



**MONASH** University

**Divine Conversations: Voices on Popular Religion in Taiwan**

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates the lived experience of popular religion in contemporary Taiwan. It draws from oral history to explore a belief system that is inextricably diffused into daily life, capturing a sense of the breadth of how popular religion is experienced while illuminating social and cultural tradition and change. By considering popular religion as a lens through which Taiwanese society and culture are understood, we see an enduring reverence for family and tradition but also complex identities and contradictions in the ways people make sense of both popular religion and the world around them.

Most existing research on Taiwan's popular religion has been undertaken by anthropologists or historians and is typically ethnographic or archival in approach. It also primarily focusses on specific practices, sects, or temples within the broader popular religious belief system. This study builds upon past scholarship while making a significant departure in its bid to capture the experience of the people who practise popular religion: most do not participate in only one element but instead pick and choose from a 'toolkit' of shared practices and beliefs. Accordingly, this thesis situates experiences of popular religion within life contexts.

The project has centred upon a trilingual collection of oral histories, conducted with practitioners of popular religion in Taipei between 2017 and 2019. The first chapter presents individualised accounts of the twelve participants and the roles that popular religion plays in their lives. The second chapter considers various understandings of central concepts that underpin Taiwan's popular religion, drawing from relevant scholarship as well as their practical expression in participants' lives. From the outset, then, this thesis's structure reflects its conceptual framework: prioritising the people whose stories have deeply informed the research, and thereafter engaging critically with major concepts and themes that arise in the study of Taiwan's popular religion.

The following three chapters explore how Taiwan's popular religion is, and is not, Chinese, popular, and religion. Examining Chineseness through the lens of popular religion reveals a complicated reality whereby individuals hold multiple identities for themselves and their culture simultaneously, illuminating discourses of identity and belonging. Analysis of the social aspects of Taiwan's popular religion uncovers the contradictions of a belief system that is not talked about but also relies on word of mouth, as well as a disconnect between a statistical increase in numbers of practitioners of popular religion and public perceptions of its decline. Finally, by investigating the variety of ways that people make sense of this belief system in relation to religion, we explore discourses of family and comfort, but also resistance and struggle.

Insofar as the research has been motivated by a drive to hear, record, and understand people, this thesis offers a nuanced scholarly understanding of one of the most fundamental elements of Taiwanese (and Chinese) culture. It argues that a life-context approach allows us to better understand the multivalent and diffuse nature of popular religion in contemporary Taiwan. In the process, the voices of ordinary people are amplified to enrich Taiwan's history of the present.

## Declaration

This thesis is an original work of my research and contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature:

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## Introduction

I have been fascinated by Taiwan's religion and culture ever since I went on exchange as a 17-year-old studying Chinese at university. It was my first time overseas and even on the drive to Taipei from the airport, I was struck by the overtness of Taiwan's temples compared to the small Australian town where I grew up, where religion was invisible to those of us who didn't practise. It was everywhere: in homes, shops, and on the street, practised by seemingly everyone. I would wake up in the morning to the distinct scent of incense and go to sleep at night to echoing clangs emanating from nearby temples. A walk around Taipei (or any Taiwanese city) would reveal braziers of paper money burnt for wandering ghosts seemingly at every turn, stylish, modern shops with plates of food lying in sacrifice at altars within, and an abundance of temples and shrines scattered among the skyscrapers. I desperately wanted to understand it. But that was, and still is, no small feat when it comes so ubiquitous, varied, and ingrained in people's lives.

I read everything I could find, but it barely scratched the surface, often leaving me with a greater theoretical understanding of the conceptual elements but not of what people were actually doing or why, and often without capturing the many different versions that exist of the same beliefs or practices in Taiwan. In daily life, people were usually eager to explain things to me. But the explanations would frequently assume a base level of knowledge and understanding that I simply lacked. I would walk into a temple with someone and see some ritual being performed and ask my companion what was going on. "They're doing *shoujing* 收驚," they might say. *What's that?* "They do it when people have been scared," they would reply, appearing perfectly happy to help me but not realising that I still did not understand what they were doing, or how it works, or really why. As I pieced together the fragments of information, I came to understand that often the people I was talking with – the people who practise or live with popular religion every day – also did not know the answers to these questions. They were accepting popular religion as part of life without really interrogating why, how or even what.

Indeed, despite being practised by over 80 per cent of Taiwanese, Taiwan's popular religion is not easy to learn about.<sup>1</sup> By its very nature, it is incredibly varied and inseparably diffused into everyday lives. As scholar of Asian religions, Christian Jochim,

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<sup>1</sup> Yang and Hu, "Mapping Chinese Folk Religion in Mainland China and Taiwan."

wrote, “the term *Chinese folk religion* ... simply designates the unwritten religious beliefs and practices of average people within traditional Chinese society.” Jochim describes it as “an eclectic mixture of the great tradition’s Three Teachings,” namely Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism.<sup>2</sup> While Taiwan’s popular religion (*minjian xinyang* 民間信仰 or, occasionally, *minjian zongjiao* 民間宗教) exhibits many elements in common with these and other religions, including Protestantism too, it differs from each of these in that it is not institutionalised. It has no clergy, fixed scriptures, or uniform initiation rites.<sup>3</sup>

Cultural anthropologist Joseph Bosco offers a pertinent picture of the inherent diversity of popular religion in Taiwan, noting the Taiwanese themselves “know only the general scheme of the religious system”:

In Taiwan, Buddhist nuns typically recite sutras the evening before a burial to help the soul pass the rigors of Hell. The actual burial is often organized by a Taoist geomancer. A Taoist priest leads the rituals on the evening before a groom’s wedding, but the matchmaker herself is usually in charge of the wedding-day rituals. Many temples have shamans or spirit mediums who hold seances to help residents consult the gods on important decisions or problems. Village temples hold a variety of gods from the folk pantheon; most people are not exactly sure who all the gods in their village temple are, and the statues and rituals frequently allow multiple interpretations.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, a decade later, I arrived at the commencement of this doctoral study confounded by the following facts: There is a long-standing belief system in Taiwan (and other Chinese communities) that is not institutionalised and does not include a clergy, fixed scriptures, or uniform initiation rites, or see all followers share the same beliefs or rituals. It is the most common belief system in Taiwan, its adherents including people of all ages, localities, education levels, and professions. It is not a lesser version of the ‘great traditions’, but rather either a separate religious system with some overlap with those traditions or a part of the complex overarching religious system that also encompasses

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<sup>2</sup> Jochim, *Chinese Religions: A Cultural Perspective*, 5–6. For the purposes of quoting and citing scholarly literature, the terms ‘folk religion’ and ‘popular religion’ are used interchangeably throughout this thesis. Analysis of the terms can be found in Chapter Two and Chapter Four.

<sup>3</sup> Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*; Yu, “Folk Religion and Religious Experiences in Taiwan.”

<sup>4</sup> Bosco, “Yiguan Dao: ‘Heterodoxy’ and Popular Religion in Taiwan,” 424–25.

the 'great traditions'. And yet there are so few ways for someone who has not lived this experience to access it.

### *An Interdisciplinary Approach*

Perhaps owing to the diffuse, ingrained nature of popular religion in Taiwan, there are significant challenges when one, especially as an outsider, attempts to learn about it through scholarly resources. Firstly, much of the little literature produced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is difficult to track down, sometimes even when one is fortunate enough to have the support of a university library. But, the study of Taiwan's popular religion has also only developed in earnest since the 1980s. This is when, as scholar of Taiwan's religion Shiwei Li points out, political control of religion on Taiwan abated and a turn towards indigenisation studies brought Taiwan's own popular religion into focus.<sup>5</sup> Reviewing Taiwanese scholarship on popular religion from 1950–2000, Li identifies a number of gaps and challenges in the field. One such issue is a lack of sources. Li suggests that this is in part owing to popular religion's place in popular society, which resulted in little effort to preserve related materials – an issue only exacerbated by government suppression. But it extends to scholarly pursuits of Taiwan's popular religion, where Li identifies a lack of reference books, bibliographies, or dictionaries to assist in understanding the field and what has been done and an unwillingness of some scholars to share materials they have found themselves. This is all worsened, Li argues, by an unwillingness of academic institutions to preserve non-scholarly works such as those produced in mass media as well as those produced by religious groups themselves, "which are important materials for understanding religion from the inside, but which, because they are not collected by libraries and museums, are scattered among researchers or practitioners and are not available to the larger community."<sup>6</sup> Li asserts that this is also an issue in that certain types of archival documents are biased and difficult to evaluate objectively, which is problematic when a lack of broader access means scholars are left to base their work on such documents.

Li also points to the difficulty caused by the syncretic nature of popular religion, which makes disentangling it from institutional religions or delineating specific popular

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<sup>5</sup> Li, "A Survey and Evaluation of Postwar Scholarship of Popular Religion in Taiwan (1950-2000)."

<sup>6</sup> Li, 66.

religious groups a major challenge. Indeed, in 2010, Li noted that there existed no general overview of Taiwan's popular religion.<sup>7</sup> To my knowledge, this is still the case. And, given the incredibly varied nature of Taiwan's popular religion, such a thing may well be impossible. But it points to another gap in the field as outlined by religious historian Paul Katz – that is, a lack of comparative studies. In a 2018 review of both Chinese and English-language literature on Taiwan's popular religion, Katz argues that there is a need for interdisciplinary approaches in the study of popular religion to overcome gaps in the field.<sup>8</sup> As it stands, these reviews indicate that, in both Sinophone and Anglophone scholarship, the vast majority of studies on Taiwan's popular religion are undertaken either by anthropologists or historians of religion and, accordingly, the methods utilised are typically either ethnographic or archival.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the study of Taiwan's popular religion is almost exclusively focussed on specific sects, or temples – that is, specific elements of the broader popular religious belief system. Indeed, even in pointing to future directions for the field, Katz's suggestions remain grounded in the study of specific elements of Taiwan's popular religion.

Such work is extremely helpful for learning about specific concepts – and is often fascinating – but it does not reveal how popular religion looks in the lives of most ordinary people, who, for the most part, do not simply participate in one aspect of popular religion. Thus, such studies do not capture the breadth of what popular religion looks like in the everyday: what people actually do, or what part it plays in their daily life. In contrast, this study utilises a life-context approach, taking a step back from the study of the individual elements of Taiwan's popular religion to instead focus on the experiences and understandings of practitioners anchored within broader life contexts.

This thesis draws from research motivated by a drive to hear, record, and understand people – ordinary, everyday Taiwanese people – and popular religion in the context of the rest of their lives. The research was designed to offer insight into popular religion as it is experienced and understood by the people practising it. Thus evolved an interdisciplinary project, both in its conceptual framework and methodological approach. This thesis seeks to amplify the voices of practitioners in the academic discussion and

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<sup>7</sup> Li, "A Survey and Evaluation of Postwar Scholarship of Popular Religion in Taiwan (1950-2000)."

<sup>8</sup> Katz, "Bridging the Gaps."

<sup>9</sup> Li, "A Survey and Evaluation of Postwar Scholarship of Popular Religion in Taiwan (1950-2000)"; Katz, "Bridging the Gaps."

historical record of their religion. Voice is central. The interview methodology was carefully designed to draw on the disciplinary norms of oral history and the thesis hinges upon the insights of oral history interviews that were conducted over 2 years, in three languages, with twelve 'ordinary' Taiwanese people in contemporary Taipei. Its aim, therefore, is not only to document Taiwan's popular religion as it is experienced by practitioners but also to anchor the experience of religion in contexts of everyday life.

Some elements of Taiwan's popular religion are impossible to translate into English or adequately explain without a deep understanding of this religion – or even with it. Accordingly, this thesis presents the view that it is equally – perhaps more – important to look for what people do know, understand, and value in their regular lives than to rest solely upon a scholarly understanding, no matter how deep, of specific concepts. It argues that the everydayness and 'everyday' experience of Taiwan's popular religion and culture are just as important to understand as their more prominent symbols: big festivals or major deities. As such, the structure of this thesis reflects its conceptual framework, prioritising the people whose stories have deeply informed the research, while engaging critically with major themes that arise in the study of popular religion in Taiwan. The goal is to create room to recognise and learn about popular religion as it is actually experienced by Taiwanese people, encompassing the diversity of their experiences, which is reflective of the nature of popular religion as long documented in scholarly literature.

Importantly, insofar as this is a project about lived experience of Taiwan's popular religion, it is also a project about voice. Sociologist of media and culture Nick Couldry defines voice as "the process of giving an account of one's life and its conditions," arguing that to deny another's capacity for voice "is to deny a basic dimension of human life. A form of life that systematically denied voice would be intolerable."<sup>10</sup> While the concept of 'giving' voice may not account for the fact that people already have voices, whether or not they are heard, the logic remains a strong argument for the need to amplify those voices and elevating agency for non-scholars in the scholarly context – that is, for recognising lived experience as a valuable form of expertise. In 'giving' voice to, and seeing how, participants construct and tell their experiences, we gain insight into the meanings behind practices or events to the people for whom they are meaningful. They offer a

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<sup>10</sup> Couldry, "Alternative Media and Voice," 45.

window into how popular religion is understood and experienced by those practising it. Further, when considered in the context of the existing academic literature, we are able to see the ways in which individualised experiences complement, expand upon, complicate, and sometimes contradict, scholarly understandings of popular religion. We make room for varying perspectives – for different ways of understanding both popular religion and a world in which it is considered to be a “very rational”<sup>11</sup> element.

Thus, the accounts presented in this thesis allow for a more nuanced understanding of the varied reality of popular religion in Taiwan than could be gleaned from the study of its individual components. These accounts allow for wider cultural insights, too, through the examination of dominant discourses *about* popular religion in everyday life. Broader still, the research proffers a steppingstone to a participatory construction of history and popular memory on the topic. The otherwise private views, experiences, and discourses of those typically ‘voiceless’ in this domain – in the scholarly construction of histories – are recorded and intentionally amplified. In this sense, this thesis reflects a project that has been designed with the view that we can, and should, act as the “historians of the present.”<sup>12</sup>

This type of research is particularly crucial in the context of the suppression that popular religion has historically endured and the ongoing challenges Taiwan faces with China. Dominant histories have long been constructed from those given voice in a society: academics, governments, media, and others with power. And, in the case of Taiwan, politics have demonstrably influenced how histories are told and understood.<sup>13</sup> The personal accounts of ordinary people are less often given the platform required to allow them to become part of dominant history or popular memory.<sup>14</sup> But they are nevertheless crucial to filling gaps in knowledge and capturing a wider breadth of human experience in the construction of history. This is, arguably, vital when talking about something so fundamentally of the people, as in the case of popular religion.

### ***Popular Religion and Daily Life: A Brief History***

Popular religion has undergone a long history of suppression in China and, later, Taiwan,

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<sup>11</sup> Doris and Sean. Interview with author, Taipei, October 27, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Popular Memory Group, “Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method.”

<sup>13</sup> Harrison, “Art, Violence and Memory in Taiwan.”

<sup>14</sup> Popular Memory Group.

including under both Chinese and Japanese rule of Taiwan. Social anthropologist, Homola outlines the history of Chinese and Taiwanese religion beginning in the early twentieth century, explaining that in Imperial China most religious rituals took place within communities. They were performed by members of the community, with Buddhist, Taoist, or Confucian specialists sometimes called in. However, the founding of the Republic of China in 1912 saw five official religions named under the neologism '*zongjiao* 宗教' (religion).<sup>15</sup> These were defined "according to Western criteria, as exclusive communities that gather the faithful around a clergy (as opposed to the traditional society, in which laymen called on one of several religious specialists according to their needs)." <sup>16</sup> Accordingly, those rituals that were previously performed within communities and did not fit the new official definitions of religion were condemned as superstition (*mixin* 迷信). Whereas such rituals had previously concerned society as a whole, the campaigns against them saw them reduced in label to only 'popular' or 'rural'.<sup>17</sup>

Following came a series of state-run campaigns to eradicate 'superstition'. Homola explains:

As the Nationalists' rational governing was meant to rely on scientific methods (rational analysis, census, registration, and classification), the newly institutionalised disciplines of sociology and ethnology took part in the State's efforts to define and categorise legitimate beliefs, eradicate superstitions (打破迷信 *dapo mixin*), and remodel society by reforming the organisation of space and time.

The Gregorian calendar was implemented to replace the traditional calendar, which was considered "a tool of imperial autocracy and the basis of all superstitions."<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, the Japanese colonial government in Taiwan was also seeking to eradicate customs linked to 'superstition', and officially replaced the traditional calendar with the Gregorian calendar in 1912 in its efforts to do so. Both measures failed, however, and business and daily matters continued to run according to the traditional calendar in both mainland China and Taiwan.

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<sup>15</sup> These – Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam – remain the five official religions of the PRC.

<sup>16</sup> Homola, "Pursue Good Fortune and Avoid Calamity," 139.

<sup>17</sup> Homola, "Pursue Good Fortune and Avoid Calamity."

<sup>18</sup> Homola, 140.

