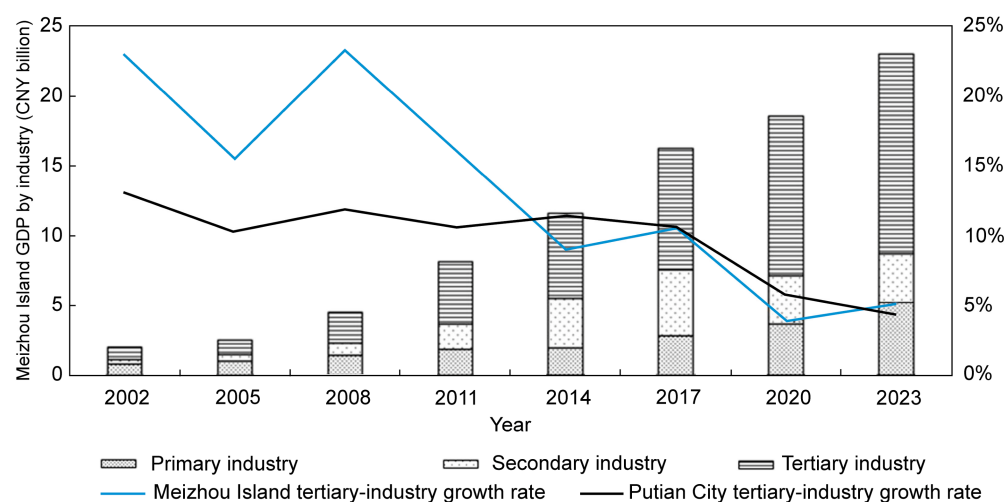


Figure 3. Industrial structure and growth of the tertiary sector on Meizhou Island, 2002–2023. Source: Compiled by the authors from annual electronic editions of the Putian Statistical Yearbook covering the data years 2003–2024 (Putian Municipal Bureau of Statistics & Putian Survey Office of the National Bureau of Statistics, 2003–2024).

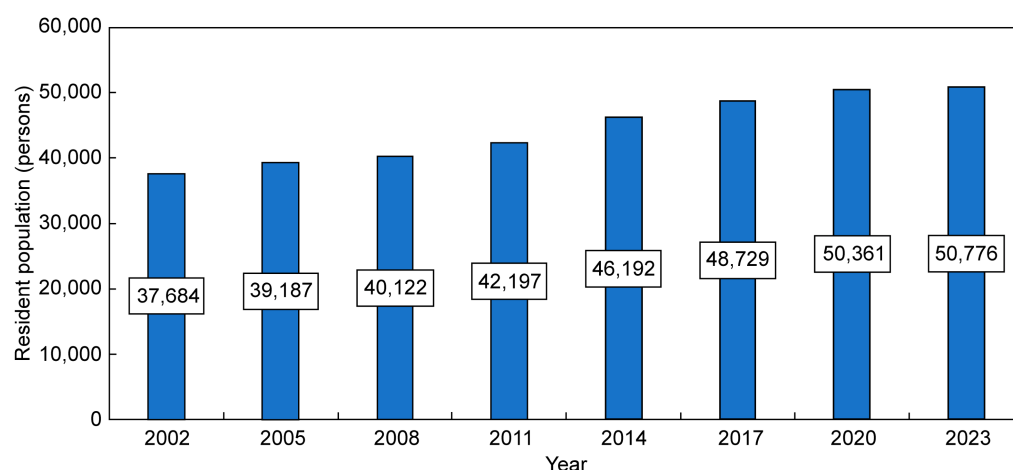


Figure 4. Resident population of Meizhou Island, 2002–2023. Source: Compiled by the authors from annual electronic editions of the Putian Statistical Yearbook covering the data years 2003–2024 (Putian Municipal Bureau of Statistics & Putian Survey Office of the National Bureau of Statistics, 2003–2024).

Alongside tourism development and the institutionalization of Mazu heritage, the island's festival landscape has also undergone gradual reorganization. Since the revival of the relevant commemorative activities in 1987, rituals and temple fair activities have been progressively restored and presented to broader public audiences. The contemporary festival landscape includes the Spring and Autumn Sacrificial Ceremonies, New Year blessing activities, and modern cultural performance projects such as Impression of Mazu. Designated viewing areas and more staged forms of presentation have also been introduced in some events. These developments provide the broader setting in which the contemporary Spring Sacrificial Ceremony is organized as both a religious ritual and a publicly presented heritage event.

2.2. Research Design, Data Sources, and Analysis

This study adopted a qualitative case study design combining semi-structured interviews, non-participant field observation, and document analysis. It examined how the Temple Board, residents, university students, and visitors engaged with the ceremony in different ways. The analysis then considered whether participation in organization,

performance, local mediation, and reception was accompanied by procedural authority or formal narrative authority.

Fieldwork was conducted in two phases. The first phase took place from 3 to 11 September 2021 and focused primarily on the festival's organizational structure, historical development, and transformation under tourismization. Interviews were conducted with four Temple Board personnel, nine university student performers, and five local residents. The second phase was conducted from 15 to 23 March 2024 and examined more recent developments in the ceremony's organization and public presentation. Interviews were conducted with four Temple Board personnel, including one participant previously interviewed in 2021, nine additional local residents, and eight visitors who had previously attended the Spring Sacrificial Ceremony. In total, the sample comprised 38 participants: seven Temple Board personnel (one interviewed in both phases), 14 residents, nine university student performers, and eight visitors with prior attendance. The first three groups formed the core of the multi-actor analysis; the visitor interviews were treated as a separate exploratory component. The qualitative sampling strategy was designed to capture variation in actor positions, forms of participation, and interpretive perspectives rather than to achieve statistical representativeness. The destination-level statistics reported in Section 2.1 are therefore used to contextualize the scale and intensity of tourism development on Meizhou Island, rather than as a basis for population-level inference. Accordingly, the interviews were used to examine differentiated roles, experiences, and interpretations rather than to estimate the prevalence of particular views among the wider resident or visitor populations.

Both phases of fieldwork were conducted outside the peak period surrounding the Mazu Spring Sacrificial Ceremony. Organizational and performance demands during peak days, together with crowding and continuous visitor movement, made extended interviews difficult to conduct. Less crowded periods therefore provided more suitable conditions for in-depth interviews. Because the principal ceremonial day was not directly observed, evidence concerning that day was drawn from multiple sources: interviews provided participants' retrospective accounts and interpretations; institutional and documentary materials provided recorded information on the organization and historical development of the ceremony; and archived official audiovisual records provided visual evidence of the ritual sequence, performance, spatial arrangements, and public presentation. In the subsequent analysis, these sources were distinguished from evidence obtained through direct observation and were compared with one another where possible.

