

The Paradox of Exchange:

Institutional Asymmetry and the Limitations of Religious United Front Work across the Taiwan Strait

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates how cross-strait distinction in religious governance affects Beijing's united front work in Taiwan's popular religious community. Due to shared spiritual lineages, Taiwanese temples are considered especially receptive to Chinese influence. Based on fieldwork and in-depth interview data collected over the years between 2013 and 2024, this article argues that institutional asymmetry has resulted in constant challenges limiting the effectiveness of cross-strait religious united front work. First, the centralised Chinese politico-religious order has limited the agency of the Chinese religious establishment in prioritising the CCP's political imperative over religious logic. Second, decentralised Taiwanese temples have created coordination problems for cross-strait brokers whose agendas are not always aligned with Beijing. Finally, Taiwanese temple leaders abiding by communal religious traditions have deployed pragmatic coping strategies to sideline Beijing's political intentions. Hence, Beijing's efforts to initiate and repurpose cross-strait religious exchanges as instances of unity have paradoxically generated conflicting narratives within the Taiwanese popular religious community.

KEYWORDS: institutional asymmetry, popular religions, religious united front work, cross-strait religious exchanges, cross-strait relations, temples, temple leadership.

There are no "people-to-people" exchanges [as propagated by the Chinese side], only people-to-authorities.

Interview with a Taiwanese religious leader, Beijing, May 2015.

Introduction

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has long made intense efforts and devoted significant resources to influencing political outcomes in Taiwanese society. Since the late 1980s, its united front work has managed "people-to-people" exchanges as influence operations. As China's power grows, Beijing deploys various material and ideational incentives and disincentives to cultivate a network of local collaborators and punish the administration whose policies they consider to violate Chinese interests (Wu, Tsai, and Cheng 2017).

Popular religious exchanges have spearheaded cross-strait reconnections even before the official prohibition was lifted in 1987. More than 60% of the Taiwanese population observe some form of deity worship,¹ and the majority of Taiwanese deity cults originate from the Chinese Mainland. Despite ongoing political tension between Beijing and Taipei, cross-strait popular religious exchanges remain frequent. Due to this shared spiritual lineage, Taiwan's temple

leaders and communities are perceived as especially receptive to Chinese influence.

Previous literature has found that Beijing's religious united front work revolves mainly around two concurrent strategies. First, it provides political and economic dividends to temple leaders involved in politics and businesses, such as high-profile attention and access to the Chinese market (Chang C. 2008; Chang and Tsai 2009; Ku and Hong 2021). Second, it uses the material and symbolic assets of Chinese ancestral temples to build ritual networks and enhance lineage identity (Liu 2017; Lee 2018; Ho 2022). This article builds on the literature but differs from the above studies in that it adopts an institutional approach to address the limitations of Beijing's religious united front work.

From an institutional perspective, the strength of Beijing's influence operations depends on (1) the target society's historical relations with China in that particular issue area, and (2) how well Beijing can

1. Fu Yang-Chih 傅仰止, "台灣社會變遷基本調查計畫2018第七期第四次: 宗教組" (Taiwan shehui bianqian jiben diaocha jihua 2018 diqi qi di si ci: Zongjiao zu, 2018 Taiwan social change survey (Round 7, Year 4): Religion), (D00170_1) [data file], Survey Research Data Archive 學術調查研究資料庫, https://doi.org/10.6141/TW-SRDA-D00170_1-2 (accessed on 11 February 2024).

manoeuvre its institutional logic. For example, participants in cross-strait popular religious exchanges are governed by separate systems of religious governance. Chinese religious establishments are centralised and highly regulated by the state, while Taiwanese popular religions are communal and build their legitimacy on the deity's efficacy. This has created two sets of actors driven by divergent incentives and subject to distinct logics of action (Chang K. 2023). What continues to drive popular religious exchanges despite this contrast in cross-strait politico-religious governance? How do these asymmetrical institutions affect the effectiveness of Beijing's measures?

The following section introduces the research data. The rest of the article is organised as follows. First, I will discuss the separate development of state-religion relations on both sides of the Strait and the subsequent institutional asymmetry in cross-strait religious exchanges. Next, I will examine the institutional logics underlining continuous cross-strait religious exchanges, including the logic of lineage authority in popular religions and the politicoeconomic logic of the united front work. Finally, I will address how institutional asymmetry creates the paradox of exchange, limiting Beijing's cross-strait religious united front work.

Research methods and data

This research's qualitative and observational data come from in-depth interviews, participant observation, news archives, research papers, official documents, and publications issued by the Chinese government and religious associations. The fieldwork was conducted between September 2013 and November 2019, during which I participated in four cross-strait religious exchanges. In September 2013, I joined a communal temple's pilgrimage to Wudang Mountains (hereafter Wudang Shan) – a Taoist sacred site and the ancestral home to the cult of Xuantian Shangdi 玄天上帝. In May 2015, I attended a conference on Taoist culture in Beijing with a group of Taiwanese temple leaders and members of religious associations. The group visited the Chinese Taoist Association (*Zhongguo daojiao xiehui* 中國道教協會, CTA), the State Administration for Religious Affairs (*guojia zongjiao shiwu ju* 國家宗教事務局, SARA), and the Taiwan Affairs Office (*Taiwan shiwu bangongshi* 台灣事務辦公室, TAO). In November 2019, I joined another visiting mission to the CTA. The group was also received by the National Religious Affairs Administration (NRAA, formerly the SARA)² and the TAO. In February 2017, I participated in a cross-strait forum on Taoist development in Taiwan. Each exchange lasted three to five days, and the scale of the activities ranged from 30 to 150 people. A typical itinerary in China contained various formats, including pilgrimage, institutional visits, conferences and forums, and reunion parties. This allowed me to observe a wide range of cross-strait religious interactions on-stage and off-stage.