Otherwise, the Japanese colonial government in Taiwan “did not generally interfere with local religious practices,” until the late 1930s, when, in its efforts to instil loyalty to the emperor in preparation for war, traditional religious practices were suppressed; all attainable images of deities were destroyed, and the population were instead ordered to worship Shinto deities.<sup>19</sup>

After Taiwan was ceded to the Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) in 1945,<sup>20</sup> the new regime viewed Taiwan as a temporary residence until the Kuomintang could regain control of the mainland from the Communist Party of China and return home, and considered the support of the local population necessary to achieve this goal. Accordingly, it implemented a series of efforts to control the people of Taiwan.<sup>21</sup> In its efforts to ‘re-educate’ and Sinicise the Taiwanese, the Kuomintang attempted to impress onto them the language, history, and culture of the mainland Chinese elite, placing formal restrictions on the use of Hokkien, Hakka, and Japanese – the languages spoken in Taiwan prior to 1945 – in state settings. Instead, Mandarin, which most people in Taiwan could not speak or understand,<sup>22</sup> was made the only language allowed for official matters and in government offices, on radio and television, in businesses, public places, and in schools,<sup>23</sup> where students heard speaking Taiwanese received fines or corporal punishment.<sup>24</sup> Schools also taught the history, geography, language, and literature of the mainland and not Taiwan,<sup>25</sup> and streets were renamed to those of mainland cities, Kuomintang ideals, or Confucian values.<sup>26</sup> Further, the new government continued to suppress religion and Chinese/Taiwanese religion in particular.<sup>27</sup> Taiwanese customs and popular religious practices, along with opera and music, were targeted and labelled ‘backward’, ‘superstitious’, and “harmful to national unification and/or national modernisation.”<sup>28</sup> Madsen explains, while the KMT actively discouraged the development of Buddhism and Taoism until the late 1970s, in its efforts to maintain a good relationship with the United

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<sup>19</sup> Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*

<sup>20</sup> Brown; Wachman, “Competing Identities in Taiwan.”

<sup>21</sup> Chang, “On the Origins and Transformation of Taiwanese National Identity.”

<sup>22</sup> Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*

<sup>23</sup> Wachman, “Competing Identities in Taiwan”; Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*

<sup>24</sup> Wachman, “Competing Identities in Taiwan”; Weller, *Alternate Civilities*.

<sup>25</sup> Wachman, “Competing Identities in Taiwan,” 52.

<sup>26</sup> Wachman, 55.

<sup>27</sup> Madsen, “Religious Renaissance and Taiwan’s Modern Middle Class.”

<sup>28</sup> Chang, “On the Origins and Transformation of Taiwanese National Identity,” 65.



States, it was more tolerant toward Protestant and Christian missionaries. Unlike Buddhists and Taoists, Protestants and Catholics were permitted to establish universities.<sup>29</sup>

Following the 1947 uprising known as the 2-28 Incident,<sup>30</sup> which was suppressed with the execution of thousands of Taiwanese and the imprisonment of many more, came the implementation of a 38-year period of martial law, ending in 1987.<sup>31</sup> During this period, Taiwan's popular religion was largely treated for scholarly purposes as Chinese. It was referred to as 'Chinese' in literature, and often framed in terms of a perceived representation of China.<sup>32</sup> The issue of whether Taiwan's popular religion, and perhaps Taiwan more broadly, is Chinese is a complicated one, made more complex by the various meanings of the word Chinese. It is also a prime example of how the stories of ordinary people can and should be considered to better understand highly nuanced situations, as is demonstrated when we consider the Chineseness of Taiwan's popular religion in Chapter Three.

Taiwan's popular religion is no longer subject to the suppression it has undergone in the past.<sup>33</sup> This is reflected officially in Article 13 of the Constitution of the Republic of China (Taiwan), which states "the people shall have freedom of religious belief," while Article 7 states "all citizens of the Republic of China, irrespective of sex, religion, race, class, or party affiliation, shall be equal before the law." Yet, it is still under-recognised. Taiwan scholar Ming-hua Yu asserted that popular religion is not an official religion in Taiwan and draws "much less attention than other religions." Yu points to a survey of religious activity that Taiwan's Ministry of the Interior conducted in 2009, where popular

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<sup>29</sup> Madsen, "Religious Renaissance and Taiwan's Modern Middle Class," 296–97.

<sup>30</sup> Named for its start date of February 28, 1947 and alternatively referred to as the '228 Massacre'.

<sup>31</sup> Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*

<sup>32</sup> Shih, "Re-Writing Religion: Questions of Translation, Context, and Location in the Writing of Religion in Taiwan"; Harrison, *Legitimacy, Meaning and Knowledge in the Making of Taiwanese Identity*.

<sup>33</sup> While it is indeed no longer suppressed to the extent that it once was, popular religion may also not be entirely free from interference. For example, in a study of the functions of fortune-telling in contemporary Taiwan, Homola explains that divination practices have become a feature of Taiwan's culture (translated as *Taiwan de tese* 台灣的特色), noting that the Taipei City Government recently invested in the "street of divination," both to attract tourists and "gather and control" fortune-tellers. Homola, "Pursue Good Fortune and Avoid Calamity," 141.

religion was not among the twenty-seven listed religions, despite it being the most prevalent religion in Taiwan.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, until it was re-vamped in late 2017, the official Taiwanese tourism website also neglected popular religion. Instead, it stated that “like China,” Taiwan has three major religions: Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. And despite describing the island as “greatly diversified in terms of religious faith” (and specifically naming Christianity, Mormonism, the Unification Church, Islam, Hinduism, and Yiguandao to illustrate the point), popular religion was left unmentioned. It instead explained that “most of the island's traditional places of worship combine all three of the major religious traditions,” owing to widespread persecution of Taoism during the period of Japanese rule, “which meant that Taoists had to secretly worship in Buddhist temples, leading to the creation of Taiwan's uniquely united yet divergent faith.”<sup>35</sup> Granted, it should perhaps be expected that a website aimed at tourists would over-simplify the complex nature of Taiwan’s religion, but this is an example of an official government website disregarding the concept of popular religion as its own system. Instead, it implies Buddhism and Taoism intersect but remain separate: that the people practise different, definable religions, but in the same temples. Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism are named as the three “major religions,” despite popular religion far exceeding these in terms of popularity. But in talking to the people who practise this diverse religion, we can gain an understanding of its reality without the need to oversimplify for the sake of neat categorisations. We can recognise and even appreciate its diversity and chaos.

### *Mapping the Scene*

One thing I heard over and over while in Taiwan, and from Taiwanese people in Australia, is that southern Taiwan is the traditional area: the place to study popular religion. This sentiment is also propagated outside Taiwan by the tendency for previous studies to focus on those areas, effectively supporting the impression that such practices are isolated to specific areas of Taiwan. Indeed, Katz points to this tendency for anthropologists in particular to remain focussed on “village religion” and thus overlook the “effervescence of religious beliefs and practices in Taiwan’s cities.”<sup>36</sup> But popular

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<sup>34</sup> Yu, “Folk Religion and Religious Experiences in Taiwan,” 42.

<sup>35</sup> Taiwan Tourism Bureau, “Religion.”

<sup>36</sup> Katz, “Bridging the Gaps,” 48.

religion is far from isolated to specific areas of Taiwan.<sup>37</sup> And one aim of this work is to demonstrate popular religion as a prominent part of Taiwanese daily life broadly by basing fieldwork in the location typically considered the least traditional: Taiwan's capital city, Taipei.<sup>38</sup> Situated at Taiwan's northern tip, Taipei is home to approximately 6.7 million people.<sup>39</sup> The national government has inhabited Taipei through the martial law period until the present,<sup>40</sup> and, as Taiwan's financial centre, the city is the base of most major news outlets.<sup>41</sup> While, in conversation, Taiwanese people often propose areas other than Taipei for studies such as this, suggesting popular religious customs are not widely practised in 'modern' Taipei. Yet, as one walks around the city, the ever-present marks of popular religion are hard to miss. Indeed, the number of temples in Taipei has consistently increased over the past twenty years, with the city now home to over 1,240 registered temples.<sup>42</sup>

### *The Talk of the Temple*

The primary languages spoken in Taiwan are Mandarin and Taiwanese Hokkien – known as Tâi-gí 台語 (*Taiyu* in Mandarin) – with most Taiwanese speaking Mandarin, which, unlike Tâi-gí, has a widely-accepted corresponding written language and is used as the primary language for education, and many also speaking Tâi-gí in informal situations.<sup>43</sup> It is common for people to switch between the two in the same conversation – often in the same sentence – and some cultural concepts, including many popular religious practices and beliefs, are typically referred to in Tâi-gí even in the context of Mandarin conversation.

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<sup>37</sup> Yu, "Folk Religion and Religious Experiences in Taiwan."

<sup>38</sup> For the purposes of this project, I use the label 'Taipei' to refer to the administrative regions of Taipei City and New Taipei City collectively.

<sup>39</sup> "Statistical Yearbook of Interior 2.11 Number of Townships & Districts, Villages, Neighborhoods and Resident Population."

<sup>40</sup> "The Republic of China Yearbook."

<sup>41</sup> Ziyou shibao dianzi bao 自由時報電子報 [Liberty Times Net], "Guanyu Women 關於我們 [About Us]"; Pingguo ribao 蘋果日報 [Apple Daily], "Lianluo Women 聯絡我們 [Contact Us]"; Taipei Times, "Contact Us"; China Times, "Lianluo Women 聯絡我們 [Contact Us]."

<sup>42</sup> "Statistical Yearbook of Interior 1.03 General Conditions of Religions." There were 1,244 temples registered in Taipei City and New Taipei City in 2019, according to Ministry of the Interior statistics.

<sup>43</sup> Wachman, "Competing Identities in Taiwan."

As my mother tongue is English, language presented a major challenge for this study. Having studied Mandarin for approximately five years in total over the course of a decade, my Mandarin was serviceable for most of my needs, but Mandarin and Tâi-gí are not mutually intelligible.<sup>44</sup> And much of the language around popular religion is typically spoken in Tâi-gí, even in the areas where Tâi-gí is less common, like Taipei. Before I started fieldwork, in 2017, I had taken some Tâi-gí lessons at a church in Melbourne – the only place I could find that offered them – and learned a little from my friends. I knew the greetings, basic words relating to popular religion, and enough to play mah-jong. But that was little use in practice. On pilgrimages, people would happily speak Mandarin to me, but they would speak Tâi-gí to each other and so I would often feel I was missing out on important details about what was happening. And I had no way to communicate directly with some elderly people, many of whom were educated in Japanese and spoke limited Mandarin.<sup>45</sup> As a result, I started Tâi-gí lessons in Taipei in July 2018, which was incredibly helpful both in helping me understand more and helping me communicate with elders, and in helping Taiwanese people feel comfortable around me in general, particularly in contexts such as pilgrimages.

### ***Finding Voice***

There is a great deal of literature on the concept of ‘experience’ in the study of religion, where ‘experience’ refers to divine or religious phenomena.<sup>46</sup> That is not what this study is concerned with. This study aims to offer an understanding of Taiwan’s popular religion through the eyes of its adherents, driven not by a focus on individual moments of divine experience, or even specific practices or beliefs. Rather, this study is about the broader lived experience of Taiwanese popular religionists’ day-to-day interactions with the rituals, beliefs, and concepts of popular religion; that is, the popular religion that underpins the daily lives of the vast majority of Taiwanese, and, indeed, much of Taiwan’s culture.

Fitzgerald discusses “continuous religious experience as an on-going feature of day-to-day life,” reviewing Hick’s “experiencing-as” concept of religious experience. Within

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<sup>44</sup> Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*

<sup>45</sup> Chen, “Becoming Taiwanese: Negotiating Language, Culture and Identity.”

<sup>46</sup> See, for example: Sharf, “Experience”; Fitzgerald, “Experience”; McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers*.

this, religious experience refers to the way a believer experiences – or interprets – the world through the lens of their religion,<sup>47</sup> “experiencing the world as created by God for a divine purpose.”<sup>48</sup> Fitzgerald argues:

The experience of committed participation in such authoritative offices, institutions, rituals, values and the world-view which provides participants with an overall structure of meaning, seems as legitimately described as “religious experience” as the more dramatic sense of the numinous or the mystical union with a god. In other words, if one is consciously participating in a Christian or some other religious framework of ideas and ideals which have been defined as “religious,” then one’s experiences will be religious, even though one might want to say that they are continuous, less intense, providing the on-going structure of one’s life.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, the “experiencing-as” mode of religious experience considers the role of religious beliefs in participants’ understanding and experience of all aspects of their lives: how people experience “the world as meaningful within the context of a dominant set of ultimate symbolic meanings, both theistic and non-theistic.”<sup>50</sup> While researching lived experience allows for insight into how practitioners experience popular religion, considering the “experiencing-as” concept further allows insight into how practitioners experience the world as practitioners of popular religion: a world heavily marked by popular religion.

The primary aim of this research, however, is not only to understand how adherents experience the world through the lens of popular religion, but how they experience the world through the wider lens of Taiwanese cultural identity, wherein popular religion plays a significant role. Given the prevalence of popular religion in Taiwan, researching adherents’ understandings of popular religion offers a window into how popular religion is understood by the majority of people in Taiwan. It allows for an understanding of another facet of a religion that has, at least in Anglophone studies, historically been illustrated in terms of the ‘outside’ views of authoritarian regimes, missionaries, ethnographers, and historians. As noted above, in contrast to such previous literature,

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<sup>47</sup> Hick, *The Existence of God*.

<sup>48</sup> Fitzgerald, “Experience,” 133–34.

<sup>49</sup> Fitzgerald, 134.

<sup>50</sup> Fitzgerald, 138.

this project set out to amplify the voices of practitioners in the academic discussion and historical record of their religion. I thus looked to oral history's capacity to empower people through recovering neglected accounts of experience and challenge dominant histories.<sup>51</sup> In this case, it provides a record for current and future generations to understand Taiwan and Taiwanese everyday life, culture, and identity as experienced and understood by 'ordinary' Taiwanese.

Determining an appropriate interviewee sample size was an important consideration. Ritchie recommends oral historians focus not on pre-determining the number of interviewees but rather the number of hours of oral history one aims to record.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Beitin notes a shift from pre-determined sample sizes in projects utilising qualitative interviews to researchers instead allowing the number of participants for a given study to be guided by the research process, remaining fluid throughout implementation of the research design and analysis of the data.<sup>53</sup> However, as Beitin notes, it is still often necessary for various reasons for researchers to pre-determine sample sizes. In this case, as a doctoral project, there were restrictions on how long could be spent both working on the project and undertaking the fieldwork. And I especially wanted to ensure I would be aiming for enough participants to see at least some of the variety of views I had come across in general conversation.

Guest, Bunce, and Johnson aimed to determine guidelines for sample sizes needed to reach "the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook" in qualitative research.<sup>54</sup> They suggest twelve interviewees to be appropriate for most studies where "the aim is to understand common perceptions and experiences among a group of relatively homogeneous individuals."<sup>55</sup> Hagaman and Wutich support these findings, suggesting twelve-to-sixteen to be an appropriate sample size for studies utilising semi-structured research methods on focused topics with culturally homogenous participants.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, I aimed for a cross-section of twelve practitioners of popular religion in Taipei and, in the end, interviewed thirteen people

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<sup>51</sup> Perks and Thomson, "Advocacy and Empowerment."

<sup>52</sup> Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*.

<sup>53</sup> Beitin, "Interview and Sampling: How Many and Whom."

<sup>54</sup> Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, "How Many Interviews Are Enough?," 65.

<sup>55</sup> Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 79.

<sup>56</sup> Hagaman and Wutich, "How Many Interviews Are Enough to Identify Metathemes in Multisited and Cross-Cultural Research?"

and recorded a total of 23 hours of oral history. Notably, as it is common for people to travel between cities for religious practices, I did not seek participants who exclusively practised popular religion in Taipei. This approach offers insight into popular religion as it is actually practised and experienced in Taiwanese daily life. Participants were asked about their lives in general as well as their experiences with and understandings of popular religion as well as their impressions of government interaction with popular religion and Taiwanese news media coverage of religion. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to tell their own stories, providing texts to be drawn on to identify how participants understand and experience popular religion in their daily lives.<sup>57</sup>

I recruited participants by attending temple events and through my established contacts in Taiwan. Before being asked to consent to participation, all potential participants were provided with an outline of the research project in detail, in line with Bryson and McConville's guidelines for approaching interviewees.<sup>58</sup> Participants were recruited from different backgrounds, ages, education levels, and professions, with the aim of selecting a cross-section of Taiwanese society, an approach that Bryson and McConville argue is appropriate for oral history studies aiming "to inform a broader social or political analysis."<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, despite following both this and the aforementioned guidelines for appropriate sample sizes for understanding perceptions and experiences among a culturally homogenous group, a small number of interviewees cannot definitively be considered representative of Taiwanese society at large. Rather than aiming for a large number of participants, this thesis instead focusses on the depth of material that can be gleaned from the life narratives generated through oral history interviews. As a qualitative, instrumental case study, this approach offers insight into an important – and largely academically neglected – element of popular religion in Taiwan.

A lack of factual accuracy in relying on personal accounts can present a limitation in oral history methodologies and necessitate verification with other supporting evidence.<sup>60</sup> Yet, while exploring popular religion through the accounts of practitioners may not allow for the determination of any objective truth about popular religion, oral historian Portelli argues that the credibility of oral accounts lies not in their factual truth. Rather, their

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<sup>57</sup> Shopes, "Editing Oral History for Publication."