Participants in the three focal groups were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961; Patton, 2002). All interviewees were selected because they had direct experience relevant to festival organization, performance, community life, religious practice, or tourism-related activities.

Recruitment proceeded through separate access routes. Two scholars specializing in Mazu studies, contacted through details provided in their publications, facilitated separate initial introductions—one to Temple Board personnel and the other to university student performers. A pre-existing contact with local ties introduced the first resident participant. Further potential participants were identified through referrals from early interviewees. Resident recruitment additionally drew on relationships developed at accommodation and dining establishments during fieldwork. The Temple Board assisted only by facilitating contact with its own personnel; the recruitment of residents, students, and visitors proceeded independently. Across all access routes, referrals did not automatically lead to inclusion; potential participants were interviewed only when their experience was relevant to the research questions.

Visitor recruitment was conducted primarily near Tianhou Square and Lianchi'ao Beach. Eligibility required previous attendance at the Spring Sacrificial Ceremony and the

ability to provide a detailed retrospective account; attendance only at other Mazu-related activities was insufficient. Eight visitors were interviewed: seven recruited through on-site contact and one introduced by a local guesthouse operator. Some older contacts communicated primarily in local dialects and could not be interviewed at length in Mandarin. As no dialect-speaking assistant or interpreter was available, this contributed to the concentration of the visitor group among adults in their 20s and 30s.

Interviews were semi-structured, lasted approximately 40–60 min, and were adapted to the characteristics of each participant group. Questions addressed participants' relationships with the ceremony, modes of participation or contact, motivations, perceptions of change, and views of tourismization. Visitor interviews additionally examined motivations for attendance, impressions of the ceremony, sources of cultural understanding, and intentions to revisit, recommend, or share their experiences. Each interview initially allowed participants to present their own accounts; recurring issues identified in earlier interviews were raised as follow-up questions near the end where relevant.

All formal interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and documented through field notes and, with participants' consent, audio recordings. The first author transcribed the recordings in Chinese and translated selected quotations into English. Minor fillers and repetitions were omitted for readability, and translations were checked against the Chinese transcripts; minor grammatical adjustments did not alter the meaning or emphasis of participants' statements.

Recruitment was guided by participants' relevance to the research questions, field access, and the recurrence of themes rather than by predetermined numerical quotas. Sampling within the three focal groups continued until additional interviews produced limited new thematic information relevant to each group's role. Recurrence was assessed during fieldwork through the ongoing review of interview notes. Among residents, emerging differences in occupation and involvement in tourism prompted further recruitment and follow-up questions. The eight visitor interviews constituted a separate exploratory component and were not included in the assessment of thematic sufficiency for the three focal groups.

Non-participant observation documented the island's tourism landscape, visitor activities at the ancestral temple, everyday worship, tourism reception, and interactions among residents, visitors, and temple-related actors. These observations provided contextual evidence about the ceremony's broader social, religious, and tourism setting.

Documentary materials were drawn from three sources. The first consisted of historical and scholarly literature on Mazu belief and ritual development. The second included materials produced by or relating to the Mazu Ancestral Temple, such as published histories, ritual standards, official publicity articles, and the archived official livestream of the 2023 Spring Sacrificial Ceremony. The third consisted of local governance and tourism documents, including annual work reports and statistical yearbooks. These sources were used to reconstruct the ceremony's historical development and to compare accounts of ritual procedures, performer arrangements, tourism development, and public presentation.

Data analysis followed a combined inductive–deductive approach. Initial codes and analytical categories were developed inductively from the interview data. Once these empirically grounded categories had been established, relevant theoretical concepts were applied deductively to interpret the relationships among the identified patterns. More specifically, during fieldwork, the first author recorded salient statements and recurring issues in the interview notes. After fieldwork, the interview materials were manually organized and coded in Microsoft Excel 2019 (Version 2608; Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA, USA), following the broad thematic analysis approach described by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). Background information and relevant excerpts were recorded for each participant.

Through repeated reading, relevant excerpts were assigned initial descriptive codes, after which codes expressing similar meanings were grouped into preliminary empirical categories. These categories were compared first within participant groups and then across groups, with attention to differences in age, occupation, place of residence, and relationship to tourism. Broader themes were subsequently developed concerning participation, motivations, functions, heritage transmission, tourism-related change, local interpretation, and visitor reception. Divergent accounts were retained throughout the analysis.

The visitor interviews were analyzed as a separate exploratory dataset. Individual case summaries were followed by cross-case comparison of motivations, affective responses, sources of cultural understanding, prior relationships with Mazu belief, and continued engagement. Affective response, articulated cultural understanding, and explicit authenticity judgment were distinguished in the coding. Terms such as “solemn,” “sacred,” or “moving” were coded as affective responses unless participants linked them to cultural meaning or authenticity.

The first author conducted the interviews, transcription, translation, primary coding, and initial interpretation of the data, which supported close familiarity with the interview materials. To broaden interpretive scrutiny and reduce the concentration of analytical decisions in one researcher, the corresponding author subsequently reviewed the organized coding materials and preliminary thematic interpretations. The predominance of apparently positive accounts prompted questions about whether participants’ views were uniformly positive and whether similar evaluations rested on different grounds. The subsequent analysis therefore paid closer attention both to ambivalent or critical accounts and to variation in the reasons underlying participants’ positive evaluations, including how these reasons were related to their roles, occupational backgrounds, and relationships to tourism. Although the first author had no employment, governance, financial, membership, or other institutional relationship with the Temple Board or other heritage- and tourism-management organizations on Meizhou Island, the routes through which participants were contacted may still have shaped which individuals were accessible and the range of perspectives expressed. The first author’s sustained involvement in data collection and analysis may also have influenced questioning and interpretation. These potential influences were examined through comparisons of accounts within and across participant groups, cross-source comparison with documentary and audiovisual materials, discussion of alternative explanations between the authors, and restriction of the resulting claims to the actors and materials examined in the study.

The study addressed non-sensitive topics and constituted low-risk humanities and social science research. All interviewees were adults who participated voluntarily after being informed of the study’s purpose and the intended use of the data, and informed consent was obtained before each interview. Personally identifiable information was removed or replaced during data analysis and manuscript preparation. Quotations are identified using anonymized codes: TB1–TB7 for Temple Board personnel, R1–R14 for residents, S1–S9 for student performers, and V1–V8 for visitors.