Through the network I acquired from the above exchanges, between September 2019 and February 2024, I conducted 33 in-depth interviews with 18 temple and religious association leaders who have organised or participated in cross-strait religious exchanges. The interviewees were selected to account for the variation of spiritual authority in popular religious institutions, such as house shrines, communal temples, and pilgrimage centres. Some interviewees actively promoted cross-strait religious exchanges, while

others deliberately kept a distance. When possible, I attended my interviewees' other events to acquire a better understanding of their narratives. Hence, this research contributes to the study of China's cross-strait united front work by focusing on micro-level interactions and narratives of actors informed by religion's alternative source of legitimacy and authority.

Asymmetric state-religious dynamics across the Taiwan Strait

China and Taiwan are ranked among the most religiously diverse countries globally,³ but they run on two distinct political systems.⁴ This has created two sets of state-religion relations that affect the agency and dynamics of cross-strait religious exchanges.

In China, the political use of religion is built into the CCP's governing logic and materialised in the formation of united front work as an institution. The five officially sanctioned religions⁵ were organised into corporatist religious associations subordinate to the state.⁶ The CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD) arranged the general religious policy, and the SARA, under the State Council, implemented the policy and administered local religious affairs bureaus. The patriotic religious associations mobilised mass support by serving as the bridge between the state and the religious community. In 2018, the UFWD absorbed the SARA to ensure better Party control over religion (Chang K. 2018).

Hence, the Party centralises power in these state-sponsored patriotic religious associations. They administer vital religious functions on behalf of the state, such as the training and certification of the clergy, interpreting religious doctrines, managing religious properties, and conducting religious exchanges. Only religious groups affiliated with the associations may operate legally. The patriotic religious leadership is selected first and foremost for their political loyalty. Positions within the united front work system come with material and political benefits, which enhance the leadership's reliance on the Party-state and impair their ability to represent the religious community (Groot 2012; Wang and Groot 2018).

Over the course of two decades, the CCP has implemented a series of major institutional adjustments that increasingly centralised its religious governance: first, the addition of a fourth division in 2004 to the SARA to manage previously noncaptured religious observances, including popular religions; second, the 2005 founding of the China Religious Culture Communication Association (*Zhonghua zongjiao wenhua jiaoliu xiehui* 中華宗教文化交流協會, CRCCA) to initiate

2. The Central United Front Work Department absorbed the SARA in 2018. The reconfigured agency retained its external Chinese name but changed the English name from SARA to NRAA.

3. Based on the Religious Diversity Index published by the Pew Research Center in 2014, Taiwan is ranked second and China ninth in the world: "Appendix 1: Religious Diversity Index," <https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2014/04/Religious-Diversity-appendix-1.pdf> (accessed on 30 March 2024).

4. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) 2022 Democracy Index, Taiwan ranked 10th in the EIU's 2022 Democracy Index, while China ranked 156th: <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2022/> (accessed on 8 May 2024).

5. Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism.

6. They are the Buddhist Association of China, the Chinese Taoist Association, the Islamic Association of China, the Catholic Patriotic Association, and the National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches.

international religious exchanges; third, the inauguration of the Sinicisation policy in 2015 to discipline and reshape Chinese religions; fourth, the absorption of the SARA into the UFWD in 2018. The Party's tightening grip has left increasingly little room for China's patriotic religious leadership to diverge from the regime's political agenda.

In Taiwan, state interference in religious organisations during the authoritarian period stemmed primarily from concern over social control, and the security agency intervened only when major state-religious conflicts arose. State supervision of religious organisations had drastically weakened by the late 1980s, when cross-strait exchanges began (Lin P. 1990; Huang 2021). Since the transition to democracy, the government has deliberately exercised self-restraint to avoid intervention (Kuo 2003; Laliberté 2009).

Therefore, the Taiwanese religious field preserves a high level of autonomy. Popular religious temples maintain complex and overlapping networks based on their spiritual lineages and histories of interaction (Chi 2011). There is a hierarchy of deities, but the relationship among their temple managements is equal, albeit sometimes competitive (Chang H. 2019). No single organisation or figure exists to represent the popular religious community. Instead, thousands of autonomous communal temples and their associations form nexuses of local power, whose influence has only increased after democratisation (Katz 2003).

With the retreat of the democratising state from the Taiwanese religious field in the 1990s, Beijing has come to dominate the policy structure of cross-strait religious exchanges. This has led to an asymmetric institutional formation in which a centralised, high-powered Chinese state seeks to sway a diverse and robust religious community.

Lineage and authority in cross-strait popular religious exchanges

Taiwanese popular religious traditions revolve around temple cults to local deities in a territorially bounded ritual community. Each communal temple is dedicated to the cult of a main deity and several other deities. In deity worship, incense serves as a sacrifice, a communication medium, and a ritual instrument that connects the deity with its followers. "Incense-fire" (*xianghuo* 香火) is a root concept for popular religions. A deity's efficacious power (*lingli* 靈力) is manifested through the temple's incense-fire, which accumulates via mass worship and is transmittable through "incense division" (*fenxiang* 分香). It is also renewable and refreshable via a pilgrimage to the ancestral temple or other historic temples.⁷ The pilgrimage of a *fenxiang* temple connects a network of temples and various local communities through a series of incense exchange rituals. Pilgrimage is then followed by the returned deity's inspection tour within its jurisdiction to share the newly replenished efficacious power. This redistribution of incense among members of the ritual community further strengthens its collective consciousness (Chang H. 2006).