<sup>58</sup> Bryson, McConville, and McClean, *The Routledge Guide to Interviewing: Oral History, Social Enquiry and Investigation*.

<sup>59</sup> Bryson, McConville, and McClean, 136.

<sup>60</sup> Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*; Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different."

credibility is in what the “active process of creation and meanings” that constitutes memory can tell us about how interviewees “make sense of the past” and “give a form to their lives,” revealing knowledge that is not apparent from factual sources alone.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, if we recognise the value of lived experience as expertise, practitioners of popular religion are precisely the sources best-placed to provide accurate accounts of how they experience and understand their religion in their daily lives.

Previous studies suggest that many Taiwanese people who engage in what would be considered popular religion in Western scholarship do not identify as popular religious – or religious at all.<sup>62</sup> Keeping this in mind, I did not select participants based on self-identification as adherents of popular religion, but rather by applying Wong’s method for defining popular religion. As such, I identified adherents based on both the practices or beliefs they engage with and their attitude towards them, an approach that is discussed in detail in Chapter Two.<sup>63</sup> This approach circumvents the challenges with defining popular religion that result from its sharing many practices with institutional religions, such as Taoism and Buddhism: It considers adherents of popular religion those who do not adhere to an institutional religion exclusively but rather select the practice best suited for any given situation with little regard for which religion it would be thought to belong to.

For some participants, I was fortunate enough to also be able to see them engaging with a religious event, allowing them the opportunity to demonstrate or explain in practice the customs discussed in interview. This approach, and additional observation and participant observation of various religious events, was used to provide further context to the material gathered through interview and a fuller picture of popular religion in day-to-day life.<sup>64</sup> Over a total of approximately twelve months of fieldwork in Taiwan during 2017, 2018, and 2019, I attended five pilgrimages, various Zhongyuan 中元 (Ghost Month) events, and countless other temple rituals.

Participants were given the option of interviews conducted in English or Mandarin. While using their native language may enable participants to feel more comfortable and better articulate their thoughts, speaking in a foreign language can help them to shed

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<sup>61</sup> Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” 54.

<sup>62</sup> Paper, *The Spirits Are Drunk*; Li, *Zongjiao Yu Shenhua Lunji* 宗教與神話論集.

<sup>63</sup> Wong, “Defining Chinese Folk Religion.”

<sup>64</sup> Jordan and Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix*.



preconceived or deep-rooted ideas grounded in culture that may influence the thoughts expressed in interview.<sup>65</sup> This may be significant, as, while religion is not a sensitive topic in Taiwan, it is also not one typically considered worthy of discussion or serious thought, likely owing to its nature as deeply ingrained in Taiwanese daily life (see Chapter Four for further discussion). However, participants were allowed to choose which language to use during interview as the possible benefits of conducting interviews in English do not clearly outweigh the possible benefits of using participants' native language(s). And requiring fluent English would have greatly impacted the selection of participants, not only reducing the number of possible participants, but also making the selection of a true cross-section of Taiwanese practitioners of popular religion impossible.

Where interviews were conducted in Mandarin (and often interspersed with Tâi-gí), to ensure maximum accuracy, the audio recordings were transcribed by a professional native Tâi-gí-and-Mandarin-speaking transcriber. I worked with the typed transcripts in Chinese and the original audio recordings for analysis, translating sections to be included here into English. As Tâi-gí has no commonly accepted writing system, I worked with the transcriber to determine how best to represent it in written form,<sup>66</sup> and it was represented in Chinese characters but highlighted to differentiate it from Mandarin. Translation represented, by far, the largest task of this study. But working with the original interviews and translating material myself allowed me to consider not only what was being said but also *how* it was being said. As such, the translations included in this thesis are focussed on accurate representation of the original speech, sometimes at the detriment of beautiful English prose. In addition, throughout this thesis, I have used Chinese words (Romanised in Mandarin) instead of the common English translations for several terms that frequently appear – *bai* 拜 (to pay respects; to worship; alternatively: *baibai* 拜拜, *jibai* 祭拜, *canbai* 參拜), *shen* 神 (gods; deities; alternatively: *shenming* 神明), *yinjian* 陰間 (the spirit world), and Zhongyuan (Ghost Month) – and the English for all other terms, for which the English is closer to the meaning implied by the Chinese. This choice is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.

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<sup>65</sup> Burton, "Issues in Cross-Cultural Interviewing: Japanese Women in England."

<sup>66</sup> It is sometimes transcribed into corresponding – or generally considered to be corresponding – Chinese characters, sometimes written in one of the various proposed Romanisation systems, and sometimes a combination of the two. See: Fuehrer et al., *Southern Hokkien: An Introduction*; Cannings, "Writing Systems for Taiwanese."

Undoubtedly, language was just one of a variety of benefits and problems that came with being a foreigner researching popular religion in Taiwan. Many Taiwanese have been eager to assist me, often excited by the opportunity to have the rest of the world learn about their culture. Indeed, so many people have been endlessly patient explaining things to me. I have amassed a suitcase full of little temple trinkets gifted by various people, and many of those same people still send messages to inform me of upcoming popular religious events.

Notably, while the cross-cultural and cross-linguistic nature of this research created significant challenges, there can be benefits, too. Research conducted by an ‘outsider’ can allow for comparatively objective observations and analysis and encourage participants to be more forth-coming than they might be with researchers of similar background to themselves.<sup>67</sup> In the end, the gracious willingness of this study’s participants to share their time and their stories to contribute to this project made it possible. In the following chapter, we begin to hear those stories and consider the discourses that shape them, as they each share how popular religion manifests in their own lives.

In its most basic form, this is a thesis driven by people. Luke, who was 23 at the time of our interview and educated in Australia but living in his hometown Taipei, aptly addressed the relevance of such an approach during our conversation:

I mean, it is your research but for me, if I wanna go into this ... I’ll want to focus on people, think about the religion of this— the origin of this religion, so, like Christian is from Jesus, right? ... But where is *Popular Religion* [Mandarin: *minjian xinyang* 民間信仰] come from? ... I would think that it’s from people missing their ancestors, so, they are thinking that they’re in the afterlife lies in— in a better place, and then, oh okay, maybe ‘cause you know before this is dynastic ... so, they’re, okay, maybe there’s an emperor for that and maybe they’re in charge of different things ... and then this god will have the job to, to protect people from this land, or for protect to bless people, to get more money, bless people for the career for their love life, for their family, for their ancestor, for the safety, everything. So, the, the origin of this is to the desire of being successful or safe or being *blessed and*

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<sup>67</sup> Jordan and Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix*; Burton, “Issues in Cross-Cultural Interviewing: Japanese Women in England.”

*protected* [Mandarin: *baoyou* 保佑]. Not blessed, but *blessed and protected* [Mandarin: *baoyou* 保佑]. So, if you think about it, like— It's from people of common belief of the people it's not just from one person, it's not one thing. So, the original the nature of the religion is from people, so, if you want to know the culture best way is just interview more people. Yeah.<sup>68</sup>

### ***Hearing the People***

As mentioned above, this thesis was designed first and foremost to amplify the voices of the people on whose stories the research was based: Its structure reflects this intent. In Chapter One, the twelve participants in the study are introduced, offering biographical details and individualised accounts of who they are and the roles that popular religion plays in their daily lives. This prioritising of study participants not only signals the significance of their input for a field hitherto marked by the absence of firsthand accounts of lived experience; it also offers valuable context for the rest of the thesis – where an examination of the discourses that shaped participants' discussion of key themes is interwoven with an intensive review of past scholarship. Along the way, we are introduced to many of the fundamental concepts of Taiwan's popular religion, and alerted to some of the different forms this diverse system may take. We thus begin with critical insight into the many different ways of understanding Taiwan's popular religion in daily life.

From there, each chapter is structured so as to work thematically through major concepts. These thematic chapters consider the lived experience of the participants within the context of the relevant scholarly literature, recognising both the value and expertise afforded by lived experience and the rarity of ordinary people having the opportunity to engage on equal footing with the people who study aspect of their lives. In considering these accounts and their discourses in the context of the academic literature,

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<sup>68</sup> Luke. Interview with author, Taipei, September 22, 2017. All references to this participant cited in this thesis were derived from this interview.

For all interview material: em dashes signify pauses and where speech has trailed off; ellipses indicate that content has been removed; the interviewer's speech is italicised; square brackets mark additions to the original speech; where the original Chinese adds specificity to the English translation, it is also included in square brackets; and where words were spoken in a different language to the majority of the speech, these are italicised with accompanying annotation specifying the language.

we gain insight into the relations between dominant discourses and the individualised accounts that are formed through lived experience.

Chapter Two proffers a critical lens onto the fundamental concepts that underpin the everyday lived experience of popular religion in contemporary Taiwan. Here, we consider theoretical understandings of the relevance and meaning of gods (*shen* 神), ghosts (*gui* 鬼), and ancestors (*zuxian* 祖先) – along with others like soul, fortune-telling, and the burning of paper money – drawing from the scholarly literature as well as their practical expression in the everyday lives of the participants in this study. Evidently, the very nature of popular religion in Taiwan means it cannot easily be defined; similarly, there is significant variance in both the definitions and understandings of key concepts. This chapter utilises both academic literature and lived experience to offer a sense of *how* and *why* those concepts may mean different things to different people.

The final three chapters look more specifically at the fundamental features of Taiwan's popular religion, examining the ways in which it is, and isn't, Chinese, popular, and religion. Chapter Three considers the relationship between Taiwanese-ness and Chineseness through the lens of popular religion in daily life. Such an approach allows space for self-identity and to see the diverse reality of the various ways in which participants understood Chineseness in relation to both themselves and their popular religion. Indeed, this chapter reveals the complex reality whereby individuals hold multiple identities for themselves and their popular religion simultaneously, and the discourses of identity, belonging, and unity that underpinned ways of talking about them. In considering the related history and literature, we also gain a sense of the relationships between political events, scholarly approaches, and individual identities, further highlighting the value of capturing individual views at a key point in time and demonstrating the need for lived experience in the discussion of matters so integrated into daily life.

Chapter Four explores a number of ways in which popular religion is popular and social. This chapter is one of contradictions. Indeed, it demonstrates the multivalent understandings developed through lived experience of a diffuse belief system to offer a nuanced picture of the reality of popular religion in contemporary Taiwan. In doing so, it shows how a lived experience-based approach allows space for the many contradictions of popular religion in daily life. This chapter first considers the use of 'popular religion' and thus 'folk religion' as terms, through a review of academic literature, before moving

on to examine matters more closely related to everyday life. In gaining a clearer sense of the many ways of understanding popular religion, we uncover ways people's impressions do not necessarily align with the statistics, including a disconnect between the prevalence and perceived prevalence of popular religion in contemporary Taiwan. Namely, in considering participants' accounts of the ways in which popular religion is social and the discourses underpinning these accounts, we see how people reported talking about (or not talking about) popular religion in the everyday context and uncover a reality of popular religion that is not talked about but also relies on word of mouth; that is marked by discourses of taboo and fear but also a perceived need for social unity and mundanity.

Chapter Five tackles the concept of religion and examines multiple scholarly theories of religion, while interpreting the ways that individuals' own understandings and conceptions vary significantly. Indeed, far from unified, the varied views of the participants in this project as they articulate their own religiosity underscore the difficulties of defining popular religion in Taiwan. Still, this chapter reveals clear discursive patterns shaping participants' accounts, as we see how personal conceptions of religion are delineated from a broader religious complex, and people contradict one another on whether popular religion *is* a religion. In anchoring conceptions of religion in life contexts, this chapter shows how ways of thinking about, talking about, and defining religion in contemporary Taiwan are underscored not only by discourses of family and comfort, but also of belonging, identity, resistance, and struggle.

Together, the chapters that make up this thesis offer a nuanced understanding of one of the most fundamental elements of Taiwanese (and Chinese) culture. Ordinary people's stories and discourses about popular religion in their everyday lives are documented and – through the use of scholarly literature – situated within the historical and cultural contexts with which they are inextricably linked. In also placing lived experience of Taiwan's popular religion within life contexts, we gain insight into the experiences that have shaped the participants as human beings as well as their understanding and experience of Taiwan's popular religion. Through this process, we also develop a sense of how they experience the world more broadly as practitioners of Taiwan's popular religion.<sup>69</sup> In seeing the various ways people understand and make sense of their lived experience, we are able to better appreciate and understand the multivalent and diffuse

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<sup>69</sup> Hick, *The Existence of God*; Fitzgerald, "Experience."

nature of popular religion in contemporary Taiwan. And, in the process, practitioners' voices are amplified and recorded, forming a steppingstone to a participatory history of daily life in contemporary Taiwan.



*Figure 1: As part of a pilgrimage, deities walk to a temple in rural Taiwan, having started out from the Sanchong District of New Taipei City: September 29, 2018. Whereas many pilgrimages see deities carried entirely on foot, in this instance they were trucked to nearby the sites visited before the final stretches were completed on foot.*

*Photograph by Tegan J. Farrell.*

## Chapter One: The Voices

This chapter offers a detailed introduction of the twelve people whose voices contribute to this thesis. It presents a picture of each person's background as well as their experience with popular religion. The historical and cultural contexts in which these accounts are inextricably grounded are discussed in detail throughout the rest of this thesis, but this chapter instead focuses on the people themselves. The profiles presented here provide valuable context, both for the study of Taiwan's popular religion broadly and for the rest of this thesis (where the coming chapters will unpack the discourses that prevailed in participants' discussion of specific themes, largely presenting interview material unique from this chapter). Firstly, they offer insight into the practicalities of popular religion in daily life – who is doing what, when, where, and why. But they also reveal a variety of different ways of understanding, or making sense of, a fundamental element of Taiwanese culture and lived experience.

One benefit of taking a methodological approach that is anchored in oral history is that it goes beyond questions about a specific topic to also enable people to share something of their life stories more broadly. This has the potential to be especially illuminating when the object of study is diffused into daily life as in the case of Taiwan's popular religion. Indeed, as a methodological tool, oral history allows neglected accounts of experience to be recovered,<sup>70</sup> as well as the giving – or amplification – of voice.<sup>71</sup> Couldry argues that, rather than the sonic aspect of voice, “more important is voice's role as the means whereby people give an account of the world in which they act. As such, voice is socially grounded, performed through exchange, reflexive, embodied, and dependent upon a material form.”<sup>72</sup> In this context – that is, in utilising a life-context approach to study lived experience of popular religion – we are able to draw on such voices to learn about the wider world in which they act and which acts upon them, as well as to witness the process of ‘performance through exchange’ through the lens of human lives. Through this process, we are permitted glimpses into who these people are, and their memories of the experiences that have shaped both themselves as human beings and their understanding and experience of Taiwan's popular religion. We also gain a

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<sup>70</sup> Perks and Thomson, “Advocacy and Empowerment.”

<sup>71</sup> Couldry, “Alternative Media and Voice,” 46.

<sup>72</sup> Couldry, *Why Voice Matters*, 129.



sense of “experiencing-as”:<sup>73</sup> That is, experiencing the world more broadly through the lens of a practitioner of popular religion in contemporary Taiwan.

It is a discomfoting challenge to summarise an entire person and life experience into a thousand words. But it is nevertheless an important element of the process of meaning-making through which the expertise garnered through lived experience can be shared and amplified. I recognise the trust these people have placed in me and the awesome responsibility of representing them truthfully. As such, in each profile, I have focussed on the key themes that stood out in each individual’s account. As a result, in this chapter, we gain insight into many different ways of understanding Taiwan’s popular religion in daily life, as well a sense of both the diversity of participants – 6 women and 6 men, ranging in age from twenty-one to their sixties – let alone the complexity of popular religion in Taiwanese society today. Notably, each participant was afforded an opportunity to specify how they would like to be referred to in this thesis, and I have thus referred to them by the names chosen rather than their full names.

The significance of family is apparent in all of these accounts of Taiwan’s popular religion, but perhaps never so prevalently or with as much reflection as in the first profile presented here, that of Chia Yin. To follow, siblings, Chris and Da-jing, offer insight into the contrast between Chris’s experience of being “in the middle” between habit and belief, and Da-jing’s enthusiastic participation and drive to protect popular religion. Conversely, Luke’s account highlights the mundanity of a popular religion so very integrated into everyday life. He focuses on convenience and nostalgia as the deciding factors for his practice. We then learn about the life of a professional ceremonialist, Chuang, who offers keen insight into the differences between popular religion in her professional and personal lives, as well as reflections on popular religion in society more broadly. Next, MJ reflects on the changes he’s experienced over the course of his life, from eating incense ash as a child growing up in a world heavily impacted by popular religion to barely participating in his sixties.