2.3. Interviewees

The interview sample comprised 38 participants. Table 1 summarizes the 30 participants in the three focal groups: seven Temple Board personnel, 14 residents, and nine university student performers. Table 2 presents the eight visitors with prior experience of the Mazu Spring Sacrificial Ceremony. The focal groups contributed different forms of evidence. Temple Board participants provided organization- and rule-related knowledge; residents provided varied accounts of community life, religious engagement, and tourism-

related livelihoods; and students provided first-hand accounts of recruitment, training, and performance. Group sizes reflected participants' relevance to these role-based questions.

Table 1. Overview of the core interviewees.

Group	<i>n</i>	Age Range	Relation to the Festival
Temple Board personnel	7	20s–40s	Institutional organization, management, and coordination of the ceremony
Residents	14	20s–70s	Everyday engagement with the festival, visitor hosting, and locally grounded cultural interpretation
University student performers	9	20s	Performance in the Mazu Spring Sacrificial Ceremony

Source: authors' analysis.

Table 2. Background characteristics of visitor interviewees.

Code	Place of Origin	Believer Status	Age Group	Reported Attendance Year(s)
V1	Outside Fujian Province	Non-believer	20s	2018, 2019
V2	Fujian Province	Believer	30s	2017
V3	Outside Fujian Province	Non-believer	30s	2023
V4	Outside Fujian Province	Non-believer	30s	2023
V5	Fujian Province	Believer	30s	2019
V6	Outside Fujian Province	Believer	20s	2023
V7	Fujian Province	Believer	30s	2019
V8	Outside Fujian Province	Non-believer	20s	2019

Source: authors' analysis.

The eight visitors formed a separate retrospective component used to explore affective reception, cultural understanding, and perceived authenticity in the interviewed cases.

3. Results

3.1. From Religious Ritual to Intangible Heritage Tourism Event

The account of the ceremony's earlier historical development in this section is based on documentary sources and prior scholarship. The reconstruction of its modern revival and subsequent reorganization draws primarily on temple histories and previous research, supplemented by retrospective interviews with Temple Board personnel, particularly regarding changes in ceremonial organization and performer composition. Specific dates and quantitative changes are reported on the basis of documentary materials; where interview accounts address the same developments, the sources were compared. Archived official audiovisual records were used as supplementary visual evidence of the contemporary ritual sequence, performance, spatial arrangements, and public presentation.

Mazu belief originated during the Northern Song dynasty as a localized sea-deity cult associated with maritime protection around Meizhou Island. Its subsequent history followed two intertwined but distinct trajectories. Belief in Mazu spread widely: by the twelfth century, it had extended along the coasts of Fujian, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, and Guangdong and gained imperial recognition after an official attributed his rescue from a storm to the deity's intervention ([Putian Meizhou Mazu Ancestral Temple Board of Directors, 2018](#), p. 101). Through the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, Mazu was progressively

elevated from a regional deity into the focus of a nationwide and eventually transnational cult (Huang, 2008; T. Zhu, 1986). The ritual festival itself, by contrast, remained more regionally concentrated. Its formal incorporation into the state ritual system began with the granting of an imperial title in 1156 and continued through the institutionalization of spring and autumn sacrifices during the Qing dynasty (Zhou, 2015). Its everyday continuity, however, continued to depend on local elites, temple organizations, and community networks centered on Meizhou Island as the place of origin of Mazu belief (X. Lin, 2023). This dual trajectory—the broad diffusion of belief alongside the local concentration of ritual practice—underpins Meizhou Island’s enduring status as the ritual and symbolic origin of Mazu worship, which was later reinforced by UNESCO inscription.

The contemporary ceremony took shape following its revival after China’s Reform and Opening Up. In 1986, the first Board of Directors of the Meizhou Mazu Ancestral Temple was established to lead temple restoration and the reconstruction of the festival (Huang, 2008).

For analytical purposes, the development of the ceremony from 1994 onward is divided here into three stages according to major revisions in its music-and-dance program, changes in performer composition and recruitment, shifts in performance space and the scale of public presentation, and changes in institutional organization. The boundaries correspond to three turning points: the revival of the Spring Sacrificial Ceremony and the formation of its initial contemporary version in 1994; the introduction of a revised version and the beginning of a period of expansion and institutionalization in 2000; and the organized recruitment of university students as principal performers from 2011 onward. Although other changes also occurred within each period, these three turning points capture the principal transitions in the ceremony’s contemporary development.

During the period of revival and initial consolidation (1994–1999), the Temple Board, with support from the local government, reconstructed the ritual through documentary research and study visits to other state sacrificial traditions, including the Confucian rites in Qufu and the Fengshan rites in Tai’an. Music and dance were incorporated into the ceremony, with performers drawn mainly from young teachers, students, and island residents, although limitations in venue, rehearsal time, and performer continuity affected the consistency of the presentation (Jiang & Zhu, 2011, pp. 364–368; X. Lin, 2023).

During the period of expansion and institutionalization (2000–2010), a revised ceremonial version was introduced in 2000 and incorporated local artistic elements such as Puxian Opera. The ceremony subsequently moved to the larger, newly constructed Tianhou Square in 2002 (X. Lin, 2023). During this period, the broader heritage element “Mazu Belief and Customs” also received formal recognition as intangible cultural heritage, including its inscription on UNESCO’s Representative List in 2009.

The third stage began in 2011, when the Temple Board’s collaboration with nearby universities introduced a more organized system for recruiting and training university students as principal performers. This collaboration supported a more standardized and large-scale mode of public presentation (X. Lin, 2023; TB1). Published figures indicate that the number of student performers increased from 456 in 2011 to 521 in 2021 (X. Lin, 2023). A further revision in 2014 incorporated Maritime Silk Road imagery into costumes, music, and choreography, strengthening the visual and narrative dimensions of the performance (X. Lin, 2023). Following this revision, designated viewing areas were introduced for visitors, and the ceremony’s modes of performance became increasingly aestheticized. Meanwhile, Temple Board leaders played key roles in the Spring Sacrificial Ceremony, while residents participated mainly as observers and community supporters rather than as performers (Zhou, 2015; TB1).

Taken together, this trajectory indicates that the Mazu Spring Sacrificial Ceremony developed from a locally organized rite into an increasingly institutionalized and publicly presented cultural event within a tourism environment. This transformation can be understood as a selective and ongoing process of reconstruction coordinated primarily by the Temple Board and involving changing configurations of residents and off-island performers, rather than as the transmission of a fixed inheritance from the past (Perry et al., 2020; J. Wang et al., 2024). This trajectory provides the historical and institutional basis for the following analysis of how the Temple Board, residents, and university students participate in the transmission of the ceremony as intangible cultural heritage and how the ceremony was perceived by the interviewed visitors.