Pilgrimage and the deity's tour of inspection are endogenous to deity worship and temple cults. The accumulation, reproduction, redistribution, and rejuvenation of incense-fire are inherent in and vital to reproducing popular religious order. This institutional logic has been a primary driving force for cross-strait popular religious exchanges.

Early immigrants from China divided the incense from their home temples. These immigrants settled in Taiwan and formed autonomous

ritual communities and communal religious traditions. Those *fenxiang* deities, having demonstrated their efficacious powers to safeguard the communities, gradually developed their own *fenxiang* networks. Some have further obtained the historical and ritual authority to command the status of a pilgrimage centre. In other words, the geographical distance and historical rupture across the Strait created relatively stable island-wide pilgrimage networks (Ting 2012; Chien 2016).

In 1987, cross-strait exchanges resumed, bringing to the fore previously abstract and distant ancestral temples. Taiwanese temples began making pilgrimages to the deities' ancestral temples. The examples include the Matsu pilgrimage to Meizhou Island which is believed to be the deity's birthplace, the Baosheng Emperor (*Baosheng dadi* 保生大帝) to Ciji Palace in Xiamen, the Holy Emperor Guan (*Guansheng dijun* 關聖帝君) to the Temple of Lord Guan in Dongshan, Xuantian Shangdi to Wudang Shan, and so on.

A temple leader actively participating in cross-strait religious exchanges described their first pilgrimage to Wudang Shan:

It was around 1990, not long after cross-strait exchanges began. We went to Hui'an, Quanzhou, to look for the building materials for our temple. While we were there, some of us said, "There seems to be a Wudang Shan," so we asked our tour guide if he could take us there. A dozen of us, all in our thirties, set forth to Wudang Shan. (...) We were surprised to find that the statues there looked similar to those in our temple.⁸

As the narrative illustrates, the geographical and political separation across the Strait had inevitably weakened the original *fenxiang* relationship if such a relationship did exist. Many temples might not have a record of their incense-fire origins but a vague sense of an ancestral temple derived from the deity's hagiography. In the 1990s, the resuming of cross-strait traffic allowed some temples to locate their ancestral temple.

Unsurprisingly, not all Taiwanese temples are keen on connecting with the "ancestral temple" in China, especially those that have themselves gained the status of an ancestral temple (Chien 2016). As a representative from Temple X explained:

We have only made one pilgrimage in the 1990s, but even then, it was more like a sightseeing tour because we did not bring the deity's statues with us. (...) Wudang Shan, to us, is more like a conceptual ancestral temple. After all, Xuantian Shangdi himself [through spiritual mediums] claimed to have come from Wudang Shan. (...) The first and foremost reason why our temple is indifferent to Wudang Shan or cross-strait religious exchanges is that we do not wish to participate in the authority ranking of Xuantian Shangdi temples. Second, our temple has not had the practice of pilgrimage. This might have to do with our status as a pilgrimage centre and our being a temple in the mountainous area – traveling was historically costly.⁹

7. Lin Mei-Rong 林美容, "萬年香火: 民間信仰中的香火觀" (*Wannian xianghuo: Minjian xinyang zhong de xianghuo guan*, Ten thousand years of incense-fire: The incense-fire concept in popular religious beliefs), *Think Folklore* (民俗亂彈), 5 July 2017, <https://think.folklore.tw/posts/2803> (accessed on 30 March 2024).

8. Interview with religious leader, Nantou, January 2023.

9. Interview with temple representative, Nantou, February 2023.

Each year, more than 5,000 *fenxiang* temples and house shrines make pilgrimages to Temple X¹⁰ in the first three months of the lunar calendar.¹¹ The temple's origin story is an incense bag in a shack – a temporary worshipping place for immigrants in the seventeenth century.¹² The shack evolved into a shrine, a temple, and eventually, a pilgrimage centre as the deity continuously demonstrated its efficacious power by protecting the community from calamities over the centuries. Temple X's public legitimacy is accumulated from years of interacting with and serving the faith community, including thousands of *fenxiang* temples in Taiwan and beyond. The temple management is well aware of its source of legitimacy, although it does not deny Wudang Shan's status as the origin of the Xuantian Shangdi cult.

Hence, temples seeking to connect with the original deity cult tend to be those looking to increase their spiritual authority and those competing for it. House shrines and newly erected temples have yet to establish their spiritual merits and ritual authority. They seek efficacious power by dividing the incense directly from the deity's lineage origin and making pilgrimages to other renowned temples. Asked why they sought connections with and certification from the ancestral temple, a spirit medium and founder of House Shrine Z answered with a rhetorical question:

Suppose I am invited to arrange *fengshui* (風水) for a business. Do I go in as a certified Taoist of Mount Longhu¹³ or as a spirit medium? Which identity do you think would command more respect?¹⁴

He continued to tell me another example of how carrying the prestige of the ancestral temple had changed the attitude of others in the community:

We went to Temple Y¹⁵ to deliver an incense note (*xiangtiao* 香條) to express our wish to go on pilgrimage there. When we arrived, the temple committee was about to meet and failed to receive us. That was not the way of hospitality. However, after I delivered Wudang Shan's event invitation, the entire management committee immediately came out to greet us.