The accounts of couple Doris and Sean highlight another prevalent theme – respect – while illuminating the notion of popular religion as “common sense” and a natural and inalienable part of life. They also offer a window onto popular religious practice at the workplace and popular religion as an alternative to psychological therapy. Extending this

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<sup>73</sup> Hick, *The Existence of God*; Fitzgerald, “Experience.”

theme of psychological benefit, Willie offers a view of popular religion as a form of insurance, with practice determined by selective belief and paying attention to only what you want to. In counterpoint, in Freddie's experience of popular religion, we gain insight into the role of – and respect for – popular religion as inter-generational knowledge, above and beyond regular participation. Finally, the accounts of friends Rosely and Feng-jiao highlight how popular religious experiences underpinned by similar motivations manifest differently in their daily lives. Both point to family, tradition, and concerns for the environment, but Rosely practises mostly when she travels to visit her mother in their family home, whereas Feng-jiao's daily life is marked by popular religion despite her keen interest in Buddhism. Indeed, their accounts illustrate the blending and balancing of the personal with the social and of competing religious identities.

Together, these accounts highlight a diversity of people and a variety of ways of experiencing and understanding popular religion in contemporary Taiwan. While some of the themes that underpin them are universal, such as family or respect, they play out in real life in different ways. Indeed, participants report having different habits when it comes to popular religious practices, as well as different motivations for participation, and different understandings of what is important. Even when the actual practice may be similar, in this chapter, we hear how the thoughts behind them differ.

### ***Chia Yin: The Influence of Family***

Talking to Chia Yin, I was struck by how cheerful she was. She spent a lot of time smiling, and she had me smiling too. Indeed, her recorded interview is punctuated by giggles, chuckles, and all-out laughs.<sup>74</sup> Like many people's experience of popular religion, Chia Yin's account is heavily marked by themes of family – our conversation repeatedly returns to the immense impact of Chia Yin's family on her own experiences and behaviour. Her mother's change in religious habits in Chia Yin's teen years also changed Chia Yin's own practice, resulting in the move to vegetarian sacrifices and the chanting of Buddhist scriptures. Moreover, when asked how she knows which practices to do and when, Chia Yin answers: "Because most of the things, my grandpa, grandma and my mother have done before, so I will know 'oh, at this time we will go *baibai* and do whatever' like this."

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<sup>74</sup> Chia Yin. Interview with author, Taipei, August 20, 2018. All references to this participant cited in this thesis were derived from this interview.

Indeed, Chia Yin explicitly states: “I think Taiwan’s popular religion is– deeply rooted in family culture and community culture.”

At the time of our interview, Chia Yin is approaching 32 years old, although she is quick to point out that Taiwan also uses the lunar calendar, the difference requiring us to add a year. She was born in Kaohsiung [city in southern Taiwan] and lived there until it was time for kindergarten. Her “Agong 阿公 and Ama 阿嬤,” her maternal grandfather and grandmother, looked after Chia Yin and her sister, as well as some cousins. “When we reached kindergarten, my mum and dad had us come back to Tainan [city in southern Taiwan],” she says. She stayed in Tainan through senior high school and then attended university in Kaohsiung. After graduating, she worked in both Kaohsiung and Hsinchu [city in northern Taiwan] before relocating to Taipei around 2010 or 2011. She has remained living in Taipei, with the exception of three months spent travelling in Europe followed by some time at her family home in Tainan before finding work in New Taipei City. At the time of our interview, she worked as a project manager in the science and technology sector.

Both Chia Yin and her sister lived in Taipei, which she describes as “chaotic” with “a lot of variance” before adding that “Taipei, even Taiwan, is all quite a good-natured place.” She planned to remain working in Taipei “for the time being” unless there was a reason not to, pointing out that her aging mother lives alone in Tainan “so it depends on how her health will be in the future.”

When asked where her family are from, Chia Yin first points out that she figures there are two sides: “my mum is a Minnan person, but my dad is a Hakka person.” She explains that, on her dad’s side, “originally, we were from Guangdong province [in China] and immigrated to Miaoli [county in central Taiwan], and after several generations moved to Pingtung [county in southern Taiwan].” Nowadays, Pingtung is considered their home and where her relatives return to during major festival periods such as Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival. “Then the first thing we do when we go home is to first *bai* the home’s *shen* [gods] and ancestors,” she adds.

As for her mother’s side, Chia Yin speculates that her ancestors came from Fujian province in southern China, but “they haven’t especially explained which province in China they come from.” But her grandparents are both from Tainan county, “so my mum is also from Tainan,” she says. After her maternal grandfather and grandmother married, they moved to Kaohsiung, where Chia Yin’s mum grew up. And, after Chia Yin’s parents

married, they moved to Tainan together. When she has time, Chia Yin continues to return to Tainan for most major holidays. She says that she will do the same for Zhongyuan Festival, during the seventh lunar month when the door to the *yinjian* 陰間 is opened and the *gui* 鬼 (ghosts) are freed for the month, explaining that they will usually choose one day to *baibai* and burn paper money at their door for the Good Brothers (wandering ghosts), and then have a meal with her family. “Because I am more afraid of ghosts,” she says, laughing “so I hope to pray for peace!”

When it comes to Tomb-Sweeping Day, the April holiday when families traditionally visit the tombs of their ancestors to clean them and make offerings, she notes that the recent death of her father has changed their practice. In the past, she explains, she would arrange a table of offerings at home:

In Taiwan we say, it’s to entertain The Good Brothers, like this. Right, then, but this— Last year my dad passed away. After, because my mum has belief, which is Buddhism ... she is following that religion. So, this year’s Tomb-Sweeping Day, we have changed to follow these Buddhist activities.

“It’s not as much Taiwan’s traditional religion,” she says, explaining that instead they will spend a day at the Buddhist site, where they chant Buddhist scripture (*nianjing* 念經) before preparing vegetarian offerings (*gongpin* 供品): “Then we regard it as offering sacrifices to [*jibai* 祭拜] my dad,” she says.

When the conversation first shifts to religion and culture, one of the first things Chia Yin points out is that her initial experience with *shenming* came from her maternal grandmother and the shrine (*shenkan* 神龕) they had in their home’s living room. There, “the family would offer sacrifices to ancestors and Guanyin [*Guanshiyin Pusa* 觀世音菩薩, the Buddhist goddess of Mercy]”:

Starting from when I was young, we would all go *bai* at home. At that time, it was grandpa and grandma ... they would have a set time to *baibai* ... so we will follow grandpa and grandma to *baibai* together, like this. So, it’s starting from that period that I’ve had contact with [religion]. Then, after returning to Tainan, our family, my mother also follows my grandma’s habit.

While her grandmother still pays her respects at their home shrine every afternoon, Chia Yin explains that their home in Tainan doesn’t have a shrine, but that when she was

young they would go out to *baibai* at a temple near their home every week or two, on weekends. And on “big days” like Tomb-Sweeping Day or Lunar New Year, they would also prepare a table at home.

On it, we’d arrange the three sacrificial animals and five fruits: chicken, duck, fish, fruit and vegetables we’ve fried, and biscuits or crackers we’ve bought. Then, we’ll *baibai* at home, like this, right. But, in recent years, because my mother has converted to Buddhism, the offerings on the table have changed from non-vegetarian food to wholly vegetarian.

Their regular schedule continued until Chia Yin was a teenager, at which time it became less defined. She’s not sure why but speculates that it may be when her mother was becoming more interested in Buddhism.

Since leaving home, she doesn’t especially go to temples except for when she has a reason, like changing jobs and hoping to find a good one, or when she is going to travel and hopes “to pray for peace and health.” She also notes that if she is out for fun with friends or her sister and passes a temple, she will often go in and “pay a visit” even if she doesn’t have a reason to. Similarly, she says that if she travels abroad she will go to temples and pay respects to the local deities, citing the example of Japan. She says she and her sister always go to their regular temples in Tainan during Lunar New Year: “It’s a bit like praying for good fortune for a whole year during the Chinese New Year.”

The influence and roles of family are a theme repeated frequently in accounts of Taiwan’s popular religion, as is particularly evident in this chapter and Chapter Four, where we consider the social nature of Taiwan’s popular religion in detail. But while family is a common and recurring feature amongst participants’ accounts, it is a theme that’s especially prevalent in Chia Yin’s telling of her life story and lived experience of popular religion and one she readily reflects on.

### ***Chris and Da-jing: The Fuzzy Middle and Protecting Culture***

I met Chris, 29, during her ten-month work trip to Australia and, back in Taipei, she and her brother Da-jing, 21, were kind enough to invite me into their home, where we talked in their living room.<sup>75</sup> Both grew up in the Beitou district in northern Taipei, although Chris also spent two years studying in Taichung [city in central Taiwan]. Their

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<sup>75</sup> Chris and Da-jing. Interview with author, Taipei, July 8, 2018. All references to these participants cited in this thesis were derived from this interview.

grandparents are from Tainan [city in southern Taiwan], although Chris explains that if we go back further their ancestors are probably from coastal Fujian province in China. They both say Taipei feels like home. Indeed, Da-jing says that, for him, “because I feel that my friends are all nearby here, and I think Taiwanese people are very passionate and very kind, I just don’t have the desire to go live somewhere else.” When asked to describe Taipei, Chris focuses on its standing as an internationalised city full of tall buildings like Taipei 101: “It’s considered advanced and is also quite prosperous,” she says. Da-jing agrees, adding that he likes to introduce Taipei to his foreign friends as “really a very bustling city.” As for the Beitou area, Chris explains that the pace is a bit slower and the “human flavour” and culture is stronger:

I think here has more, um, friendliness. Like, you’re likely to know the people in your neighbourhood better. If we compare it to big cities, I think the people here have closer relationships with each other. Right. So, there is a kind of sense of home. Like if you walk along the road, you will probably have some neighbours recognise you.

When it comes to popular religion, Chris says they most often *bai* Guanyin or Matsu (Mazu 媽祖, sea goddess originating in Fujian, China). “Yes,” Da-jing agrees, “we usually go to some temples to *bai* Matsu, more or less. Right, the majority of religious beliefs in Taiwan are Matsu,” he adds. Both siblings note how their family’s influence has shaped their own experiences with religion as adults, in different ways. Da-jing feels he has stronger fate (有緣 *youyuan*) with Matsu, partly because there is a Matsu temple near their home. But also, he says, “since I was a child, we would go to Matsu temples, and follow their activities, so I feel that, spiritually, I have received a lot of Matsu’s care.” Conversely, Chris feels closer with Guanyin. She explains that, when she was a child, her grandmother’s house had a picture of Guanyin. “Every morning, grandma would face Guanyin and *baibai*, then recite scriptures. So, seeing this every day, as a result, I felt closer to Guanyin.” Furthermore, she notes, for Matsu “you definitely have to go inside a temple, and only then can you *baibai* Matsu.” When asked whether the need to go to a temple for Matsu was her own habit or a widespread custom, Chris turns to her brother, who is significantly more interested in religious and cultural matters: “it’s usually in temples, right?”

“Right, Matsu is usually always inside temples,” Da-jing confirms, prompting Chris to answer more confidently. “Oh,” she exclaims:

the reason for this is because we are used to seeing images [pictures or statues] of *shen*! ... When you really want to sincerely *baibai*, you need to see that image of Matsu. Then, there's only in temples, or special places that have that image of a *shen*, only then making it possible.

Da-jing explains that, when it comes to which temples to visit when, their family's habits are fixed: they always go to the same temples every year. But both siblings agree that it's their mother who ultimately decides which temples to visit.

Their family also pays their respects to ancestors. Chris says that, in the past, they would go to the grave to *baibai*. But because of land issues, they've been moved to a columbarium (*lingguta* 靈骨塔) and cremated. The family visits to pay their respects on Tomb-Sweeping Day. At Lunar New Year, the family will go together to *baibai* at their local temple, and their maternal grandmother, Ama, goes to pay respects to their ancestors on their behalf. During Zhongyuan, their Ama also prepares a Pudu 普渡 table with incense and fruit and burns paper money for the wandering ghosts. Chris explains that this is necessary because of the "ghost door" being open and the increased risk of spirits causing bad things to happen. Still, she clarifies, they don't need to individually participate because "Ama's representation is fine."

As for the rest of the year, Chris says she only goes to temples when with her family, and not when she's by herself. She attributes this to the fact that she doesn't strongly believe in *shenming*, but having grown up in this environment, with everyday folktales and traditions from their elders, it remains "a kind of habit." Thus, she says she finds herself in the middle, in a "fuzzy zone that's hard to grasp." Despite her lack of unwavering belief in *shenming*, Chris says she does believe in ghosts, explaining that "because ghosts feel more scary, so I think I had better believe it."

In contrast, Da-jing says he believes in both and is highly involved in religious and cultural activities. He participates in other temple-based activities and pilgrimages, explaining that "we think if you help the *shenming* do things, that *shenming* will take care of you." He also goes to temples whenever he has time and when he passes them, noting that "it just feels like when you pass by, if you *baibai*, your mind will feel more taken care of. Yes, your mind feels at ease." He likes to go to historic and famous temples because "in Taiwan, we think that temples teeming with worshippers, just like temples where lots of people go to *baibai*, it means that it is more efficacious... the things you hope for will happen more easily." Conversely, Da-jing is hesitant to go to smaller or unfamiliar

temples because of the risk that they will be “*yin temples*” (*yinmiao* 陰廟) and have ghosts rather than *shenming*. Both siblings also note that limiting their involvement to known places and events with *shenming* helps avoid being cheated because they are more reliable.

Da-jing’s caution remains apparent in his narration on fortune-telling. Both siblings agree that they don’t go to fortune-tellers because they don’t believe in it. Chris giggles as she explains that “because fortune-tellers are people, I don’t think the things they calculate are accurate.” Da-jing continues on from his sister, explaining that “they might cheat you or something, so I don’t believe in it.” As for their parents, Chris asks her brother, “they believe a little tiny bit, right?” “Maybe,” Da-jing responds, “like my name came from fortune-telling.” Chris responds, chucking, “but mine didn’t.”

For Chris, it’s clear that her participation is deeply rooted in family, in the absence of a strong sense of individual belief. She describes being taught as a child:

It’s like holding incense. When I was young, I didn’t know how to hold it. The adults in the family would tell you that you just hold your hand like this, hold the red area underneath, then you might nod your head and say, they would say, now you just have to nod three times or, yes, what to do, and then tell the *shenming* your name, what are you called, and what kind of issues you are praying for today, they would teach you how to say it.

Da-jing also notes the influence of his elders, especially as a source of information when it comes to cultural activities. But he also points to individual motivations as well as a strong desire to protect popular religion as Taiwan’s culture:

In my case, I think the first reason why I do this is because I want the culture of Taiwan to continue, not because— because people now are very busy, and then they don’t have time to participate in this activity, so this culture is slowly disappearing. Then the second thing is that I want to say, if I participate in these activities, I help the *shenming* do things, I can just get some spiritual comfort in my heart.

Despite being less involved than her brother, Chris also points to the significance of popular religion as a part of culture, explaining that she thinks it’s “pretty cool” (*man ku* 蠻酷) that the boundaries of religion are blurred with daily life:

Just like, we are all walking with *shenming* ... if you look at the culture of perhaps other countries, maybe they won’t be said to be tied to the gods ...



but, for Taiwan, I think this can be considered one of our religious cultures, but actually it's tied together with religion. It's a little complicated. Right, because if you talk about our Hakka culture, then you might have some Hakka clothing. Then, that's also a kind of cultural activity. And when that has nothing to do with *shenming*, you can clearly classify it as a cultural activity. But, for popular religion activities, it is a part of culture, and it is a part of religion. It is combined. You can't just make a straightforward cut.

Indeed, the view that popular religion is important to Taiwan's culture is one both siblings share. But, while Chris's account is marked by her own reality "in the middle," participating out of habit more than sincere belief but nevertheless unable to say she doesn't believe, Da-jing is adamant about the need to protect popular religion – as a part of Taiwan's culture – so that it continues for generations to come.

### ***Luke: Mundanity, Nostalgia, and Convenience***

Luke was born in Taipei. He grew up there, and at age 17 moved to Australia for six years. He completed high school and university in Australia, before moving back to Taiwan for work experience that he hoped would make him eligible for a visa to return to Australia. At the time of our interview,<sup>76</sup> he was working as a marketing intern at "a company that sells everything." I first met Luke in Melbourne, Australia, and interviewed him six months after he returned to Taiwan. We met up on a beautiful evening near the grand Chiang Kai-shek memorial hall in Taipei and settled on interviewing in the gardens. Luke was 23 years old at the time of interview and preferred to use English for the bulk of our conversation. He enthusiastically answered my questions with lots of laughs along the way. Albeit, with less interest in my questions about himself.

As for Taipei, "it's hot, humid, and crowded," he says laughing, then adding, "hmm not always hot, but always humid— and always crowded!" When asked about his family history, Luke answers simply: "Family's from Taiwan. Both of them. Yeah." Similarly, when asked if Taipei feels like home, he chuckles as he replies: "I mean, my family's here, so— yes? Yes."

Luke objected to the use of the word 'worship' to describe his experience with popular religion, a significant point that is addressed in the following chapter of this

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<sup>76</sup> Luke. Interview with author, Taipei, September 22, 2017. All references to this participant cited in this thesis were derived from this interview.

thesis. This came up almost immediately when we began to talk about his experience with popular religion. *Do you worship any gods— or shen 神*, I asked. “Not particularly— no. Not, not— [*sighs*— no. Not like ‘worship’. I wouldn’t use the word ‘worship’. But— ,” he replied thoughtfully, trailing off.