3.2. Temple Board: Institutional Organization, Ritual Standardization, and Public Presentation

In the contemporary Mazu Spring Sacrificial Ceremony, the Temple Board constitutes the core institutional actor responsible for festival planning, personnel coordination, ritual regulation, and external communication. Its role extends beyond the annual operation of the ceremony to the formalization of Mazu heritage. In 2008, senior Temple Board leaders headed the working group responsible for preparing the nomination materials for the inscription of Mazu Belief and Customs on UNESCO's Representative List. Following the inscription, the Temple Board continued to promote the institutionalization of the ceremony. In 2023, a Temple Board-led working group, supported by expert review, formulated the Mazu Sacrifices Group Standard (T/MZMZ 01—2023) (Putian Meizhou Mazu Ancestral Temple Board of Directors, 2023), which specifies the ritual sequence, ceremonial roles, music, dance, costumes, and related performance content. These developments show that the ceremony's contemporary transmission increasingly depends on institutional coordination and the codification of an officially recognized ritual form.

The composition and allocation of ceremonial roles further reflect this institutional structure. Participants in the Mazu Spring Sacrificial Ceremony can be broadly divided into ritual personnel and performers. Among the ritual personnel, the principal celebrant, who occupies the central ceremonial role, is generally drawn from the leadership of the Temple Board and is commonly represented by its chairperson. Accompanying and participating celebrants are typically invited dignitaries and representatives of other Mazu temples. The Temple Board therefore occupies a central position in determining ritual procedures, allocating key ceremonial roles, and maintaining the normative order of the ceremony.

Interviews indicate that Temple Board personnel do not understand their involvement solely as an administrative responsibility. One interviewee (TB1) recalled that, in the earlier period, "life on Meizhou Island was rather monotonous, the welfare benefits were limited, and people from outside were not very willing to come. Many people stayed because they did not want to leave their hometown and because they loved Mazu culture." This account suggests that institutional continuity has also depended on the local attachment and cultural commitment of those engaged in the long-term operation of the ancestral temple.

At the same time, Temple Board personnel have actively adapted the public presentation of Mazu culture in response to tourism development. One interviewee (TB2) described a central task as keeping "up with the times," telling "the story of Mazu well," developing cultural and creative brands, and retaining qualified personnel. Another interviewee (TB3) argued that performance could facilitate the dissemination of Mazu culture and explained that the ancestral temple did not reject tourism development because greater public attention was considered important. These accounts indicate that at least some Temple Board personnel regard performance, tourism, and media visibility not as inherently opposed to religiosity but as means through which they seek to extend the public reach of Mazu culture.

Programs such as Auspicious Meizhou illustrate this approach by extending Mazu-related performances beyond the annual Spring Sacrificial Ceremony through regularly staged cultural programming. Such initiatives create additional occasions for the public presentation of Mazu culture while relying on specialized capacities in event management, communication, and creative production. These developments point to a continuing tension between increasingly organized public presentation and the maintenance of a locally rooted religious and emotional foundation. A related tension concerns the maintenance of ritual norms while presenting the ceremony in visually engaging and publicly accessible forms.

The evidence examined here identifies several institutional functions performed by the Temple Board, including ceremonial organization, ritual standardization, role allocation, and tourism-oriented dissemination. These functions reflect two related but analytically distinct forms of authority. Its role in formulating ritual standards and allocating ceremonial roles reflects procedural authority, whereas its role in authorizing and circulating official public representations reflects formal narrative authority. The latter does not imply complete control over residents' informal interpretations or visitors' individual understandings.

3.3. Residents: Local Mediation, Everyday Transmission, and Locally Grounded Tourism Encounters

Compared with Temple Board personnel, residents are less central to the formal organization and large-scale performance of the Mazu Spring Sacrificial Ceremony, but they remain an important local foundation of its continuity. Residents are not a homogeneous group. Their relationships with the ceremony and tourism vary according to age, place of residence, frequency of participation, and the extent to which their own or their household livelihoods are connected to tourism. For analytical purposes, the 14 residents are therefore distinguished into three groups according to their livelihood relationship with tourism: residents directly engaged in tourism-related work, such as guesthouse management, catering, and visitor transport (R1–R4 and R10); residents with household or occasional connections to tourism-related work (R8, R9, R11, and R12); and residents with no direct tourism livelihood (R5–R7, R13, and R14). This distinction is used below to compare the grounds on which residents supported or questioned tourismization, their modes of participation, and the concerns they raised.

Residents' participation in the ceremony ranged from direct attendance to mediated forms of engagement. Some reported watching the ceremony whenever time permitted (R1, R3–R5), while others followed it through television or online broadcasts (R2). A guesthouse operator, for example, explained that the festival period brought increased visitor-reception work and left little time to attend the ceremony in person. Younger residents (R8, R13, and R14) also recalled participating through school-organized visits during childhood or adolescence. These accounts indicate that the ceremony remains embedded in local social life and collective memory, although residents' access and participation are shaped by work obligations, life-course changes, and the increasingly regulated organization of large-scale events.

Residents could also act as informal mediators between visitors and local culture, although this role was unevenly distributed. Several residents described providing visitors with cultural explanations, worship guidance, or information about local history and attractions (R1, R4, and R8–R12). One young resident who occasionally worked in a guesthouse (R8) explained, "I introduce visitors to places that only local people know and explain the etiquette for worshipping Mazu." These accounts suggest that such interactions may provide visitors with locally grounded and faith-inflected interpretations alongside practical tourism guidance. However, cultural mediation was not an automatic consequence of being a resident. Another resident (R14) stated, "I usually tell visitors about restaurants and places to visit, but I rarely discuss the ceremony because they may not understand

it. Moreover, because the ceremony is held only at particular times, they may not have an opportunity to attend even if I explain it.” Residents therefore differed not only in the frequency of their interactions with visitors but also in the kinds of cultural knowledge they felt able or willing to communicate.