House Shrine Z is dedicated to the cult of Xuantian Shangdi. The founder made pilgrimages to Temple X during the shrine's founding stage, but he later turned to Wudang Shan and became a disciple of one of the Taoist masters. This lineage connection paid off in Xuantian Shangdi's second inspection tour to Taiwan in 2018. His shrine was selected as an overnight residence for the deity's statue, boosting the founder's authority among his followers.

Temple cults to a deity with a history of status competition also resort to this strategy. Religious competition within the Matsu cults has been well-documented since the Japanese colonial period (Lin M. 1989; Yen 2007). Major Matsu temples in Taiwan sought to elevate their status by pursuing a direct *fenxiang* relationship with Meizhou Matsu, which inadvertently amplified the ancestral deity's prominence (Chang H. 2019).

In short, the spiritual weight assigned to a deity's lineage origin has been a primary driver of cross-strait popular religious exchanges. The Chinese state and its local agents have quickly learned to utilise the spiritual and material resources of ancestral temples to pursue

their political and economic agendas. However, as will be discussed later, the neglect of Taiwan's existing religious order could impair the ability of Chinese ancestral temples to mobilise their deity's *fenxiang* system.

The political economy of cross-strait popular religious exchanges

Nonreligious factors also facilitate cross-strait popular religious exchanges. For example, cross-strait pilgrimages have created ample business opportunities for the tourist industry. Subsequently, travel agencies have begun to supply products to encourage religious demands. However, it should be noted that these factors are exogenous to the popular religious order. The absence of religious tourism might make pilgrimages challenging but would not otherwise erase the institutional imperative for *fenxiang* temples. Similarly, secular courtesy prescribes return visits between two friendly temple committees, but the absence of such visits would not reduce the deity's efficacious power. This article will focus on the dominant institutional driver, the logic of the Chinese Party-state.

Taiwanese pilgrimages in the early 1990s brought in large donations and tourist incomes. The inflow of Taiwanese pilgrims fulfilled not only the local state's growth imperative but also its political task to co-opt Taiwanese compatriots. This political and economic context created widespread deity cultural festivals in coastal China. Cross-strait religious tourism became an effective source of local state revenue (Chang and Tsai 2009). Taiwanese groups received VIP treatment, often with their local accommodations paid for (*luodi zhaodai* 落地招待). They were welcomed by Communist Party and government officials. Some business and temple leaders used this policy network to access the Chinese market and negotiate privileged treatment, resulting in cross-strait cultural and industrial complexes that comprised local governments, religious associations, and travel agencies (Chen 2021). Some Taiwanese temple managers who were also active in politics benefitted from high-profile exposure in those events (Ku and Hong 2021).

Institutionalised forums and reunions are the primary instruments of Beijing's religious united front work. The annual Straits Forum (*haixia luntan* 海峡論壇) is the largest cross-strait exchange platform. Launched in 2009 by the Taiwan Affairs Office and the Fujian provincial authorities, the Forum has covered a wide range of themes targeting various Taiwanese social groups, such as the youth, union workers, women's organisations, farmers' associations, religious

10. Many *fenxiang* temples only go on a pilgrimage once every several years. This suggests that Temple X has far more than 5,000 *fenxiang* temples.

11. Xuantian Shangdi's birthdate is said to be on 3 March in the lunar calendar.

12. In the early days, immigrants who traveled across the Taiwan Strait could only bring incense bags or small deity statues that did not take up too much space in the ship. Therefore, an incense bag left by the early settlers is one of the primary origin stories of temple cults in Taiwan.

13. Mount Longhu (hereafter Longhua Shan) is one of the four sacred mountains in Taoism and the ancestral home to one of the two primary Taoist schools, 正一道 (*zhengyi dao*, way of orthodox unity). *Zhengyi dao* is the primary practice in Taiwanese Taoism.

14. Interview with house shrine leader, New Taipei City, August 2022.

15. Temple Y became one of the first Taiwanese temples to connect with Wudang Shan and acquired the title of the first palatial residence.

groupings, and so on. Under the Forum, the Fujian Taoist Association initiated the “Cross-strait Reunion and Exchange of Popular Religious Temples” (*liang'an minjian gongmiao xuyuan jiaoliu hui* 兩岸民間宮廟敘緣交流會) in 2012. The Forum also incorporated local deity cultural festivals¹⁶ such as Matsu, Holy Emperor Guan, Kaizhang Shengwang (開漳聖王), and Chen Jinggu (陳靖姑).¹⁷

In 2014, the CTA inaugurated the first “Cross-strait Taoist Spring Reunion Party” (*liang'an daojiao jie xinchun lianyi hui* 兩岸道教界新春聯誼會) held annually except during the Covid-19 pandemic. This annual event, presided over by SARA and UFWD officials, hosts leaders of major Taoist associations and temples. Right before the 2022 reunion – the first after the pandemic – the CTA convened the management of the nation's ancestral temples. The chair, the CTA secretary-general and concurrently the UFWD's Taoist bureau chief, described the ancestral temples as centripetal forces that bridge cross-strait religious communities. He instructed ancestral temple managements to provide convenient conditions for Taiwanese pilgrims.¹⁸