*What word would you use?*

Believe? But— ah you know ‘cause the, it doesn’t really work like Christianity, you don’t ‘worship’ them. I mean, you can. But— maybe just me ... I’ll believe to the degree that it doesn’t— bother me. So, like, for example if I have to go to temple every weekend, that bothers me, so I wouldn’t do to that degree. So if you say it’s like if you’re, religious enough, no. But, do I believe there’s spirits and stuff, and like gods in general? I believe they help [*pause*] when you really need help. Like, either spiritually or mentally. Yeah.

Often, Luke’s descriptions of popular religion suggest a general awareness rather than an understanding of the details. He says he’s “fairly certain” that a lot of people, particularly younger people, go to temples for their relationships. He explains he will go “just kind of like to wish everything goes well, with my, like, relationship and everything.” He also recalls that he once went to a temple for his career, and that he attends in periods of uncertainty, providing he has time: “But, I wouldn’t go there every day and pray that, you know, it’s not worship, but it help me mentally to feel like, to calm my— doubt. I guess.”

Other than the major festivals, he says that he will also go to temples if he’s with his family, “or if I actually feel like I need some faith, need to build up my confidence, or eliminate my doubts, I will, but otherwise I’ll, I will say I don’t go to temple that often.” He points out that he also won’t go if “it’s too far.”

Luke is initially clear that he believes the benefit of turning to *shen* for assistance is psychological. But, in talking through his reasoning, he lands on a more neutral position, ultimately declaring that the benefit is “half-half” psychological and “supernatural.” He describes a “just in case” attitude and explains that, in difficult circumstances, popular religion allows people to “mentally feel like” the possibility of accidents is decreased, even though they know accidents can still occur.

Luke has two younger siblings – a brother and sister – and says, “I think they’re either equal or less [religious] than me.” Even so, he says the rest of his family believes “a little bit more” than him, “but not like to [a] ridiculous level.” Generally, he explains, they don’t go to temples but when it comes to major occasions like Tomb-Sweeping Day or Dragon Boat Festival (the fifth day of the fifth lunar month), “we would try to do all the stuff that we can.” For Tomb-Sweeping Day, specifically, he explains that his family will prepare a meal and his extended family will gather. They will arrange food offerings on the altar table (*shenzhuo* 神桌) to pay respects to his ancestors. His grandparents are represented on the table by a photo, but Luke isn’t clear on the specifics, noting that “there’s a photo in the frame there, and then I think there’s a small god, everything. I don’t know what this— what this the god is.” After arranging the food, they leave some incense to burn. “We will come back when the incense is finished. It’s like to let them have the meal and stuff.” This is called “*bai zuxian* 拜祖先 [paying respects to ancestors], maybe,” he adds. He says that his parents sometimes *shangxiang* 上香 (burn incense before a spirit tablet) “for their parents,” reflecting on how the practice allows the living to feel closer to the deceased and speculating that he would do the same if his parents passed:

I will probably do that ... because it just made me feel like they are with me.  
Same thing with Western culture when they go to the— what’s it called?  
Tomb. Yeah, yeah, go to like those places, just to feel like they’re still with  
you.

Luke says that Tomb-Sweeping Day is one of the few times he burns paper money, which he doesn’t do often because of the environmental impact. He explains that this is done as a family for his ancestors, but not every family member will have time and “it doesn’t matter” because “as long as there’s people doing it, it’s okay.”

He speculates that people in companies also burn paper money during Zhongyuan: “They have like food or money. I don’t really like it. I mean it’s fun, but it’s harmful for the environment, so, still do, but much less.” Indeed, he says he never burns paper money for the Good Brothers: “I don’t do it. I’m not sure if that is a good thing, because if you give them maybe they’ll ask [for] more.”

Despite his statement that his family does as much as they can for major festivals, Luke takes a casual approach to the other festivals on the calendar, initially saying he personally doesn’t participate before explaining “no, like maybe *Duanwu* 端午 [Mandarin:

Dragon Boat] Festival, but only because I can eat *zongzi* 粽子 [Mandarin].” When asked about Lunar New Year, he says that it’s like a family reunion and they have a family dinner, play mahjong, and get red envelopes of money. He starts saying that his family don’t *bai*, but quickly corrects himself: “I don't. My family do. My fathers and their bothers do, yeah.”

Overall, Luke’s account frequently offers a sense of the mundanity of a popular religion so integrated into daily life. But, despite his casual approach, it is clear that he values the family element of religious life. When asked how he knows what to do in any given situation, he declares that he “just” follows his parents “because they know what to do ... Most of the time you’re influenced by your parents. So, how you do it is different each family.”

Indeed, when asked about the importance of popular religion, Luke muses that *Yuelao* 月老 (the *shen* for romantic matters) is “not that important” but, paying respects to ancestors and major festivals is, owing to the role of family:

Because you're doing this with your family, so, it's kind of like, what's it called? Nostalgic, means like— make you think about your childhood ... [if] you stop doing it just feel[s] weird, sometimes. Like *Guonian* 過年 [Mandarin: Lunar New Year], I will feel weird if I don't eat *Nianye fan* 年夜飯 [Mandarin: New Year's Eve family dinner] which I didn't sometimes when I was in town, in Australia, but I will still try to get in my friends and have a dinner.

### ***Chuang: The Professional Practitioner***

Chuang differs from the other participants in this study in that her work as a ceremonialist meant she was professionally involved in popular religion. As a result, she often has a broader knowledge than other participants.<sup>77</sup> I met Chuang in what looked like a regular restaurant or café, but actually had several rooms with altars out the back. She led me through to one such room to record our interview. She spoke confidently and was very matter-of-fact, but nonetheless generous with her time and answers to my questions, and gave me a tour of the place afterwards. At one point, bells could be heard ringing repeatedly as a small procession of people walked through the building ringing

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<sup>77</sup> Chuang. Interview with author, Taipei, July 17, 2018. All references to this participant cited in this thesis were derived from this interview.

them. Chuang explains that this was so that the soul of the recently deceased could follow the sounds, helping them to find their spirit tablet, which would then be enshrined. The religious practitioner walked at the front ringing the bells, and the deceased person's family members walked behind. "I can take you to see that later," she adds.

Chuang lived in Taipei City, where she was born and grew up, and was turning 40 in the year of our interview. As for her ancestors, she "had heard that they came from China," but her mother was from northern Taiwan and her father from southern Taiwan. Chuang says Taipei feels like home but still laments that she might consider moving to Taiwan's northern mountains because Taipei is "a place with a lot of people, the population density is very high, and then it's quite noisy, and then it's also quite hot and humid, so I don't really want to always live here."

She has previously worked in a non-profit, as a civil servant, and at an architecture firm. But her current job was as a ceremonialist; helping people deal with the aftermath of death. "To put it simply," she says:

In terms of Taiwan's popular religion ... it is generally believed that after a person dies, this soul [*linghun* 靈魂] leaves the body. And we still have to help this soul do many things, let them be reborn to a better place. This is what we do for the soul; the other part is what we do for the people in the world of the living [*yangshijian ren* 陽世間人].

Chuang's work sees her assist the deceased's family or friends: "Maybe they want to help the deceased person be memorialised, and better let their soul go to the next reincarnation. So, after a person dies, in addition to dealing with physical matters, they may also have to deal with matters of the soul." As the ceremonialist, her role is to "help them arrange these things" and advise how they should be done. "There are a lot of people who need to help," she says. "So, the ceremonialist is more like a planning role, and then they know in that aspect, which people to look for to help, so that this family can take care of what they want to do."

She explains that, in today's "commercial society," "the whole thing will be simplified":

Because every aspect will generate a business, a kind of industry, and the ceremonialist is responsible for connecting these industries, and then helping the family to make a plan. The family can simply say that they will

just pay, and then we can find the people they need to help them with things, the items needed, the space needed, the environment, the venue, etc.

As for her personal life, Chuang says that she doesn't especially *bai shen* or participate in related activities. She does pay respects to ancestors, mostly during festival periods, at which time she would go to a pagoda to visit their spirit tablets. Chuang notes that her ancestors' tablets were not kept at home due to a lack of space, explaining that older people and those in the countryside are more likely to have their ancestors at home. She also says that she would typically go to pay respects with her dad at his request: "Mainly it's my dad saying we will go, matters like this it's always him remembering, then he will tell me a few days before we go, and we will clear some time, and go." Chuang explains that they mostly pay respect to ancestors during holidays because "festivals are when the whole family gets together." On such days, they would "prepare many rich dishes for the ancestors to enjoy." She emphasises the need for the food to look delicious, noting that "according to the kind of word that's been spread, they use smell; when they smell the flavour, they have eaten it." They also burn incense and sometimes paper money: "Sometimes I feel like I want to buy some [paper money] to burn. Sometimes I feel I don't need to buy it, these offerings are enough. I just look at my mood." As for Zhongyuan, she explains that her father sometimes participates but not every year. Even so, she acknowledges that Zhongyuan is a big event for Taiwanese and that even some public offices would prepare Pudu sacrifices accordingly. As such, people can sign up to attend a pre-prepared public offering rather than arrange one in their home.

Despite her indications that she was not personally overly interested in religious activities, Chuang shows great thought and care in her approach to her ancestors. "For Taiwanese people, in fact the deepest meaning is you must remember your ancestors, thank your ancestors," she says:

I personally don't pay much attention to this *bai* activity. But I think that when you have decided that we are going to the pagoda to *bai* our ancestors in two days, in fact, at this time, you are already thinking about what I should prepare to take. Then, how many bowls should I prepare? Then what are the dishes in those bowls? Then how do I match it, so that it is delicious and beautiful? And then in this process, in fact, your intentions are already conveyed to your ancestors.

For Chuang, it is this process and preparation and the meaning behind it that are most important, “not that after you go to the site, you light incense and pay respects [*bai yi bai* 拜一拜].” She decides what to arrange according to her mood, including whether or not to purchase paper money. Chuang likes to buy flowers in addition to the standard offerings, explaining that “I think the flowers are very important. Then, after, I will go there and ... see how I want to arrange them.”

Chuang has reflected on the mental shift she experiences through this process. “I have shared this with some people, but I find it quite interesting,” she says:

At the start I feel like saying, *baibai* is quite a troublesome thing. Because you have to arrange it in advance, and then you have to drive somewhere so far away. It may take an hour to go there. Right, then *baibai* and come back ... you may use a whole day. But after every time I *baibai*, I will nevertheless have a kind of feeling that my body and mind are free from worry, which is quite interesting.

After she has finished arranging the offerings, she takes photos. “Later I discovered that I had accumulated photos of the *baibai* offerings, and I thought it was quite fun,” she says. The flowers included in her offerings, Chuang notes, are her own personal touch. She feels that the addition of flowers as a living thing makes it seem like the whole thing comes alive. But, she notes, this is unrelated to tradition:

Actually, as far as you really talk about popular religion, many have regulations, but I don’t care about those things. I just think that if something is good, I want to *bai* with what I think is good; many have regulations that say what you can *bai* and what you cannot *bai*, these are very long-winded.

Even so, she follows the rules when it comes to her job helping others. She explains that some people care about what you should and should not *bai*. And the varied nature of popular religion is further complicated by people not knowing the details:

Different places have different regulations, so it’s very complicated. It’s impossible to know all the regulations in each place, so usually your family members tell me what you know about your place, because they also can’t know all of them. If in what you know, there is something I should pay attention to, just tell me.

Chuang says her work is important precisely because most people don't know how to do these things, so her job is to help them. When people don't share such information with her, "it means they don't know. Then follow me, let me do it, and I will do it for them in the most general way."

### ***MJ: Witness to Change***

MJ is kind, lively, and excitable. He is often quick to include English words in his speech and does so with enthusiasm as he reflects on how he's seen the world change over his lifetime.<sup>78</sup> He talks about eating incense ash as a child, the ongoing importance of religion in rural areas, and his own transition from that environment to barely participating in popular religion. At the end of our conversation, he again reminds me that he is "very happy" that he is able to help with this project. His account is underpinned by a sense of respect for popular religion as a tradition but, at the same time, he repeatedly hints that practices are tied to a lack of education and muses that they will change or disappear as people become more educated. Even so, he reasons that his own lack of participation is a result of general good luck in his life, meaning he hasn't been driven to popular religion.

MJ was born in 1954 in Madou district of Tainan [in southern Taiwan] and is the youngest of seven, with three older brothers and three older sisters. "I'm already in my sixties. I'm about to retire," he says. He came to work in Taipei "around 1970" after graduating from university in Taichung, and has lived in Taipei ever since. He later married and raised his children in Taipei. Despite living in Taipei for so long, MJ still feels that Madou is his home. He returns there to *bai* his parents with his extended family every year during Lunar New Year. He describes Taipei as "an extremely friendly *city* [English]" and notes that Taiwanese people are generally very friendly and glad to help foreigners. MJ worked in telecoms, first as an engineer and then a sales manager, and now as a consultant. In the past, his work often took him abroad for training, usually to Europe. He adds, "I often proudly say that I have never used my own money to fly abroad!"

When asked where his ancestors are from, MJ says he doesn't know how to answer this question because, although most people came from China at some point, their ancestry is mixed. His parents were also born in Tainan, and he notes that he was a

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<sup>78</sup> MJ. Interview with author, Taipei, November 18, 2018. All references to this participant cited in this thesis were derived from this interview.



locally-born Taiwanese, and didn't come from China in 1949. He explains that his older brothers all had Japanese names, and his sense was that his father was Japanese:

My parents were considered Japanese-registered Taiwanese people. Because, at that time, it was controlled by Japan. So my mother and father also both spoke a bit of Japanese. Ah, when I was small, my first *language* [English] was Japanese. Because I could only count, I could count in Japanese, from one to a hundred, but I couldn't use Chinese [*Zhongwen* 中文] from one to a hundred. My mother taught me.

MJ often prefers to speak Tâi-gí (Taiwanese Hokkien) over Mandarin, explaining that he has spoken Tâi-gí since he was young and slowly transitioned to speaking Mandarin after moving to northern Taiwan, where it was more common. But he still spoke Tâi-gí as much as possible and noted that his Mandarin pronunciation wasn't very standard. Even so, he spoke Mandarin for the bulk of our interview, correctly reasoning that speaking Tâi-gí "might bring about some complications" for my research.

As for his habits when it comes to popular religion, MJ says he will *baibai* if someone else asks him to go, "I won't refuse," but that he otherwise won't do it. "I don't very superstitiously go *baibai* them. I just respectfully go *bai*, that's all." He says that this also applies when he returns home to Madou; he goes when asked. But they do always *bai* his parents at the pagoda where their ashes are housed. MJ points out that "I also don't say '*bai* ancestors', it's that I *bai* my mum and dad," explaining that he doesn't remember his grandparents.

"I still don't hold incense," he says. "We just go use our hands to *baibai*. Occasionally, in addition, my brothers, they will hold incense and burn paper money. Then I insist I don't want it." He cites three reasons for his decision not to use incense and paper money: Firstly, he says he thinks he has been influenced by Europe. Secondly, he was influenced by a spirit medium, who said that most of what she had seen from the after world were ghosts and that she often saw ghosts standing beside the incense eating the smoke. And, thirdly, he was concerned about the environment and the air pollution caused by burning paper money. He adds, "I once saw a report, that said burning paper money was the most foolish." Laughing, he explains: "Why? Say you use real money to go buy fake money and then burn it. If this isn't foolish, what is it?" He further notes that the habit of burning incense and paper money is changing and that the government of Taiwan will slowly educate people.

MJ doesn't go *bai* his parents on Tomb-Sweeping Day, although his brother in Madou will. As for Zhongyuan, MJ says he looks at it with respect, noting that this is a common tradition. "We don't necessarily believe, but we will respect it." He explains that, even though he has never been inside the temple near his home to *bai*, his family participate in their annual Pudu feast, "we say for keeping the peace." Aside from the element of peace and safety, MJ mentions that it is convenient to participate because it is very close to his home and doesn't cost much money, noting that he doesn't know if he would participate otherwise.

As with most, MJ says that it was his parents who taught him about religious activities. When he was young, his parents would take him to *bai* at a temple and his mother took him to a fortune-teller. He also recalls being three or four years old and woken in the middle of the night to participate in a temple event, saying that even though it was almost sixty years ago, he remembers it because the surprise wakeup was uncomfortable. He reflects on how many people believed temples could help with all sorts of problems, and how the number of people who believe in that way is slowly reducing. He recounts how when he was a child, they believed that the incense ash from temples could cure diseases, adding that now no one believes that: "But, when I was a child, I ate it, right. In the past, my mum believed, because she wasn't educated. When I had a cold, I ate it [laughs]. Just mixed it with water and gave it to me to drink." He continued to participate in events at his childhood temple as an adult when he would go back to visit his parents, but says he hasn't since they passed away.

MJ muses that his lack of interest in religious activities as an adult is because of his life experience and a lack of unfortunate events. "Maybe it's individual," he says: "If someone's life is rough, then you might go to the temple and pray [*qiqiu* 祈求] for peace."