Residents’ responses to tourismization were broadly supportive, but the grounds for support and the concerns they expressed varied across the three groups identified above. Residents directly engaged in tourism more frequently emphasized employment, income, improvements in local services, and new livelihood opportunities (R1, R3, and R10). Those with household or occasional connections to tourism referred to both economic opportunities and pressures associated with tourism, including seasonal fluctuations and increasing competition within the guesthouse sector (R8, R9, R11, and R12). Among residents with no direct tourism livelihood, cultural visibility, pride in the island, and the local character of ritual activities were more salient in some accounts (R13 and R14). One resident (R13) explained, “Seeing Mazu culture from my hometown attract more and more people makes me very proud.”

However, support was not necessarily uncritical. The same resident observed, “Some ritual activities and performances have become increasingly routinized. After attending several times, I became less interested. I now prefer the village-led Lantern Festival processions because they better express the customs and distinctive character of each village.” This account illustrates an ambivalent relationship with tourismization: tourism development may increase the visibility of the Spring Sacrificial Ceremony and generate economic benefits, while also weakening perceptions of local distinctiveness and reducing opportunities for direct community participation. Other residents raised concerns about disruption to everyday mobility and the unequal distribution of tourism-related benefits (R8 and R14). These differences did not amount to a simple division between supporters and opponents of tourismization; rather, residents’ livelihood relationships, cultural attachments, and everyday experiences shaped which benefits and problems they emphasized.

Taken together, these accounts show that residents’ engagement with tourismization was shaped by multiple and overlapping considerations. Economic interests, cultural attachment, religious attachment, place of residence, and everyday experience influenced what different residents valued and what they regarded as problematic. Through watching, hosting, storytelling, worship guidance, and informal encounters, residents may contribute to connecting the ceremony with community life and may provide locally grounded channels through which visitors encounter and interpret Mazu culture. At the same time, these forms of mediation were informal and uneven. The interview and documentary materials examined did not identify ordinary residents as direct participants in the formal standardization of ritual procedures or in determining the ceremony’s official public representation.

3.4. University Students: Performative Display and Cross-Group Participation

The Mazu Spring Sacrificial Ceremony involves both ritual personnel and a range of performance-related roles, including ceremonial attendants, musicians, singers, and dancers. As discussed in Section 3.2, the Temple Board remains the formal organizing body of the ceremony, and its chairperson commonly assumes the role of principal celebrant. University students, however, participate primarily in the performance roles enumerated above. According to the Mazu Sacrifices Group Standard (T/MZMZ 01—2023) (Putian Meizhou Mazu Ancestral Temple Board of Directors, 2023), large, medium-sized, and small ceremonies differ substantially in their recommended numbers and configurations of participants. The large-scale form recommends 521 on-field participants, excluding accompanying and participating celebrants, and therefore requires the coordinated recruitment and training of a substantially larger body of personnel than the smaller forms (TB4).

Against this organizational background, the Temple Board began collaborating with Putian University in 2011. According to a Temple Board interviewee, the collaboration was introduced to improve performance quality and meet the substantial personnel requirements of large-scale ceremonies. Interview accounts suggest a division of participation according to event scale: university students are mobilized mainly for the large-scale performance, whereas Temple-based personnel remain more regularly involved in medium-sized and smaller ceremonies and related cultural activities (TB5). The university partnership is therefore better understood as a recurrent mechanism for expanding performance capacity during major ceremonies, rather than as the replacement of locally based performers.

Most of the university students interviewed were not residents of Meizhou Island and were not embedded in its everyday religious life. However, Putian University is located within the same municipality as Meizhou Island, meaning that the collaboration represents a regional university–temple partnership rather than the recruitment of an entirely distant external group. Students were incorporated into the ceremony through university-based selection, intensive training, and collective rehearsal. Many interviewees indicated that their initial motivation did not arise from prior identification with Mazu culture. One student (S1) explained that “at first I received a notice from the university and thought it seemed like a very interesting activity, and I could also visit Meizhou Island, so I signed up.” Another (S2) stated that the initial motivation was that “participating would add points to my comprehensive evaluation, and I thought it would be one more experience to have.” These accounts suggest that participation often began with instrumental, experiential, or task-oriented motivations rather than established religious commitment.

Student participation was structured through clear training and organizational procedures. Interviewees reported that the university arranged selection and training sessions led by instructors or senior students, followed by collective rehearsals several weeks before the ceremony. One student (S3) recalled that “we started learning three weeks before the ceremony and practiced every day for about two hours each time.” Another (S4) reported that, after the initial training period, they had joint rehearsals with students from other departments. This structured preparation provided a recurrent means of assembling and coordinating part of the large performance cohort required for the ceremony. It also enabled students from different university units to perform within predetermined arrangements of movement, rhythm, positioning, and ceremonial sequence.

Interview accounts also suggest that, for some students, participation was experienced as extending beyond task completion. As training progressed and their involvement in the ceremonial setting deepened, several interviewed students described becoming more interested in and developing a more substantive understanding of Mazu culture. One student (S5) noted that, although the activity initially seemed “just a very interesting activity,” they subsequently “became interested in Mazu culture, paid more attention to knowledge about Mazu culture, and tried to understand the spirit of Mazu.” Another student (S6) stated that, after participating, they came to feel that “this is quite a sacred thing” and noted that their family expressed pride. A third student (S7) emphasized that only after entering the ceremonial setting did they perceive the event as “grand and majestic” and appreciate its cultural significance. These accounts indicate that the students described their participation as an experience through which their interest in and understanding of Mazu culture developed.

From the perspective of tourismization, students tended to interpret the ceremony in terms of public presentation and cultural dissemination. Many interviewees stated that the ceremony increased awareness of Mazu culture and enhanced the visibility of Meizhou Island. They generally regarded its expanded scale, coordinated performance, and broader audience as facilitating cultural communication rather than diminishing cultural meaning.

At the same time, their understanding was shaped primarily through training, performance, and short-term participation rather than through sustained involvement in the island's everyday social and religious life. Their perspectives therefore placed greater emphasis on public dissemination than on locally embedded forms of interpretation.

Student participation depended on university organization, periodic recruitment, and performance-based mobilization. One student (S1) remarked that “by the third year, academic work had become very heavy, and I wanted to quit, but I felt I should keep going.” This suggests that the cultural engagement students described did not necessarily translate into sustained involvement after graduation or stable religious practice.

University students constituted a regionally recruited but primarily off-island group of temporary performers. In the ceremony examined here, they contributed to its coordination, visual presentation, and public dissemination. Their role in heritage transmission lay mainly in embodied performance and communicative visibility rather than in formal ritual governance or the definition of official heritage meanings.