Beijing's united front work injected political and economic resources into cross-strait religious exchanges, generating action incentives exogenous to popular religious practices. In Taiwan, groups are formed specifically for cross-strait activities, and individuals bid to organise these events for potential benefit.¹⁹ For example, for the 2015 visiting mission to the CTA that I participated in, the Taiwanese organiser collected TWD 25,000 from each participant. Because the CTA paid for the group's accommodations in Beijing, the organiser only spent TWD 16,000 per person and retained the balance.²⁰

Some cross-strait event brokers have charged temples for their services. For example, in the 2014 Xuantian Shangdi inspection tour, the Taiwanese organiser requested TWD 100,000 from each of the temples serving as overnight residences for the deity's statue.²¹ In the 2016 Holy Emperor Guan's tour, the organiser was said to demand TWD 200,000 from temples wishing to receive the ancestral deity.²²

In sum, the CCP's political and economic use of religion created an environment friendly to Taiwanese pilgrims. Institutionalised platforms facilitated regular cross-strait exchanges among religious groupings at a reduced cost. They also attracted individual brokers wishing to access the policy network and material benefit of religious united front work.

Institutional asymmetries and the paradox of exchange

Hence, we see various actors operating on distinct sources of power and legitimacy in cross-strait religious exchanges. Religious exchanges are a means to an end for both sides. Taiwan's religious groups seek exchanges to enhance their standing within the island's lineage complex. Agents of the Chinese state manage religious exchanges as united front work to serve their political and economic goals. The asymmetries in institutions, actors, and motivations inevitably limit the effectiveness of cross-strait religious united front work.

Interinstitutional conflicts

Due to the political weakness of patriotic religious establishments, agents of the Party-state dominate cross-strait religious events. They

regularly prioritise political and economic logic over that of religious institutions, weakening the legitimacy of these events in the religious community. The conflicts between two distinct institutional logics first drew public attention in 1997, when Meizhou Matsu became the first Chinese ancestral deity to tour Taiwan.

In October 1989, the China News Service reported that a planned tour of Taiwan by Meizhou Matsu would take place at the end of the year.²³ In reality, it was not until 1997 that the history-making event took place. Yet, major prominent Taiwanese Matsu temples chose to absent themselves because of the political and economic controversies revolving around the tour. To begin with, a local TAO official rather than the ancestral temple leader headed the Chinese delegation, prompting criticism of the political use of religion. The Chinese event organiser was reported to have demanded a service fee of TWD 10 million, and all donations received during the tour were to be transferred to the ancestral temple. In addition, the Taiwanese organiser, ignorant of Matsu beliefs and lineage relations, failed to observe the proper etiquette.²⁴ Although many passionately welcomed Matsu, this high-profile event made public the ancestral temple's contentious extraction of Taiwan's immense incense economy and Beijing's ulterior motives in promoting religious exchanges.

Over the years, Beijing has adapted by disguising the political nature of its religious united front work. In 2005, the SARA founded CRCCA – a government-organised nongovernmental organisation that conducts China's major international religious exchanges, such as the triennial World Buddhism Forum and International Taoist Forum. Despite the CRCCA allowing Beijing to circumvent the censure of unsolicited government involvement (Chang C. 2008), political logic still governs cross-strait religious exchanges. In one of the very few studies of deity inspection tours, Ting (2012) found that the

16. See 海峽論壇官方網站 (*Haixia luntan guanfang wangzhan*, The official website of the Straits Forum), <http://www.taiwan.cn/hxlt/> (accessed on 30 March 2024).

17. Kaizhang Shengwang is the patron deity of the Zhangzhou communities, and Chen Jinggu (or Lady Linshui) is the patron deity of women and children. They are both worshipped in Fujian Province and Taiwan.

18. Xie Fei 謝飛, “全國道教祖庭(祖廟)對台工作交流座談會在福州召開” (*Quanguo daojiao zuting (zumiao) dui Tai gongzuo jiaoliu zuotanhui zai Fuzhou zhakai*, The [management of the] nation's Taoist ancestral temples met in Fuzhou to exchange their work [experiences] on Taiwan), *China Taoism* (中國道教) 2022/1: 12.

19. Interview with religious leader, New Taipei City, September 2019.

20. Interview with event organiser, Taipei, October 2019.

21. Interview with religious leader, Chiayi, August 2023.

22. Interview with religious leader, Chiayi, April 2023.

23. “媽祖、鄭成功自彼岸來台巡遊” (*Mazu, Zheng Chenggong zi bi'an lai Tai xunyou*, Matsu and Koxinga coming to Taiwan from across the Strait for a tour), *United Daily News* (聯合報), 24 October 1989, p. 3.

24. “八家至親廟抵制費疑猜：林文豪拜碼頭，鎮瀾宮：價碼太高；朝天宮：來台目的不明” (*Ba jia zhiqinmiao di zhi feiyicai*: Lin Wenhao bai matou; Zhenlan gong: jia ma taigao; Chaotian gong: Lai Tai mudi buming, Eight sister temples' boycutting puzzling: Lin Wenhao paid visits to the prominent temples. Jenn Lann Temple: The price was too high; Chaotian Temple: The purpose of the Taiwan tour was unknown), *China Times* (中國時報), 27 January 1997, p. 5; “湄洲媽祖大駕，台北不歡迎：邀請遠境須付卅萬，天后宮等認為不符禮節” (*Meizhou Mazu dajia, Taipei bu huanying: Yaoqing roujing xufu sa wan, Tianhou gong deng renwei bufu lijie*, Taipei did not welcome the grand arrival of Meizhou Matsu: An inspection tour invitation cost 300,000; Tianhou Temple and others regarded it as not in line with religious etiquette), *China Times* (中國時報), 28 January 1997, p. 7; “湄洲媽祖遊台變成吸金大隊？接駕價碼文件外流，大陸祖廟否認，相關人士拒談” (*Meizhou Mazu you Tai biancheng xijin dadui? Jiejia jia ma wenjian wailiu, dalu zumiao foren, xiangguan renshi jutai*, Meizhou Matsu's Taiwan tour became a money-raking mission? Documents of hosting price tags were leaked. The ancestral temple from the Mainland denied the story, and relevant personnel refused to talk), *China Times* (中國時報), 30 January 1997, p. 7.