He also thinks it might be related to his outlook on life: He believes in letting nature take its course, "so there's nothing to pray for, if this is what life is like, that's it." He further speculates that he would participate in more religious activities if he had not moved to Taipei, reasoning that religion is more important in the countryside and in southern Taiwan, and mentioning that this might be because of differences in education levels. But, despite his view that popular religious practices are tied to education, MJ's account of his own lived experience of Taiwan's popular religion makes it clear that he values treating popular religion and those who participate with respect. And at times his reasons for not participating are also grounded in popular religion, such as reasoning that

there is no need to burn incense if it is the ghosts who are benefitting from it rather than the ancestors for whom it was intended.

### ***Doris and Sean: Common Sense, Respect, and Offerings at the Office***

Despite having little free time, Doris, 36, was determined to participate in an interview with me. Eventually, she asked to meet on a Saturday evening after a day of teaching as part of her work in the employment services industry. Then, she asked if her boyfriend could come too, because it was supposed to be their evening together. And even though a typo when entering the address into their maps app had caused Doris and Sean, 36, to walk 20 minutes too far and have to double back, they were nothing but joyful and enthusiastic when they finally arrived in my living room on a Saturday night. They chatted fervently for over three hours, only ending our interview at midnight.<sup>79</sup>

Doris and Sean met at an event run by Dharma Drum Mountain, a Buddhist sect, and said they had been together for two years and 5 months at the time of our interview. Doris was born in Hsinchu and grew up there, while Sean was born in New Taipei City but says he grew up both there and in Chiayi [city in southwestern Taiwan]. Doris moved to Taipei when she started university and, apart from a year-long working holiday in Australia, had lived there for the past 18 years, although she had started working in the nearby city of Taoyuan and was going between the two. For Doris, her place in Taipei felt like home: “If disorder feels like home, our house has it! It feels very like home.” Like Doris, Sean, a mechanical engineer, also worked in Taoyuan and had commuted before moving there four years ago to be closer to his work, although Taipei still felt like home.

Doris says her mother was from Pingtung in southern Taiwan, and her dad from Hsinchu. Doris was unsure where her ancestors came from but speculated that it was Fujian in southern China, noting that she was a Minnan person. Sean’s parents were both from Chiayi and later moved to Taipei. He notes that his paternal grandparents and his paternal great grandparents “at that time, they were already in Taiwan. ... Right, so we are fishermen,” he explains. Surprised, Doris responds: “Oh, I thought everyone’s grandparents had come over from China!”

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<sup>79</sup> Doris and Sean. Interview with author, Taipei, October 27, 2018. All references to these participants cited in this thesis were derived from this interview.

When asked to describe Taipei, Doris jokes: “Should I tell the truth or not?” before focussing on the many conveniences of modern Taipei – the many exhibitions, art, theatre, libraries, exercise centres, convenience stores, and the convenient transport:

Some people say in Taipei you can go both up to the mountains and down to the sea in one day. It’s just a place that’s very suitable to live in. And, really when it comes to law and order, it’s also very good.

As for religious activities, Doris muses that her family is quite religious. Her family home in Hsinchu has an altar table (*shenzhuo* 神桌), and her mum pays her respects during the three major festivals, at which time she will cook and offer fruit, and *baibai*. Doris explains that “because my mother is quite lazy” and it takes a lot of preparation and is very serious, her mother only goes to the trouble around three times per year. Doris is sure that there are three important festivals a year, but she’s forgotten which festivals these are. When prompted, she says that they don’t participate in Zhongyuan, but that Tomb-Sweeping Day is very important. For Tomb-Sweeping Day, Doris’s family gather to *bai* her father, whose ashes, she says, are kept at a centrally managed place with beautiful scenery. Doris also notes that her mother used to use incense, but now prefers not to because of its negative impact on the environment and individuals’ health.

Doris explains that the family’s altar is divided into two sides, with one dedicated to ancestors and the other to Guanyin. When asked why this *shen* in particular, Doris replies “today is the first time I’ve considered this question. Maybe it’s to do with their fate, right?” Her family’s altar was installed around the time Doris was in middle school, after her family experienced a serious car accident. Following the accident, her paternal grandmother suggested they install an altar for safety.

Doris says she used to go to temples to *bai* quite often, speculating that this was because she felt less peaceful at the time and psychological consultations aren’t very popular in Taiwan. But she no longer participates in this manner due to studying Buddhism through one of the four major sects – Dharma Drum Mountain – which gives her the sense of peace she was looking for. Even so, she explains, when her boss asks her to *baibai* on her company’s behalf, she does. She notes that this is also to be done with a serious and respectful frame of mind, but isn’t personal for her. Both Sean and Doris say they will pay their respects whenever passing an altar, which, for Doris, means that when she is at the family home in Chiayi, she will *bai* every time she passes the altar on the second floor, and thus do so daily.

Over the course of our conversation, Doris increasingly remembers her family's various ties to religion. "When you ask me, I suddenly remembered my family's religious beliefs. I just thought I would add one thing. My grandma and my grandpa are Yiguandao. You should have heard of Taoism Yiguandao, right?" So, she explains, she had forgotten because it had been some time since her paternal grandparents had passed away, but growing up, every Lunar New Year they would do the "Five Thousand Kowtow" (*wu qian koushou* 五千叩首) ceremony. And every month there would be an endless supply of fruit, because her grandparents had a Buddhist hall (*fotang* 佛堂) on the third or fourth floor. Every Wednesday, people would come to make tributes and there would be a ceremony. She describes it as "quite pious" but notes that she didn't necessarily participate, except for important festivals, which they would need to attend. Additionally, every year they would go clean the Buddhist hall:

Because everyone would hold incense, the ceiling was all very yellow. So we had to do this job. Suddenly recalling this now, my family is indeed quite religious. No wonder my friend said that I'm very suitable to come [interview]! ... Right, I have quite a lot of religious beliefs.

As for Sean, he explains that his immediate family does not have a home altar because this responsibility fell to more senior relatives. His immediate family only *bai* at the family altar during Lunar New Year. He further notes that his mother does *bai* the Good Brothers at Zhongyuan, but explains that this is out the front of their house rather than inside. They will prepare a table of sacrifices and burn silver paper money. Sean participates if he is there, but not if he isn't home. Although, he notes that he may still participate at his workplace if asked to. Sean says that it is his mother who primarily cares, so his mother will remember when to *bai* and what to do. He and his father cooperate, but don't take the initiative.

For Sean, temple attendance is not something he does without a clear reason. He explains that he typically goes when there's a "special need," such as when his family says they want to. He says this is in part because he's busy, but also because he doesn't especially trust religion to give him comfort, and thus doesn't seek it out.

Both Doris and Sean say they don't participate in other religious activities aside from occasionally volunteering at Dharma Drum Mountain. Even so, Doris says she likes lively events and hopes to participate in a Matsu pilgrimage, which she describes as a "cultural activity": "I want to experience our traditional Taiwanese culture," she says.

Sean characterises his relationship with Taiwan's popular religion is one of respect: He respects popular religion in the same way he respects all religions. He likens paying respects to ancestors and *shen* to respecting the hosts of places you visit, before adding that "there's also the hope to help oneself have peace wherever you go, like peace for the people in your family." In response, Doris says:

I think that in Taiwan, *bai* ancestors, I think the earliest must be if I consider it a matter of being grateful for your blessings [*yinshui siyuan* 飲水思源, lit: when you drink water, think of its source]. Just like your respect for your parents is in your blood, then why do you have this? In fact, there are actually many, many people before you. It's a kind of respect. It's a way of thinking of them and remembering them.

As for the value of religion to her personally, Doris says it's very important. She initially struggles to put her thoughts into words, but eventually explains that "it must already be a kind of *lifestyle* [English]. It cannot be separated from me. It is already a very natural existence." Indeed, Doris says that for Taiwanese people, popular religion, and *baibai* in particular, is "common sense":

It's passed down like this from my paternal grandparents, my maternal grandparents, so my dad and mum did it just like this. So, when you start doing it, you don't ask [for] too many reasons. You've been doing it like this since you were small, so only when you grow up will you reflect on whether you want to do it or not. But when you're young, you're just very used to it. Just like, it's already a part of your life ... This is also a characteristic of Taiwan: Maybe westerners will think 'why do you *bai*' but, as for here in Taiwan, you want to say 'oh, because we want to respect them so we will *bai*' and we will *bai* right away. We just don't have too many doubts about this matter. But it has already become a kind of, it seems to be a kind of *common sense* [English]. It seems that there are not that many people who will go *question* [English] this matter.

Furthermore, she again returns to the role of popular religion as a form of psychological therapy, speculating that is the other reason popular religion is so prevalent in Taiwan: "If you look at Western countries, they'll go find a person to chat to. Then, we will all go chat with *shenming*."

### *Willie: An Insurance Policy*

For Willie popular religion was a type of insurance. When we met in central Taipei, he spoke matter-of-factly, characterising popular religion as insurance, centred around selective belief and practicing based on what you think you need.<sup>80</sup>

A 31-year-old website developer at the time of our interview, Willie was born in the Neihu District of Taipei. He explains that his mum's side of the family were *benshengren* 本省人, having settled in Taiwan prior to 1945, and his dad's side were *waishengren* 外省人, with his paternal grandfather having come from Jiangxi province in China:

He came with the KMT troops, during that time, that ... war with China over there. When he was a teenager, he was sent to the military. Then, he came with the Nationalist government to Taiwan. After, he settled in Taipei.

Willie lived in Neihu until moving to Kaohsiung City in southern Taiwan for four years of university. He then spent a further two years studying in Hsinchu before completing his year of compulsory military service, which he describes as "a very special experience. I think the circumstances were quite unlike modern life." After completing his service, he moved back to Neihu around five years before our interview. He reflects on the decision to move back after the seven-year period when he lived away and didn't see his parents often:

I thought that Mum and Dad are also older, so, it was best, or, because I am the only son in our family. I have two older sisters, so I'm the only male ... so, there might come a day where I nevertheless would return to Taipei to look after my family. Rather than only going back at that time, better to just take a look at whether Taipei had some alright work. In that case, I came back early, ahead of schedule.

For Willie, Taipei can be described as a modern international city and is characterised by its fast pace and the various different groups of people who live there. He says that Taipei, and particularly Neihu, feels like home: "Without a doubt," he says. "It's the place I grew up, so, in the past every time I was there, maybe in, in Kaohsiung, and return to Taipei, return to Neihu, it was all special. I would think 'oh, how comfortable!' It was the definition of feeling like home. It truly has that kind of sense of home."

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<sup>80</sup> Willie. Interview with author, Taipei, August 18, 2018. All references to this participant cited in this thesis were derived from this interview.

When it comes to religious activities, Willie says his family doesn't really have traditional *jibai* 祭拜. Rather, they usually go *bai* at bigger festivals such as Dragonboat Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, Tomb-Sweeping Day, and Lunar New Year. He explains that, because his family home does not have a shrine, his dad would typically go to the balcony to *bai* and ask certain *shen* and the ancestors to come enjoy the meal and paper money that had been prepared for them. His family typically burn paper money and incense, which he sees as an important element of practice: "I think that offering sacrifices [*jibai* 祭拜] is a, is a kind of sincerity," he says. It is for this reason that his family will offer food and gold paper money to his Yeye 爺爺 (paternal grandfather). If his sisters can come home, they will also participate, "but the most important thing is that my dad and I will go to *bai*." His mother never participates in the practice. Willie says he's never asked her why, but since he was a child, she's never done it. She prepares the food but does not *bai*.

For Tomb-Sweeping Day, Willie explains that because his Yeye was in the military, "he was interred on that land, just like that columbarium [*lingguta* 靈骨塔], living in the military. After we *baibai*, we might also go to where Yeye is and *bai* some more."

Zhongyuan is one festival for which Willie says his family also does not especially engage in popular religious practices. His family also doesn't go to temples all that often, except perhaps for special events like Lunar New Year. He also might go if he has a particular reason to, like before he started his military service or when his sister was giving birth, or if he's sight-seeing and comes across a temple. "After you *baibai*, maybe you will feel like your heart is more peaceful, a little more calm," he adds. He does not participate in other temple activities, but will go take a look if a Matsu pilgrimage is passing by.

Willie says that which temples he goes to is mostly based on habit: His family took him to Xingtian Temple [in Taipei] when he was young, so that's where he goes now. Or, he went to the temple near his university and felt it was effective, so he continued to go there. Indeed, Willie says the Earth God (Tudi Gong 土地公) near his university is the *shen* he has the most fate with. He explains that when he asked to be admitted to the university, the Earth God allowed him to be, and that he would go *bai* and the *shen* would let him feel more at peace, so he is grateful. "Afterwards, if we were going out for fun, I would also *jibai* with him a bit, and at the same time chat with him, that kind of thing."



Even so, Willie explains that he primarily only believes in paying respects to his ancestors, and is otherwise selective about what he believes in and practises. With regards to ancestors, he says, “I feel that they are living above us, maybe they’re, maybe also silently taking care of us, and we hope they will live happily up above.” He says he knows what to do because of his parents and what he did when he was young, likening his religious practice to “buying insurance.” It is his parents to whom he usually turns if he has a religion-related question (though they don’t always have the answers), and he describes these practices as “very very important” to himself and his family. But he is clear about the selective nature of his popular religion: “Some things, we will listen to, but we think maybe this isn’t something we really need in our lives. So maybe we won’t go, won’t go and pay attention to this bit,” he says. “We are more inclined to go believe selectively. What we want to believe, right. We think this thing might help us, so we’ll go believe it.”

### ***Freddie: Inter-Generational Knowledge***

Maternal influence and a deep respect for family and intergenerational knowledge underlined Freddie telling of popular religion in his daily life.<sup>81</sup> Freddie, 31, met me on an evening in Taipei’s Da’an District, where we both lived and he grew up. We spoke on the campus of National Taiwan University. We started off in the library until loud music started playing to warn that it was half an hour until closing time, so we finished our interview outside on one of Taipei’s warm summer evenings. Freddie preferred to speak in English, saying that it felt strange to speak Mandarin to me.

After Freddie’s grandparents came to Taiwan from Fujian in southern China, his parents also grew up in Taipei. He had worked in Hsinchu for a year, as well as the Matsu islands where he spent his military service, and which he fondly remembers for the unpolluted night sky. For the time being, Taipei was his home; he likes the warmth and friendliness of its people, and says he is used to the “pace of life.” He planned to stay in Taipei for at least five more years, but notes that he might like to try working at his company’s European or American offices someday if given the chance.

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<sup>81</sup> Freddie. Interview with author, Taipei, August 21, 2018. All references to this participant cited in this thesis were derived from this interview.

Freddie worked in IT, as a service engineer, having been doing similar work for the eight years since he graduated university. He was also studying for an International MBA, which was on his list of life goals: “I need to get the master no matter what.”

Of his parents, Freddie says that his mother participated in Taoism and his father Buddhism. It was only his mother who went to a temple regularly (about once a month), with his father attending less often. Freddie himself says he joined them “rarely” once every few years. Freddie recounts that both his parents had strongly religious upbringings, and muses that perhaps the comparative lack of religious education in his own upbringing contributes to his less regular attendance at temples.

Even so, his mother was a key influence in Freddie’s own religious habits. “Actually, my mom would, were asking me to come with her if I have time, but if I don’t, she would just kind of go to their temple and pray for me.” But, Freddie explains, a lot of the time he attends temples not specifically to pray but for tourism, especially if he travels to other areas or if someone visits him from overseas. Even in those times, he notes, his parents have taught him to be respectful:

*When you’re ... passing by, do you stop in?*

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Well, I guess my— my parents ... educated me that way I need to do pay respect to them, and when I pay respect I would sincerely to pay respect like telling my name, telling them where I live or something, yeah. If I need to pray for something, like I need to pray for my health or my job or something, I will also pray for them.

Respect for past generations is also evident in his family’s practices regarding ancestors. Although his family pays their respects to *shen* at temples, “we worship our ancestors the most, yeah. Comparing with the religion, yeah,” Freddie says, drawing a separation between ‘religion’ and the ancestor worship his family more often practises. “We worship our ancestors to respect our ancestors at home,” he explains, “‘cause we have like *paiwei* 牌位 [spirit tablets]. ... For both my mother's family or my father's family, we all have altars in our houses for different ancestors, no matter they are from my father's side or ... from my mother's side.”

Freddie recounts that his whole family participates in paying respects to his ancestors on the first and fifteenth days of each lunar month. In line with his Buddhism,

Freddie's father is a fulltime vegetarian but his mother shares in the custom for those two days every lunar month, and sometimes Freddie does, too.

My mother will prepare food and drinks on that day. So, not sure how to say in English we call it *jibai* 祭拜 [to offer sacrifice (to one's ancestors)].

In, on those days and then we will need to stand in front of the table which [is] full of food and they pay respect to our ancestors.

In the past, Freddie says, they would also burn incense and paper money but have stopped because "my grandparents would do that but my father and my mother would not."

Although Freddie describes this practice as "quite important for me," explaining that this is "because my parents told me that's important," he himself hasn't participated in "a few years" since moving out of the family home. His parents will still invite him to participate if they think it's an important day, and he'll go if he has time: "If I'm not occupied by my job or school stuffs I would definitely go, yeah." One such important day is Tomb-Sweeping Day, when Freddie says his extended family would also attend his home to pay respects to their ancestors.