3.5. Visitor Accounts: Affective Reception and Mediated Understanding

This section presents an exploratory analysis of retrospective accounts from eight purposively recruited visitors who had previously attended the Mazu Spring Sacrificial Ceremony. The analysis focused on their prior relationships with Mazu belief, motivations for attendance, perceptions of the ritual atmosphere, sources of cultural understanding, and subsequent intentions or practices related to revisiting and sharing their experiences. Three analytical themes were identified across these accounts.

Affective reception of the ritual atmosphere: Across the eight accounts, visitors described the ceremony in affective terms, although their impressions were not uniform. One visitor (V6) described a “strong religious atmosphere, with most people coming to pray out of genuine faith,” whereas another (V5) felt that the ceremony was “more like a lively temple fair, with a strong tourism atmosphere,” while also noting the evident care invested in its organization. A further visitor (V8), who had initially been reluctant to attend because of the crowds, reported being “moved by the on-site atmosphere” and experiencing the ceremony as “sacred.” These accounts indicate that the interviewed visitors perceived the ceremony as solemn and devotional, lively and spectacular, or as combining these qualities, rather than experiencing a single uniform atmosphere. These descriptions are treated here as affective perceptions of the ritual atmosphere rather than as evidence of perceived authenticity.

Cultural understanding associated with local mediation: In several accounts where visitors expressed more specific cultural or religious understandings, these were associated with explanations provided by local residents. One visitor (V1) recalled a guesthouse owner explaining the “old rules that had to be observed during earlier ceremonies,” which was the visitor's first introduction to such practices and conveyed a sense of the culture's depth. Another visitor (V3) described a restaurant owner near the ancestral temple explaining that “many of the patterns carved on the temple steps depict legends about Mazu,” and reflected that “the older island residents know much more; we can only learn some of it through the internet.” A further visitor (V4) reported that conversations with residents introduced them to “a locally circulated folk version of Mazu's story” and to the understanding that Mazu protects island residents and people at sea. These accounts illustrate how residents may mediate several forms of locally grounded knowledge—including ritual conventions, material symbols, and orally transmitted narratives—through informal tourism encounters.

Revisitation and continued engagement: Some visitors described forms of engagement extending beyond their initial attendance, including repeat attendance, continued attention to related events, and interpersonal recommendation. One visitor (V2) described

the ceremony as “worth experiencing regularly” and explained that, when recommending activities to friends, “I only recommend those I have attended myself, so that I can explain them and describe how they felt.” Another visitor (V6), whose initial response was shaped by the ceremony’s religious atmosphere, stated that “in each year afterwards, I basically continued to follow related events.” A further visitor (V7) reported subsequently attending other Mazu-related ceremonies, including the 2023 Maritime Sacrificial Ceremony, and also “recommending them to friends so that they could experience them for themselves.” These accounts suggest that attendance may be followed by different forms of continued engagement, ranging from sustained attention and repeat ritual participation to the interpersonal circulation of first-hand experience. However, these trajectories were not evident across all eight interviews and should therefore be understood as possible rather than uniform outcomes of attendance.

Overall, these retrospective accounts offer several exploratory insights. Visitors described the ceremony as solemn, sacred, festive, or emotionally moving, yet few independently articulated detailed interpretations of its ritual history or symbolic structure. Affective responses could be strong even where detailed cultural knowledge remained limited. Such affective responses are analytically distinct from perceptions of authenticity and are not interpreted here as evidence of authenticity unless explicitly articulated as such by participants. Where more extensive cultural interpretation appeared, it was associated in several accounts with prior belief or with explanations provided by local residents. Within this small exploratory sample, reception was described primarily in terms of atmosphere and emotion, while the depth and form of cultural understanding varied according to individual background and access to interpretive mediation.

3.6. Synthesis: Differentiated Participation and Formal Narrative Authority

Across the three principal actor groups, participation in the Mazu Spring Sacrificial Ceremony differed in both function and degree of institutional influence. The Temple Board served as the formal organizing body, promoted the standardization of ritual procedures, coordinated ceremonial personnel, and shaped the ceremony’s official public presentation. Residents sustained locally grounded connections through everyday participation, storytelling, worship guidance, and visitor reception. University students contributed primarily to the large-scale performance component through university-based recruitment, training, and rehearsal within pre-established ceremonial and choreographic arrangements. Exploratory visitor accounts suggest that these contributions were received primarily through atmosphere and emotional response, while the depth of cultural understanding varied according to prior belief and access to local explanation.

However, despite these varied forms of engagement, the materials examined did not identify ordinary residents or university students as direct participants in formal ritual standard-setting or in determining the ceremony’s official public representation. Within the scope of the evidence analyzed, expanded participation therefore did not appear to entail an equivalent redistribution of procedural authority or formal narrative authority.

4. Discussion

4.1. Heritage Transmission as the Relational Basis of Intangible Heritage Value in Tourism

The Meizhou case supports the view that intangible heritage value is produced through ongoing transmission rather than conferred once and for all through formal recognition. UNESCO inscription strengthened the legitimacy and visibility of Mazu belief and reinforced Meizhou Island’s symbolic status as its place of origin. However, recognition alone does not ensure that the Spring Sacrificial Ceremony remains socially embedded, culturally meaningful, or accessible to different audiences. Consistent with understandings of heritage

as an ongoing cultural and political process rather than a fixed inheritance (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2014; Smith, 2006), the case shows that heritage value depends on the recurrent organization, enactment, interpretation, and social reproduction of the ceremony.

The findings suggest that transmission in this tourismized heritage setting is organized relationally, with different actor positions associated with different functions. The Temple Board, as the principal institutional actor, provides procedural continuity and coordinates recurring ritual activities. Residents connect the ceremony to community life and communicate locally grounded meanings through everyday encounters. University students contribute to its embodied realization and large-scale public presentation.

In this case, these contributions appear to support three capacities that may be important to the continued transmission of intangible heritage in tourism contexts: procedural continuity, public visibility, and interpretive accessibility. Formal standardization may help maintain a recognizable ritual structure, but does not by itself ensure locally grounded meaning. Community attachment and everyday interpretation may help sustain cultural significance, but do not alone provide the organizational capacity required for large-scale public performance. Performance mobilization may extend the ceremony's visual and communicative reach, but does not independently establish its institutional legitimacy. The significance of multi-actor participation therefore lies not simply in the numerical inclusion of multiple stakeholder groups but in the functional complementarity among their different contributions (Aas et al., 2005; Loulanski & Loulanski, 2011).