ancestral temple of the Reverent Lord of Broad Compassion (*Guangze zunwang* 廣澤尊王) selected a house-shrine-turned-urban-temple to coordinate its 2009 Taiwan tour instead of the historic Xiluo Temple that commanded the largest *fenxiang* network. It turned out that the leader of the organising temple was also a successful Taiwanese businessman in the township where the ancestral temple was located. The ancestral temple management's disregard for the hierarchy within the lineage complex in Taiwan resulted in the withdrawal of Xiluo Temple and its *fenxiang* network from the event.

In my fieldwork, the violation of religious order was a common reason why participants withdrew from cross-strait religious exchanges. A leader of a temple cult to Holy Emperor Guan told me after our 2015 Beijing trip that the nature of the visit had nothing to do with serving her community. She said that her expenses were covered by donations, and she had to be responsible for the interests of her followers. She quit the organisation brokering the exchange immediately afterwards because its activities did not meet her religious expectations.

Another temple committee chair explained to me why they refused to participate in Xuantian Shangdi's 2014 Taiwan tour:

He [the southern tour organiser] wanted us to go all the way to Hsinchu County to welcome the Chinese delegation and pay for everything. The costs would include the delegation's travel expenses and the procession troupes (*zhentou* 陣頭). Spending is not a problem, but it has to be meaningful. Not only did the organiser fail to supply a proposal for me to present to the temple committee, but he also demanded an additional TWD 100,000. The deal was off the moment he brought up this money. We are no small temple and cannot be ordered about like that. (...) A friend of mine dropped out of the tour after only three days because the deity statues from the ancestral temple had not undergone consecration (*kaiguang* 開光), meaning they had no efficacious power (*ling* 靈). Nobody knew about this. It's a scam targeting the Taiwanese people. My friend said he could not be part of that.²⁵

The event's southern tour organiser was a temple leader with deep business ties in China. A statue without consecration is a mere object void of magical power. Surprisingly, neither the ancestral temple management nor its Taiwanese broker took the trouble to address this critical aspect of popular religion. The scam comment was most likely an overstatement, but the negligence on both sides amounted to an attack on the popular religious order.

Dispatching procession troupes is an expected expense for temples in a popular religious festival. For example, the 2014 Xuantian Shangdi's northern Taiwan parade mobilised more than 1,000 troupes.²⁶ It is not the receiving cost that bothered the temple leader who gave the above statement, but rather what was perceived as the southern region organiser's self-serving charge. For many in the religious community, fees of this kind that are frequently collected during inspection tours by Chinese ancestral deities are illegitimate. The procession troupes mobilised to receive a deity and the accommodations for its followers are already no small costs to any temple. In Taiwan, it is customary for guests to compensate the hosting temples by giving donations rather than vice versa.

The ancestral temple management might not be directly involved in the illegitimate fee. However, the "money-raking" narrative spread fast in the network. Despite the controversies in 2014, the ancestral temple again entrusted the southern tour organiser (this time the sole event organiser) with its second inspection tour in 2018. By then, "many of us thought the ancestral temple's peddling of the deity's image for money to be unfitting," a religious leader commented.²⁷

The accumulative negligence of popular religious norms and practices has reduced the legitimacy of cross-strait religious exchanges for some. Worse, these violations could damage the spiritual authority of the ancestral temple. Beijing's efforts to utilise religion's spiritual and material resources are further frustrated by Taiwan's diffused religious order and united front work's reliance on intermediaries for cross-strait religious exchanges.

Weak representation

Taiwanese religion's decentralised power structure has created tremendous difficulties for China's united front work. Coordination is a recurrent challenge in cross-strait religious exchanges. Take Xuantian Shangdi's 2014 inspection tour, for example. A member of the Wudang Shan management told me in 2013:

Many in Taiwan regard Wudang Shan as their ancestral temple (...) and seek to work with Wudang Shan to organise Xuantian Shangdi's inspection tour. Wudang Shan is willing to support the request, but the Taoist Association in Taiwan does not have the capacity to coordinate such an event.²⁸

China's centralised religious governance grants the patriotic religious association license to conduct external exchanges with the goal of serving the state. In Taiwan, no similar institutions exist. The religious landscape is populated with various organic networks based on *fenxiang* relationships and historical interactions between deities, and between deities and ritual communities. A Taiwanese deity's inspection tour or pilgrimage is an intercommunity ritual formation intertwined with the deity's merit stories and community development (Lin C. 2006; Chi 2011). The Chinese ancestral temple is not part of this formation. Each Chinese ancestral deity's inspection tour in Taiwan is an ad hoc event that requires new and protracted negotiations among actors who previously had little history of cooperation.