Despite his esteem for the inter-generational knowledge his parents have passed down to him, Freddie is only knowledgeable about some aspects of his family's customs. When asked whether he does anything for Zhongyuan in the seventh lunar month, he responds that he thinks they do a "similar thing as Tomb-Sweeping Day." His gap in knowledge becomes apparent when he is asked whether he does anything relating to the Good Brothers, the hungry ghosts thought to roam during the seventh lunar month. Freddie thinks maybe his mother participates in Zhongyuan rituals, but isn't sure. Still, he says he pays attention to Zhongyuan taboos, as he was taught as a child, even though his parents "barely mentioned about it after I grew up." His respect for his mother and inter-generational knowledge is also evident in his attitude towards teaching these taboos for the seventh lunar month to any children he has in future:

*Do you think if you have children, will you tell them the same thing?*

My mom would tell my kids ... Maybe at that time my mom would tell me again about the importance of these, yeah. And wish I could pay attention for my kid.

*Do you think you'd be listening to, like, make your mum feel better about it or because you believe, or—?*

Yeah. Maybe I would. So, to make my mom feel better, yeah. Yeah, I will also notify or tell my kid about stories or taboos in that month. ... But I think that I maybe ... I'm not pretty sure maybe, maybe that depends on my wife or something.

Freddie further reflects on the impact his parents have on his own behaviour when asked about his habits regarding the burning of incense and paper money. He notes that his family no longer burns incense or paper money at home and, while they also don't burn paper money at temples, they will sometimes burn incense, "but not ... every time." When asked why, he explains, "I don't know, because maybe just my parents think it's good enough with *shaoxiang* 燒香 [to burn incense]." Most of the time, if he attends a temple with friends or family, he would burn incense if they do, but not if he attends alone. "Maybe at this part I mostly follow with my father because my father would not do that, only my mom would that," he says. "You just, from these talks, just reminds me how much my parents affect me," he reflects.

Freddie's telling of his religious life highlights both the social nature of popular religion and how he operates within that structure, as well as his own respect for intergenerational knowledge. This respect is most evident in Freddie's deference to what his parents have taught him, a theme repeated over and over throughout this interview. Indeed, even when he doesn't explicitly set out to follow his parents' direction, he still internalises their advice to refer to in future, taking mental note of his mother's recommendations so that he might refer back to them someday.

### ***Rosely and Feng-jiao: Tradition and Fate***

I met Rosely while on a Matsu pilgrimage in central Taiwan and she agreed to meet me a few weeks later for an interview. I visited her at her Taipei apartment, and she brought her friend Feng-jiao, who she reasoned would be more knowledgeable about religious matters.<sup>82</sup> Both were exceptionally welcoming and kind. Their accounts of popular religion are underpinned by similar motivations that manifest differently in their daily

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<sup>82</sup> Rosely and Feng-jiao. Interview with author, Taipei, October 26, 2018. All references to these participants cited in this thesis were derived from this interview.

lives. Both point to family and tradition but, even so, Feng-jiao reflects on not being able to force your children to participate.

Rosely was born in Chiayi county [in southwestern Taiwan] in the 54<sup>th</sup> year of the Republic (1965) and grew up there. She moved to Taipei for work and had lived in Banqiao [district of New Taipei City] for 16 years and other areas of Taipei before that. Her sister lived on another floor of the same apartment building, which she explains was a reason for choosing to move there. Feng-jiao was born in Taichung [city in central Taiwan] in the 49<sup>th</sup> year of the Republic (1960) and grew up there. She moved to Banqiao when she got married and had lived there for 36 years at the time of our interview. Both Feng-jiao and Rosely had only lived in their respective home city and Taipei. Both say Taipei feels like home. Feng-jiao describes it as “very warm,” noting that it’s a very convenient and clean place. Rosely also focuses on the convenience, and chuckles as she says, “it feels like the quality of life is pretty good for everyone, so I think this place is pretty wonderful.”

Feng-jiao was retired and Rosely described herself as “semi-retired.” Feng-jiao used to work with her husband making molds, noting that their molds were used for computers, phones, and keyboards. Rosely worked in computer-related system analysis, constructing and analysing databases as well as performing the subsequent maintenance, explaining that in her “semi-retired” state, she took on the odd case at home and sometimes taught ball sports.

Rosely didn’t know where her ancestors were from. She explains that her father was adopted so they didn’t know where his birth family originated from, but her parents were also born in Chiayi. Feng-jiao says that her husband’s ancestors came from Zhangzhou in China. Her mother was from Changhua, “but she was also adopted, so I also don’t know much.” The family Feng-jiao married into consists of five brothers, and thus five wives, she says. Her original family has six siblings: three brothers and three sisters, and she says the distance caused by her being married off to Banqiao means they aren’t in constant contact. She notes that her own children were now in their thirties.

For Rosely, her participation in popular religious activities was centred around her mother. She says she would follow her mother to *baibai* when she goes back to the country. She explains that their home had enshrined Tudi Gong (the Earth God) and had some images of other *shen*, as well as their ancestors. They would pay their respects to the ancestors with incense every morning and night. And they would go to a nearby Matsu

temple or Tudi Gong temple on the first and fifteenth days of the lunar month, taking some fruit and biscuits with them to *baibai*. They would also burn paper money on such days. When she is at her home in the north, Rosely explains that she doesn't have any *shenming* enshrined and rarely goes to temples. She speculates that this is because there's nothing she especially wants to ask for. In general, Rosely says whether she goes to *baibai* alone or with others varies. As for Feng-jiao, she says it's done as a family.

Unlike Rosely's family, Feng-jiao only pays respects to her ancestors during big festivals such as Tomb-Sweeping Day, Double Ninth, and Lunar New Year, at which time they would prepare dishes: fruit, rice, and fried noodles, which they would use to *bai* the ancestors before the family ate them together. "So it's like having a festival for everyone to get together," she says.

Feng-jiao explained that she used to *bai* Taoism, and Taoists have "a lot of fate" with Matsu and Wangye 王爺: "We simply calmly respect them, but the *shenming* will also silently bless and protect us. Just as long as we don't do bad things, they will bless and protect us." She says she still has a pre-destined relationship with Matsu, but now studied Buddhism, which she converted to when she was 38 years old. This didn't mean she couldn't *bai shenming* and ancestors, but rather that she was slowly changing her "bad habits" and would chant the sutras at night and in the mornings. As for her own children, she says they generally follow her in her turn towards Buddhism, but she knows she can't force them and wouldn't mind if they chose not to.

Feng-jiao has an altar with Matsu in her home. She explains that, before enshrining any deity, she had thought about enshrining Wangye but it turned out there wasn't any fate. "Because, with Wangye, if you want to enshrine him, it's not like you want to invite him and it'll just happen, because he needs the right time and a favourable place." After being unsuccessful with Wangye, Feng-jiao asked about Matsu. She went to "that big temple next to Dongshi [in Chiayi county]" to invite Matsu:

We originally wanted to say I'd carve one myself, but in the end by chance people said 'eh, that big temple in Bengang already has Matsu, they've already carved it, and they're enshrining it ... you can go invite her and see, see if there is a predestined relationship'. ... That required throwing moon blocks three times and inviting her to come back with us.

"But we have, we have an agreement with that temple," she says: They return with Matsu every three years so that she may "return as a guest, return to her natal home." When

they return, their Matsu is able to “take in the smoke” of the temple’s incense censer. “But when we are going to go back, we will all ask her together, speak to her about whether this day is good or not, is going back good or not, just with moon blocks,” she says. Feng-jiao explains that she had been doing this for more than ten years. When they go back, she notes, “we will add a little bit of donation money for incense and lamp oil to express our thanks to you for allowing us to be safe.” The drive from their home to the temple takes at least four hours, and Matsu sits in the back, safely fastened in with a seatbelt. “How amazing,” I whisper after listening to this story. “It’s not amazing, it’s a predestined relationship, it’s fate,” Feng-jiao corrects me, chuckling.

Even though she has Matsu enshrined in her home, Feng-jiao goes to temples during big events like Lunar New Year. She explains that this is because the deities’ power is stronger when there are many people together. She also regularly attends Buddhist temples, although draws a distinction between this and the “temples” that are the subject of our interview. She says she also used to participate in other temple activities before she studied Buddhism, but no longer does. She draws a clear distinction between the activities she labels Taoist and those that are Buddhist, noting that she still participates in a number of Buddhist activities.

Both participate in their building’s Pudu feasts during Zhongyuan. Rosely explains that this is arranged by the apartments’ management committee, who prepare it on behalf of the residents and notify them of the date and time. “If it’s this community thing, I will participate,” Rosely explains. “Right, because you live in this part, if you don’t join you’ll feel a bit uncomfortable,” Feng-jiao replies. Rosely responds: “A little, maybe I won’t receive that protection.”

Rosely says the pilgrimage event at which I met her was the only temple activity she has participated in. She went to support a friend, but also “had many gains myself and I felt a kind of enthusiasm.” Even so, she is quick to say she doesn’t think she will participate again in future, noting her concerns for the environmental impact of such events. Feng-jiao corrects her, though, explaining that she can’t make such a determination because it is fate that will decide whether she joins similar activities in future.

Concern for the environmental impact of their practices was something they shared. Feng-jiao says she now only burnt one stick of incense to *baibai*, explaining that not burning any “felt strange.” As for paper money, she “will just do a bit less for the Good

Brothers, because when I don't burn any at all, my mind will be very worried, anxiously saying 'aiya, my ancestors'." Rosely chuckles as she replies: "Afraid they don't have any money to use!" Feng-jiao further explains that they use flowers instead of incense in Buddhism, and she was conscious of the environmental and health impacts of incense, so she was slowly decreasing the amount she used and was now at one stick at a time. She was also teaching her children to use less.

For Feng-jiao, participating in these practices was important for the peace of mind they brought, whereas for Rosely it was more about whether time permits. Both point to the passing down of traditions from previous generations as the reason they participate. For Rosely, this centres around her family as both the source of her customs and her current motivation for participating in them:

When I was a child, if I would *baibai* together with my parents, it was because my elders did it, so I would do it with them. At that time, I didn't understand why I had to do such sacrifices on various festivals, but ... after I have more of an independent life, my feeling about this *baibai* has become that I will pray, I hope they can help me to take care of my mother's place, that I can't. So there is a kind of, a type of spiritual trust, I hope they can help.

Similarly, Feng-jiao's reflects on the passing down of traditions but from a more historical perspective as well as the generation above her:

It's because older people from a long, long time ago just continuously had this type of ritual passed down. But, even though I now say I study Buddhism and I want to change, I also can't completely change all of a sudden. Because you will feel like your heart is somewhat uneasy. Your mind will say 'hey, we just respect the things our mother-in-law left behind.'

But we still need to do the rituals as instructed, but less.

Indeed, Feng-jiao keeps a small notebook of the practices that have been passed down to her, where she has written what to do when and how. And she has become the source of information in her family. She laughs as she explains: "You could write a book for decades with the old people's family traditions passed down! [*laughs*] This is a secret. But my sisters-in-law don't know. They will ask me [*laughs*]. I look at it every month."





*Figure 2: The shrine in Feng-jiao's living room: February, 2019. The carved Matsu described in the preceding chapter can be seen behind an incense censer, with an ancestral tablet visible to the left.*

*Photograph by Tegan J. Farrell.*

## Chapter Two: Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors

Definitions are fundamental. They allow both the reader and the author to understand what this thesis is about. But, unlike many religions, the nature of popular religion means it cannot easily be defined. Indeed, it cannot be defined by the deities, beliefs, or practices it incorporates, where it is practised, or its common concepts or attitudes. This presents a significant challenge for those who study it. While in scholarship it is commonly referred to as popular religion, or sometimes folk religion, use of the equivalent term is far less common among those practising it. In the words Stephan Feuchtwang uses to open an eminent work on Taiwanese popular religion:

This is a thesis about Chinese popular religion. A sensible reader will ask: What is that? What is its name? We have come to expect of religions that they can be named like identities of nations or cultures or at least that they can be understood as doctrines. But in this case these sensible questions are disconcerting, because it has no name.<sup>83</sup>

As such, the ways in which one refers to the customs addressed in this thesis have been a major and constant consideration. This chapter puts this consideration front and centre. It begins with a venture through the many ways that scholars have tried to define this sometimes nameless popular religion. But defining popular religion is only a fragment of the context necessary to appreciate Taiwan's popular religion – as well as the voices included in this thesis. Hence, this chapter goes on to discuss in greater detail some of the central concepts in popular religion, drawing on both the scholarship and participants' accounts. While there is also variance in definitions and understandings of such concepts, the information discussed here nonetheless offers an initial understanding to be built on as subsequent chapters explore how participants understand and experience various aspects of their popular religion. Thus, in considering participants' understandings in the context of related academic scholarship, this chapter offers critical insight into key differences between theoretical concepts of popular religion and their practical manifestation in daily life.

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<sup>83</sup> Feuchtwang, *The Imperial Metaphor*, vii.

### *Diffuse, Diverse, and Changing*

Let us begin with the words of one participant, Chuang, whose contemplation on her use of the term “popular religion” (*minjian xinyang* 民間信仰) reveals something of the difficulty in naming and defining Taiwan’s popular religion. Chuang tells me that this term isn’t common in Taiwan. When asked why she herself had used the term during our conversation, she explains:

Of course, you are going to discuss this large issue from a foreigner’s point of view, it’s understandable, because— but if you’re really talking about it, this ‘popular religion’ includes quite a lot. So, I think this title is too big. But, from your perspective, if you just want to talk about a wide range, that’s *OK* [English]. Then, I think, in Taiwan we won’t especially go and talk about these matters. Because it’s already become a part of our lives. It’s a type of culture. So it has become many fragments within our lives.

Chuang says that she usually only uses the term “popular religion” occasionally, for example, when she’s communicating with family members who are unsure whether a certain custom would be considered Buddhism or Taoism:

Even many Taiwanese people are unclear whether they themselves are Buddhist or Taoist or they don’t have any [religion]. They only have popular religion, so they burn incense, *bai* ancestors. For me, this definition can draw clearer distinctions. If they are just, if they just follow the family and burn incense and *bai* ancestors, I conclude this type is popular religion. So, in the past many people would hold incense and call it Buddhism, but actually it’s not. If you hold incense, maybe it’s Taoism or Buddhism, these are not the same, the content of the beliefs are not the same. I can only definitively say that if you hold incense, then you are definitely not [Protestant] Christian.

When asked, Chuang says that it is only because of her profession as a ceremonialist that she is able to make such distinctions, given the diffuse and ‘fragmentary’ nature of how popular religion is experienced by its practitioners.

Indeed, two major obstacles to defining popular religion are that it is both diffuse and diverse – obstacles that are both well-documented in the scholarship and clearly reflected in the lived experience of participants in this study. Scholar of Taiwan’s religion,

Li Yih-Yuen, identified diffuseness as one of the “important characteristics” that make traditional Chinese religious belief “so different from the Western religions”:

The belief contents of diffused religion are mixed with our everyday life with no significant differentiation. For example, the Chinese folk religion has contained traditional concepts such as ancestor worship, deities worship, seasonal ritual, cultural ceremony and etiquette, as well as certain incantation or even worldview. The beliefs of this religion are diffused into our culture and everyday life.<sup>84</sup>

Furthermore, while popular religion has many adherents, their beliefs and practices are quite diverse. Wai Yip Wong points to Guandi worship as an example – while Guandi is enshrined all over China and in Chinese communities outside China, the reasons people pay respects to him vary. He is thought to be the protector of soldiers, police, or criminals in some areas, and the protector of fisherman or the god of wealth in others.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, popular religious practices and beliefs can vary quite significantly. They might generally include rituals dedicated to gods, local festivals, divination, ancestor worship, the appeasement of ghosts, and spirit mediums, among others,<sup>86</sup> but may vary by locality, temple, or even person. And adherents might engage in all or only some of those practices.

This is further complicated by the fact that the contents of popular religion are, as Wong notes, “changing rapidly.” A detailed history of the concepts of Taiwan’s popular religion and their origins is beyond the scope of this study. But, for the present discussion, it is worth noting that they are grounded in hundreds – or thousands – of years of shared history with other culturally Chinese areas. (The historical Chineseness of Taiwan’s popular religion is considered in detail in the following chapter.) In an early work addressing change in Chinese ritual, Emily Martin Ahern points to the differences between ‘closed’ and ‘open’ practices. ‘Closed practices’ have formal features and, consequently, their conventions are upheld unless they are deliberately changed. In contrast, ‘open practices’ allow change to occur during the practice itself on an ongoing basis. Popular religion falls into the ‘open’ category: practices are allowed to change over time. “Because of the variety of traditions and the lack of any central authority ruling on

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<sup>84</sup> Li, *Zongjiao Yu Shenhua Lunji* 宗教與神話論集, 169–70; English translation from Wong, “Defining Chinese Folk Religion,” 161.

<sup>85</sup> Wong, “Defining Chinese Folk Religion.”