This relational perspective extends recent multi-stakeholder approaches by distinguishing two dimensions that are often treated together: the distribution of transmission functions and the distribution of institutional authority. Different actors may perform complementary roles in sustaining, communicating, interpreting, and publicly presenting heritage, while the authority to formalize ritual procedures and authorize official public representations remains institutionally concentrated. In the Meizhou case, participation is therefore functionally distributed but authority is not equally distributed. This distinction is important because the presence of multiple participating groups should not be taken to imply a corresponding decentralization of decision-making or formal narrative authority. The analytical contribution of functional complementarity thus lies not only in identifying different actor functions, but in showing that functional importance and institutional authority may be distributed according to different logics.

The case further suggests that preserving tradition and presenting it in tourism contexts cannot be neatly separated. The contemporary ceremony was not first preserved as a complete cultural form and only later introduced into tourism. Rather, its ritual form, institutional status, performance organization, and public function developed through interrelated processes of revival, standardization, adaptation, and tourism-oriented presentation. Tourism has thus become part of the conditions through which the ceremony is currently transmitted, rather than merely an external force acting on an already fully formed tradition. Although this study does not establish long-term cultural sustainability, the findings indicate several relational mechanisms that may support continuity, including procedural coordination, locally grounded interpretation, embodied performance, and public accessibility (Cohen, 1988; Loulanski & Loulanski, 2011).

4.2. The Mediation of Authenticity: Institutional Validation, Embodied Experience, and Interpretive Reception

The processual character of heritage transmission also shapes how claims and senses of authenticity are constructed, experienced, and negotiated. The contemporary Spring Sacrificial Ceremony is not an unchanged continuation of a historical ritual. Since its revival, its venue, performer composition, audience scale, costumes, choreography, and modes of public presentation have been adjusted. Such changes do not necessarily indicate the

disappearance of authenticity (Cohen, 1988; N. Wang, 1999; Y. Zhu, 2012). Rather, they demonstrate the limitations of assessing authenticity solely according to the preservation of an unaltered ritual form.

The distinction between cool and hot authentication provides one way of understanding how the ceremony continues to acquire legitimacy and cultural meaning despite these changes (Cohen & Cohen, 2012). The Temple Board's institutional position, the codification of ritual procedures, and the formulation of the Mazu Sacrifices Group Standard constitute forms of cool authentication. These mechanisms formally validate the ceremony as a recognized and normatively regulated Mazu ritual, providing an institutional basis for continuity, legitimacy, and recognizable ritual order.

At the same time, the ceremony's music, choreography, spatial organization, collective performance, and religious atmosphere provide an embodied and affective basis for participation and reception (Belhassen et al., 2008; Y. Zhu, 2012). University students contribute directly to this sensory and visual realization through collective training and performance, while visitors may experience the ceremony as sacred, solemn, lively, or emotionally moving. These responses suggest that the ceremony was meaningful to the interviewed visitors, although they did not interpret it in uniform ways.

Possible forms of hot authentication can be identified more cautiously in practices through which participants not only took part in the ceremony but also expressed, reaffirmed, or circulated its cultural or religious significance. Participation itself should not be treated as authentication. Rather, hot authentication becomes analytically relevant where involvement is accompanied by processes of experiential recognition or social reaffirmation. In the present study, some student performers described coming to regard the ceremony as sacred or culturally meaningful through their participation, while some residents communicated locally grounded religious and cultural meanings through explanations of worship practices, local histories, and personal experiences associated with Mazu. Several visitors also described continued engagement through further participation in Mazu-related ceremonies or interpersonal recommendation. To the extent that such practices involved affirming and recirculating the ceremony's significance, they may be interpreted as possible instances of hot authentication. Given the limited and retrospective nature of the evidence, however, these practices are treated here as suggestive rather than definitive examples of hot authentication.

The visitor accounts also distinguish affective reception from detailed cultural understanding. Visitors could experience the ceremony as sacred, solemn, festive, or emotionally powerful without possessing extensive knowledge of its ritual history or symbolic structure. The most detailed interpretations were associated with prior belief or locally provided explanations, suggesting that local mediation may help translate an institutionally organized and publicly performed ritual into more personal and culturally specific forms of understanding (Moscardo, 1996; Poria et al., 2003).

Within this case, the findings suggest that claims to authenticity and perceptions of authenticity are shaped by the interplay of institutional validation, ritual standardization, embodied participation, local interpretation, and visitor reception. Formal standardization establishes an authorized and recognizable ritual framework, while collective performance renders that framework perceptible and experientially meaningful. Residents' explanations and visitors' prior beliefs and experiences further shape how the ceremony is interpreted, while continued narration, participation, and recommendation may reaffirm its cultural significance. The case therefore suggests that cultural sustainability may depend not only on maintaining formally recognized ritual procedures, but also on sustaining the social and interpretive relationships through which those procedures acquire meaning. Together, these differentiated processes of mediation highlight the need to assess whether expanded partic-

ipation also expands participants' capacity to shape the ceremony's officially recognized meanings and public representation.

4.3. Expanded Participation and Unevenly Distributed Formal Narrative Authority

The materials indicate a structural asymmetry between expanded participation and the distribution of authority. Residents and university students contributed to the transmission and performance of the ceremony in different ways, while visitors received and reinterpreted these presentations through their own backgrounds and experiences. Within the actors and materials examined in this study, procedural authority and formal narrative authority appear to remain institutionally centered on the Temple Board. Participation and authority should therefore be treated as related but analytically distinct dimensions of heritage governance.

This pattern echoes the concept of authorized heritage discourse (Smith, 2006, 2011; Waterton & Smith, 2010), in which institutional actors retain greater capacity to define legitimate meanings and modes of representation. In Meizhou, however, institutional centrality did not amount to exclusive control over cultural meaning. Residents continued to transmit personal memories, local knowledge, and religious interpretations through everyday interactions; student performers described developing their own cultural understandings through participation; and visitors interpreted the ceremony in relation to their prior beliefs and experiences. Meaning-making was therefore plural, whereas the capacity to institutionalize and legitimize particular meanings as official remained unevenly distributed.

Concentrated institutional coordination also performs practical functions that should not be dismissed as merely constraining participation. Large-scale ceremonies require agreed procedures, extensive personnel coordination, and sufficiently consistent public presentation. The Temple Board's organizational position enables coordination across ritual, performance, safety, media communication, and visitor-reception activities, providing the procedural stability through which a complex event remains recognizable and repeatable across different occasions.