The above inspection tour eventually took place in 2014 and again in 2018. One of the key organisers described it as a very long but successful process (*shinian mo yijian* 十年磨一劍, literally "taking ten years to forge a sword"), since he proposed the idea to the ancestral temple management in 2005.²⁹ Regardless, the tour was beset with a lack of coordination, as described by a participant:

Xuantian Shangdi temples in Taiwan were not united. No organisation could take on the general planner's role, so

25. Interview with religious leader, Chiayi, August 2023.

26. Interview with religious leader, Taichung, February 2023.

27. Interview with religious leader, Nantou, September 2022.

28. Interview with religious leader, Hubei, September 2013.

29. Interview with religious leader, Kaohsiung, September 2019.

they [the interested parties] decided that three organisers would each arrange the northern, central, and southern regions separately. (...) The central region planner couldn't finalise the deity's itinerary one week before the tour. (...) The northern region organiser had no money, so the Chinese Taoist Association had to cover its accommodations independently. The southern region organiser eventually picked up all the bills during the central and southern region tours.³⁰

The northern region organiser is a religious association built on a loose network of Xuantian Shangdi temples. It was founded three decades ago and currently has more than 150 members. Voluntary religious associations exist to connect and provide services to the faith community. An organisation like this offers ready access to Taiwanese religious networks. Indeed, some deity associations help organise cross-strait religious events, but this is only one of their functionalities. Because these associations are embedded in Taiwanese popular religious communities, they are more likely to abide by the governing institutional order.

In this case, the northern region organiser mobilised more than 1,000 parade troupes in the deity's procession in Taipei. A spectacle on this scale was estimated to cost TWD 100 million for a single day, if not more – a cost absorbed entirely by the participating temples.³¹ However, the association did not pick up the ancestral temple's bills during the northern tour. The southern region organiser, a Taiwanese businessman in China, stepped forward to sponsor the Chinese delegation's accommodations for the rest of the tour. Religious logic would dictate that the association should be a better liaison and solution for the coordination problem. Yet, the southern region organiser sought and obtained the license to organise the second tour.

Beijing relies on intermediaries to implement its cross-strait religious united front work. These intermediaries do not always command public legitimacy in the eyes of the religious community. The reasons for this are two-fold. First, those drawn to cross-strait religious exchanges tend to be those seeking to improve their positioning in the spiritual lineage, and some even participate to obtain material benefit. Second, Chinese authorities tend to select their liaisons or brokers among Taiwanese individuals and organisations they already know well and who speak their institutional language. The lack of religious incentive, institutional knowledge, and spiritual authority to mediate religious demands has become a primary source of conflict.

As the above narratives illustrate, a spiritually crippled centre and a decentralised religious network have created problems of coordination and the unequal distribution of costs in cross-strait religious exchanges. The ancestral temple is incapable of capturing the deity network in Taiwan due to the geographical and political distance across the Strait. This has resulted in China becoming dependent on specific Taiwanese religious organisations and figures willing to provide information and access to the decentralised religious sphere. The logic of Beijing's united front work attracts brokers who often fail to follow the popular religious order. Not only do these brokers lack the authority to represent and coordinate the religious community, but they also facilitate interinstitutional conflicts.

Divergent agendas

Behind the grand narrative of cross-strait unity in popular religious exchanges are actors with divergent agendas. Many temple leaders oppose the political and economic use of religion, and most Taiwanese participants in cross-religious exchanges I encountered opposed unification – an observation consistent with public opinion survey results.³² Nonetheless, this attitude has not stopped their engagement. Instead, some Taiwanese religious leaders have even actively exploited their advantageous positions in cross-strait united front work.

As mentioned above, incense-fire is a categorical concept of popular religions. During my 2019 field trip to Beijing, one temple leader complained about the removal of the incense burner from their ancestral temple at the TAO meeting. He told the receiving officials that the incense burner was essential for their homecoming pilgrimage rituals and asked for its reinstallation. Despite the central government's crackdown on religious commodification being the reason for the removal (only state-designated venues were allowed religious activities), the TAO officials promised to seek a solution.

Another example involved incense burning in a protected historic site during the 2015 trip. The smoke triggered a fire alarm and alerted two security officers, who were then dismissed by our guide. "For the great cause of cross-strait reunification," he said as he turned to us with a smile. Later that day in the SARA, the head of our group brought up the incident: "Why bother to talk about both sides of the Strait as one family if a simple act of burning incense could alert public security officers?"

Taiwanese religious leaders have also proved capable of manoeuvring in the interinstitutional space. Deflection is a common strategy to avoid the thorny topic of unification in those events:

They would always attempt united front work. When I was over there [in China], I always told them, "We are all Chinese. United Front is not a problem. But the question of unification belongs to politics."³³

This house-shrine-turned-temple committee chair made pilgrimages to China every year for over a decade, except during the Covid-19 pandemic. Like many, she started out as a spiritual medium and later sought Taoist certification from Longhu Shan and Wudang Shan to strengthen her spiritual authority in the temple committee. She had participated in various cross-strait religious exchanges and regularly used religion to shield herself from politically sensitive issues:

30. Interview with religious leader, Taichung, February 2023.

31. Each parade troupe performance costs TWD 30,000 to 50,000. A procession of 1,000 troupes would cost TWD 30 to 50 million. This amount does not include food, accommodations, and transportation for the participating temples and their deities.