The generally supportive attitudes expressed by the interviewed residents, documented in Section 3.3, coexisted with differentiated perceptions of tourism-related benefits and costs. Residents connected to tourism livelihoods more often emphasized employment, income, and livelihood opportunities, while some also referred to seasonal fluctuations and increasing competition. Other residents placed greater emphasis on cultural visibility and local pride, while concerns also included congestion, unevenly distributed benefits, and the routinization of some performances. These mixed evaluations are broadly consistent with social exchange perspectives emphasizing the role of perceived benefits and costs in shaping resident attitudes toward tourism (Ap, 1992). They also help explain why limited formal authority did not necessarily produce opposition to tourismization. At the same time, residents' support neither indicates that they possessed substantial formal decision-making authority nor implies unqualified approval of all tourism-related changes.

The exploratory visitor accounts presented in Section 3.5 offer a relevant indication of why locally grounded interpretation matters. The visitors who articulated the most detailed understandings of cultural and religious meaning, notably V1 and V3, both recalled extended explanations from local guesthouse or restaurant operators. By contrast, the accounts of V5, V6, and V8 remained primarily affective and did not contain comparable elaboration of ritual history or symbolism. This contrast does not demonstrate that local explanation always produces deeper understanding, particularly given the small, purposively recruited, and retrospective visitor sample. It nevertheless suggests that affective reception

and interpretive understanding are not identical and that locally mediated explanation may sometimes enable visitors to move beyond visual and atmospheric impressions.

The institutional centrality of the Temple Board within the actors and materials examined here may therefore leave some locally grounded meanings outside official public presentation. This does not imply that all resident accounts should be incorporated into a single authorized narrative, or that procedural authority should simply be decentralized. Rather, it raises a governance question concerning whether and how local knowledge, participant experience, and informal interpretation can inform the presentation and safeguarding of the ceremony (Dragouni & Fouseki, 2018; Paulino et al., 2023; Waterton & Smith, 2010). Evaluations of festival tourism should consequently consider not only visitor numbers, event scale, and media visibility, but also the relationships among formal coordination, locally grounded interpretation, embodied participation, and visitor reception.

The significance of this arrangement lies less in whether all forms of authority should be distributed equally than in whether institutional coordination remains connected to locally grounded knowledge and participant experience. Long-term cultural sustainability may depend in part on maintaining channels through which resident interpretations and performer experiences can inform formal presentation while preserving the procedural stability required for large-scale ritual performance (Aas et al., 2005; Loulanski & Loulanski, 2011; Paulino et al., 2023).

5. Conclusions

This study examined how tourismization has reconfigured the Mazu Spring Sacrificial Ceremony, how differently positioned actors contribute to its transmission and public presentation, and how procedural authority and formal narrative authority are distributed. The analysis indicates that the ceremony has been reconfigured into a religious practice, a mode of heritage transmission, and a publicly presented cultural event. This reconfiguration has involved ritual revival, institutional standardization, changes in performer composition, and the expansion of large-scale public presentation.

The findings suggest that continued transmission of the ceremony is supported by differentiated and complementary contributions. The Temple Board coordinates ritual organization, procedural standardization, and official public presentation. Residents connect the ceremony to community life and communicate locally grounded meanings through everyday encounters. University students support the embodied realization and coordinated presentation of the large-scale ceremony through trained performance participation. The interviewed visitors retrospectively described the ceremony as solemn, sacred, festive, or emotionally moving, but detailed cultural understanding was less consistent and was more evident among those with prior religious knowledge or access to local explanations. Although participation has expanded, the documented capacity to formalize ritual procedures and circulate officially recognized public representations remains, within the actors and materials examined, concentrated in the Temple Board.

This qualitative case study of Meizhou suggests that the value of festival-type intangible heritage in tourism is not secured through formal recognition or ritual preservation alone, but may also be supported through the interaction of procedural continuity, locally embedded interpretation, embodied public presentation, and visitor reception. In this case, tourismization has not simply replaced religious meaning with commercial display; rather, tourism has become part of the contemporary conditions through which the ceremony is organized, transmitted, and publicly encountered. Authenticity claims and perceptions appear to be mediated through institutional validation, ritual performance, local interpretation, and individual reception, rather than resting on an unchanged ritual form or a uniform visitor judgment. At the same time, expanded participation does not

necessarily entail an equivalent redistribution of procedural authority or formal narrative authority. Taken together, these findings offer a case-based analytical framework for examining how participation may become functionally distributed across multiple actors while procedural authority and formal narrative authority remain unevenly distributed. Its relevance to other heritage sites should be assessed in relation to their specific geographical, institutional, religious, and tourism-development contexts, rather than assumed to be universally transferable.

These findings suggest that the cultural sustainability of tourismized ritual festivals should not be assessed solely through event scale, visitor numbers, or public visibility (Getz, 2009; Loulanski & Loulanski, 2011). Attention is also needed to the relationship between institutional coordination and locally grounded knowledge, particularly whether the experience and interpretations of residents and performers can inform public presentation and safeguarding practices. This does not imply that formal authority must be fully decentralized, but it does highlight the importance of channels through which locally embedded knowledge can enter institutional processes.

Several limitations define the scope of these conclusions. The principal ceremonial day was not directly observed, and the analysis of ritual performance therefore relied on interview accounts, institutional documents, and archived official audiovisual materials. The eight visitor interviews were retrospective and exploratory, and the concentration of the sample among adults in their 20s and 30s limits conclusions about the wider visitor population. The visitor accounts therefore cannot be used to estimate how widely particular perceptions, interpretations, or forms of continued engagement are shared among the much larger visitor population; their role in this study is limited to identifying possible patterns and interpretive processes within the interviewed group. Similarly, the resident interviews were intended to examine variation in local relationships with tourism and the ceremony rather than to represent the distribution of attitudes across the island's population. In addition, the study did not interview government officials or ritual specialists outside the Temple Board, limiting its ability to examine broader institutional negotiations over heritage governance.

Future research could include residents from other parts of Meizhou Island, recruit a larger and more age-diverse visitor sample, and incorporate direct observation across different ceremonial periods. Larger and more diverse resident and visitor samples, including survey-based or mixed-methods designs, could help examine how widely the patterns identified in this qualitative study are shared across different social and demographic groups. Interviews with government administrators, ritual specialists, and other institutional actors would help clarify how formal authority is negotiated beyond the Temple Board. Comparative research across tourismized ritual festivals in different geographical and cultural settings could further examine how different organizational arrangements shape heritage transmission, authentication, visitor reception, and the distribution of formal narrative authority.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

AHD	Authorized Heritage Discourse
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
JSPS	Japan Society for the Promotion of Science
JST	Japan Science and Technology Agency
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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