32. Between 2013 and mid-2024, the percentage in favor of "unification as soon as possible" was below 2%, except in 2017-2018. If we include the number in favor of "maintain status quo, move toward unification," pro-unification sentiment before the pandemic was around 10% except in 2017-2018 and constantly below 10% after the pandemic. See "Changes in the Unification-Independence Stances of Taiwanese as Tracked in Surveys by Election Study Center, NCCU (1994-2024.06)," <https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/upload/44/doc/6963/Tondu202406.jpg> (accessed on 16 September 2024).

33. Interview with religious leader, Chiayi, October 2019.

We only understand religion. We do not deal with political matters. We don't care if they [Chinese religious personnel] hold concurrent political positions. We receive them as temple committee chairs if they visit us as temple committee chairs.³⁴

Many religious leaders resorted to the “separation of religion and politics” discourse in their encounters with the grand unification narrative. Some disliked Beijing's political use of religion – a topic that came up often but only in offstage settings during the exchanges. More did not see Beijing's co-optation efforts as problematic because these allowed some flexibility in their religious practices in China.

The religious use of politics occurs not only on the Taiwanese side. Members of the Chinese religious establishment have also sought benefit from CCP united front work toward Taiwan. In the early reform era, Taiwanese connections ensured the continuous revival of Chinese popular religions amid policy uncertainties. Chinese religious delegations visiting Taiwanese temples obtained knowledge of temple management (Chang H. 2019). Taiwanese religious communities supplied texts and ritual expertise to their Chinese counterparts who were struggling to recover from losses during the Cultural Revolution. Some rituals previously condemned as superstitious were restored or tolerated to meet Taiwanese demands. “The Chinese said themselves that consecration rituals for statues are allowed only because of Taiwan.”³⁵ When asked to what extent he needed the Chinese ancestral temple, a Taiwanese religious leader replied with candour, “We each took what we needed” (*gequ suoxu* 各取所需).³⁶

Leaders of patriotic religious associations perform political tasks given to them and echo the CCP's irredentist religious discourse:

In the view of the Wudang Shan Taoist masters, Xuantian Shangdi's inspection tour in Taiwan (...) was of great significance for passing on the fine culture of the Chinese nation (...) and facilitating peaceful unification across the Strait.³⁷

However, when offstage and given the opportunity, they present alternative narratives. As an ancestral temple's Taoist master told me:

The inspection tour is a request from the Taiwanese side. (...) China implemented strict religious control. Conversely, Taiwan has an open religious environment. Therefore, few evil cults exist. There are no Taoists in Taiwanese temples, and the belief is very secular.³⁸

Although patriotic religious leaders are public mouthpieces for Beijing's political ends, as targets of the CCP's united front work, many are more concerned with the survival of their institutions than the grand task of cross-strait reunification.

During my fieldwork, I sometimes observed the above mutual understanding between Taiwanese temple leaders and their Chinese counterparts regarding their separate political circumstances. Regardless, this has not been able to change the policy structure forcefully laid out by the Chinese Party-state. Beijing's tightening control over religion and increasing assertiveness in its ever-expanding geopolitical interests are expected to further consolidate the asymmetric institutional structure.

Conclusion

Religion as a category of state action poses a unique challenge because it operates under a separate normative system and structure of authority. This article adopts an institutional approach to the limitations of Chinese religious united front work across the Taiwan Strait. It investigates how political and religious institutions inform cross-strait popular religious interactions at the micro level. I show that participants in these exchanges are driven by distinct institutional logics. On the one hand, the logic of the deity's incense-fire lineage drives Taiwanese temples' quest for connection. On the other hand, Beijing's political intentions toward Taiwan and its local state's economic agendas create the material infrastructure for cross-strait religious networks.

These actors are remarkably different in their constituencies and incentives, and their logics of action constitute layered and complex dynamics in cross-strait religious exchanges. Agents of the Chinese state exploit religion's material and symbolic assets to fulfil their political and economic objectives. Taiwanese temple leaders utilise their privileged status to achieve their religious goals and emphasise their religious motivations to dodge unwanted political topics. Cross-strait brokers use religious united front work to fulfil their self-serving agendas. Although these institutional and individual strategies enable continuous popular religious exchanges under the banner of “two sides of the Strait are one family,” they also persistently generate contradictions due to the asymmetric state-religious order across the Taiwan Strait.

Thus, the political weakness of Chinese religious establishments limits their agency to prioritise the state's political and economic agendas. The plurality and communal nature of temple cults have created problems of coordination and representation and made it challenging for agents of the Chinese state to co-opt Taiwanese religious groupings. Although Beijing can repurpose cross-strait popular religious exchanges as exemplars of unity, its attempts have paradoxically generated conflicting narratives within the Taiwanese religious community.

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34. Interview with religious leader, Chiayi, September 2022.

35. Interview with religious leader, Taipei, October 2019.

36. Interview with religious leader, Tainan, September 2022.

37. Li Guangfu 李光富 and Li Xuanxin 李玄辛, “共謁玄帝, 福澤兩岸: 武當山玄天上帝赴台巡境拾零” (*Gongye Xuandi, fuze liang'an: Wudang shan Xuantian shangdi fu Tai xunjing shilin*, Shared homage to Xuandi, good fortune on both sides of the Strait: Sidelights of Wudang Shan Xuantian Shangdi's Taiwan inspection tour, *China Religion* (中國宗教) 2015/3, p. 72-3.

38. Interview with religious leader, Hubei, September 2013.

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