<sup>86</sup> Feuchtwang, *The Imperial Metaphor*, vii.

religious matter,” Bosco explains, “local temples and their committees can innovate and reinterpret rituals and beliefs. As a result, a variety of beliefs and rituals coexist in one area. Ritual specialists of different traditions offer different perspectives and advice.”<sup>87</sup>

Discourses of change were prevalent throughout the participants’ accounts of their lived experience. The below excerpts demonstrate both understandings of the ways in which and reasons why Taiwan’s popular religion is varied and changing and what that means, as ideas of change are linked with discourses of convenience, environmental progress, loss of knowledge, and growth.

Luke is one participant who emphasises differences in customs when talking about popular religion. When asked at the end of his interview whether there was anything he wished to add, he emphasised the differences in beliefs in different regions of Taiwan:

This *popular religion* [Mandarin: *minjian xinyang* 民間信仰] is like a dish, but how it's being made ... can differ from region, and okay so, different from person, people to people. ... It is really like how you get that from— and mostly from your parents, and your families, or your friends.

Both Luke and Chuang also point out that differences in ethnic groups influence popular religious practices and variations in them. In describing how people *baibai*, Chuang says:

Maybe the majority are quite similar, but when you say Taiwan, it’s divided into indigenous peoples and Han Chinese ethnic groups. So, indigenous peoples’ *baibai* and Han peoples’ *baibai* are completely different. Indigenous peoples’ belief [*xinyang* 信仰] and Han peoples’ popular religion [*minjian xinyang* 民間信仰] are also totally different. Then, for Taiwanese people, within this Han ethnic group, Taiwanese people are also separated into Minnan people, and Hakka people. Minnan and Hakka peoples’ beliefs are also not that similar. The manner is also quite similar, but within it there are still some differences.

Like Luke, Chuang, points to the ways in which popular religion is shared, describing its changing nature:

Because these things are spread and mixed with each other through oral transmission and experience, they will certainly be changed. Even if, even if it is a custom that was brought over by the first people from, from China,

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<sup>87</sup> Bosco, “Yiguan Dao: ‘Heterodoxy’ and Popular Religion in Taiwan.”

and continuously handed down, on this small island of Taiwan. It's been continuously handed down until now and is all continuously changing.

Specifically, she points to the change from Taiwanese society as predominantly agricultural to industrial and commercial, as well as the progress of science and technology:

Did you know that in the past few decades it's gone so far as to *bai* ancestors on the internet? Do you know?

*I know.*

That's right, so you if you say at the time of those people, before computers had been invented, who could imagine that you could *bai* ancestors on the internet? Then, when there was no internet, then even if it was someone with a computer, but when there was still no internet, who could conceive that you could *bai* ancestors in front of a computer using the internet? Then if you go to your *Ama* 阿嬤 [maternal grandmother] now, just for example, telling my *Ama* that you *bai* ancestors online, she will surely think it's baffling. She will think 'what ancestors do you *bai* at the computer? If you want to *bai* ancestors, you have to go to the ancestors and *bai* in front of their spirit tablets'.

Chris also points to change, noting that in the past practices were more complicated with "a lot of regulations and cumbersome processes," but that she has never studied popular religion in detail so isn't overly familiar. Her brother Da-jing further explains that now practices are much simpler, and the particular arrangements of offerings have been simplified as things change more and more. For example, Da-jing points to the reduction in burning of incense and paper money:

I think people now are less like before. Like, before, in the past it was really like to *baibai* you definitely needed incense, and must burn paper money. But now it's become that people think and say that if you don't hold incense or burn paper money, it's good for the whole environment. And that can also help us psychologically. In the past, it wasn't like that. Because now Taiwan is divided into two different types of people: There is one type that thinks that without holding incense and burning paper money, you can [still] receive help from *shenming* all the same. And some people think that

if you don't hold incense and burn paper money, that's fundamentally not our religion's original manner.<sup>88</sup>

Like Chuang, Doris and Sean point to technology, expressing that it has driven changes in popular religion. Doris gives the example of 'lighting a lamp' (*dian guangmingdeng* 點光明燈) for peace, which used to require people to go to temples but can now be done online, and a temple in Kaohsiung that will allow you to *bai* over the internet. Even so, she concludes that not everything about popular religion is changing. "Maybe some things change, but some things will never change," she says, musing about the predictable rush to place the first incense of the Lunar New Year (*touxiang* 頭香) at major temples.

As one of this study's eldest participants, born in 1965, Rosely says she has seen popular religion change over the years. "What has it changed into?" she asks as she muses about how popular religious activities that are seen internationally are made grander, but more common or ordinary practices are gradually simplified: "Later, young people will use a youngster method to pass on the tradition. It won't resemble the more complicated and more traditional style of the past. So I think there is change." She also points to the integration of technology in Taiwan's popular religion: "In the future, everyone will use an *app* [English] to draw lots for divination," she predicts. Rosely further explains that modernisation has changed practices in other ways, noting that now if the set day to pay your respects is not convenient, people will shift it to another day. Feng-jiao, born in 1960, listens to Rosely attentively before adding that "things are different now. So now we will have changed the methods. Because the environment is changing so older people can also be more accepting [of the changes]. The methods aren't dying. The methods are living, rather than dying." Indeed, for Feng-jiao, change is a part of Taiwan's popular religion but not a sign of its decline. When she reflects on her little book of rituals passed down from previous generations, Feng-jiao says that they no longer do everything outlined in her notes. She and Rosely link the changes in practice to the increased availability of food in modern Taiwanese society.

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<sup>88</sup> I did not formally study attitudes towards the necessity of incense and paper money in popular religious practices, although my anecdotal impression is that those who felt they were vital were few. I only came across one person who expressed this opinion: we were on a pilgrimage and he passionately shared his anger that his mother could no longer burn paper money and incense.

FENG-JIAO: We pay our respects for whichever festival, big festivals. It won't be like the past like you *bai* for this, *bai* for that, *bai* endlessly [*bai bu wan* 拜不完], right? After all, in short *bai* is really: however you *bai* it's all just eating. In the past, there was less to eat, so they would *baibai* especially often. They would really always take this opportunity, right? Because people in the past were very poor, with less opportunities to eat. Now, people are different. Now it's different.

ROSELY: Now there's always too much.

FENG-JIAO: They've forgotten their roots. [*Rosely and Feng-jiao both laugh*]  
Perhaps in contrast to Feng-jiao's view that popular religious methods "aren't dying," Rosely points to the disappearance of knowledge about certain elements of Taiwan's popular religion. When asked how she knows what to do when, Rosely says she often sees her mother encounter this problem:

In the middle of the *baibai* process, she will have a question: 'Ah, here, how do you do it?!' Then, actually, in the countryside we also no longer have, maybe now also can't find someone who wholly, thoroughly understands how this should be done, what can be called proper. So, usually she will always go ask people who *baibai* more often than her, or people who are older than her. But— maybe there are gradually less and less people who are older than her ... so now they will ask those who *bai* more often, 'so then what is proper?' Sometimes it's a frequent problem, what is correct.

Together, these accounts demonstrate different types of the change that is a fundamental feature of Taiwan's popular religion, as well as some of the factors participants understood as driving that change. Through these accounts, we also gain insight into various ways of thinking about the changing nature of Taiwan's popular religion. In some accounts, changes in popular religious practices represent progress as practices become more convenient, considerate of their environmental impact, and less vital due to increased food security. For some people, like Doris, popular religion incorporates change and technology but the fundamentals remain the same: people will always rush to attend temples on Lunar New Year. For others, like Feng-jiao, change and simplification of practices are a reality but not a sign that popular religion is in decline,



rather it remains “living, rather than dying,” while her friend, Rosely, laments the loss of knowledge that comes with simplified practices as older generations pass away.

### *Naming the Nameless*

Despite the challenges with identifying Taiwan’s popular religion that come with its diffuse, diverse, and changing nature, it remains a necessary task for a study of this kind. On the construction of Confucianism, ter Haar points out that nineteenth-century scholars “had to create a set of characteristics to make up this new label of Confucianism, but each of them did so in very different ways, though always based on experiences in the Chinese world around them.” Pointing to the ensuing “complete subjectivity of the label” both when it was established and in the scholarship on China to follow, ter Haar asserts: “there simply cannot be one correct way of defining it, since there is no straightforward relationship between the label and the objects and experiences that it can be taken to denote.”<sup>89</sup> The same might be said for popular religion, approaches to defining which have varied considerably.

Indeed, Wong argues, scholars of Chinese popular religion have tended to define it in one of several ways.<sup>90</sup> Some, such as Jordan,<sup>91</sup> Burkhardt,<sup>92</sup> and Adler,<sup>93</sup> referred to the deities within it. Regarding such work, Wong notes that it may offer valuable information about things that could be considered religion but “would provide little help to understand what Chinese folk religion really is from the methodological perspective.”<sup>94</sup> This approach also does little to answer yet another major issue with defining popular religion: the overlap between the contents of popular religion and institutional religions. Deities may be – and often are – revered by multiple religions. So, if we witness someone paying their respects to a deity, how do we know if this is popular religion, Taoism, Buddhism, or some other religion?

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<sup>89</sup> ter Haar, “From Field to Text in the Study of Chinese Religion,” 86.

<sup>90</sup> Wong uses the term ‘folk religion’ and focusses primarily on the PRC but the historical information and methodological approach are nevertheless relevant to Taiwan’s popular religion.

<sup>91</sup> Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*.

<sup>92</sup> Burkhardt, *Chinese Creeds and Customs: A Compilation of the Best-Selling Trilogy*.

<sup>93</sup> Adler, *Chinese Religious Traditions*.

<sup>94</sup> Wong, “Defining Chinese Folk Religion,” 155.

An approach taken by some Western scholars has been to categorise them into 'elite' and 'folk' or 'peasant' religion.<sup>95</sup> In this view, the institutionalised 'great traditions' – usually Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism – are considered to be 'elite', in contrast to the 'folk' or 'peasant' popular religion. Such an approach represents attempts to define popular religion by its followers: an idea exemplified by Harrell's definition of popular religion:

By 'folk religion' I mean the religious beliefs and practices of the peasantry and other non-elite classes in late traditional China and in modern Chinese society outside the People's Republic. This term specifically excludes the textual religions (the State Cult, Buddhism, and Taoism) and also the beliefs and practices of religious specialists.<sup>96</sup>

In contrast, Harrell refers to the institutional religions of China as the "elite 'great traditions'."<sup>97</sup> Similarly, Dean and Jordan both describe popular religion as 'local' or 'village' religion.<sup>98</sup> Yet, as is discussed in detail in Chapter Four, such views fail to reflect the reality of popular religious practice in Taiwan or China. It is not possible to accurately define popular religion by its followers, nor to differentiate it from other religions with which it shares practices or beliefs, in this way.

The other common method of defining popular religion, Wong asserts, uses "the common concepts, attitudes, or ways of thinking that its followers all shared" to differentiate it from other religions.<sup>99</sup> The question this raises (not unlike defining it by its beliefs and practices) is how to separate popular religion from other religions with which it might share concepts or attitudes. Wong cites Christianity as an example: "Although Christianity could be understood as a religion that believed in monotheism, it was nonetheless defined as a religion that believed in the Bible, as there could be many other religions that also believed in monotheism."<sup>100</sup> But unlike Christianity, popular religion also shares concepts and ways of thinking with other 'folk' religions, meaning this approach also does not allow it to be distinguished from other religions.

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<sup>95</sup> Wong, 159.

<sup>96</sup> Harrell, "The Concept of Soul in Chinese Folk Religion," 519.

<sup>97</sup> Harrell, 520.

<sup>98</sup> Dean, "Local Communal Religion in Contemporary South-East China"; Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*.

<sup>99</sup> Wong, "Defining Chinese Folk Religion," 158.

<sup>100</sup> Wong, 158.

Alternatively, some scholars have argued that Chinese popular religion is not a religion at all. Instead, it is described as a “form of belief”: a religious attitude rather than a religious tradition. Rationales for this approach cite the structural differences between popular religion and institutional religions.<sup>101</sup> Yet, while it avoids some of the issues with other methods, Wong criticises this approach for failing to consider popular religion a religious tradition in itself. The question of whether or not popular religion – literally “popular belief” in Chinese – is itself a complicated matter with many views, discussed in depth in Chapter Five.

Another view taken by Li Yih-yuen, along with other contemporary scholars of religion, is that Chinese popular religion does carry doctrine, but, rather than in scripture or an institution, it is integrated into the everyday lives of the people.<sup>102</sup> By arguing that it does have a fundamental feature of institutional religions, this approach has the benefit of affirming popular religion as equal to those ‘great traditions’. Still, while it may offer a better understanding of what Chinese popular religion is in a general sense, it does not easily allow scholars of popular religion to pinpoint exactly what it is that they are studying. The final common approach to defining popular religion is to not clearly delineate it at all. Some scholars have resolved that a precise definition of Chinese popular religion is not possible, and, as such, it should be defined ambiguously. However, such an approach does not provide a tool for scholars to consistently identify what counts as popular religion.

While the above represent the most commonly seen definition strategies, other scholars have used yet further methods to delineate popular religion. For example, Yang and Hu state “a consensus definition of folk religion is almost impossible.”<sup>103</sup> They argue the best way to get around this and “define or classify folk religion in a way that is quantitatively measurable” is to categorise it into three types: communal, individual, and sectarian.<sup>104</sup> For them, communal popular religion refers to beliefs and practices based in communities (such as worship of local deities and ancestors). In contrast, individual popular religion “refers to supernatural beliefs and practices that are independent of any collectivity” (including divination, *fengshui*, and worship of certain gods with only the

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<sup>101</sup> Wong, 160.

<sup>102</sup> Wong, “Defining Chinese Folk Religion.”

<sup>103</sup> Yang and Hu, “Mapping Chinese Folk Religion in Mainland China and Taiwan,” 505.

<sup>104</sup> Yang and Hu, 505, 508–10.

intention of benefitting the individual). And sectarian popular religion refers to sectarian groups. While these categories may prove helpful for classifying popular religious activities once they have been identified, they too do little to aid the identifying. The solution, Wong proposes, is to combine two common methods for defining Chinese popular religion.

### ***“Folk Religious Attitude”***

Defining Chinese popular religion by its contents does not allow it to be separated from the institutional religions with which it has many beliefs, practices, and deities in common (primarily Taoism and Buddhism). Nor does defining it by the common attitudes or ways of thinking shared by adherents allow it to be separated from other popular/folk and world religions with which it shares these attitudes. Thus, Wong proposes combining these two approaches: defining it as a religious tradition that incorporates certain practices and beliefs common in popular religion, Buddhism, or Taoism, “of which its followers would hold these beliefs and perform the related ritualistic practices with a folk religious attitude.” That is to say, “for the people who worshipped the Buddhist deities by offering burning incenses or meat dishes, they would be treated as Chinese folk religion believers rather than Buddhists or folk religion believers in general.” In this example, the practice can be differentiated from Buddhism by the folk religious attitude of the practitioners who don’t pay their respects with Buddhist methods, and separated from other world popular/folk religions by the Chinese contents. In contrast, practitioners who study *fengshui* with no apparent folk religious attitude would be considered Taoists rather than popular religionists.

In other words, for any belief content that also exists in other religious traditions in China, the folk religious attitude would work as its identity; and for any religious attitude that also exists in other folk religions outside China, the Chinese religious belief contents would in turn work as its identity.<sup>105</sup>

Wong does not argue that this is a perfect definition for reflecting the reality of Chinese popular religion, but rather that it is the best available method for identifying the subject of studies on Chinese popular religion. It allows scholars to single out what and who

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<sup>105</sup> Wong, “Defining Chinese Folk Religion,” 164–65.

exactly it is they are studying beyond focussing on a specific element of popular religion. For this reason, Wong's is the approach to defining popular religion I adopted while studying Taiwan's popular religion. That is, it is the approach used to initially identify potential participants. But, importantly, many people who would be classified as popular religious under academic definitions do not self-identify as such. And, as this thesis aims to give voice to participants' own understandings, I defer to participants' own identifications whenever possible and in conversation with them.

In order to utilise this helpful methodological approach to identifying popular religion, though, it is necessary to understand what a folk religious attitude is. A folk religious attitude (henceforth referred to as 'popular religious attitude') might best be identified with reference to the religious tool kit. That is, the variety of practices and beliefs "transmitted through familial and communal life." Instead of differentiating between religious traditions, practitioners select from their toolkit of shared practices and beliefs for use in any given situation. These include rituals that may be ascribed to institutional or other religions, or particular religious organisations.<sup>106</sup> (See Chapter Five for a detailed discussion of the religiosity of Taiwan's popular religion, including the religious tool kit approach.) To utilise this approach for identifying popular religion, and to better understand the stories shared within this thesis, it is also important to understand something of what Taiwan's popular religion might include. The following sections, therefore, offer short explanations of some central concepts in Taiwan's popular religion.

### **Baibai Worship**

The Mandarin words *baibai* 拜拜, *jibai* 祭拜, or *bai* 拜 are often translated into 'worship' in English. Yet, before I left for my first round of fieldwork, a Taiwanese friend living in Australia helped me look over my interview questions and was surprised to see I had used the word worship when translating *baibai*: 'Worship is more like what they do in churches,' I recall her telling me. *Really? It's the usual translation in the literature*, I countered.<sup>107</sup> My friend shrugged it off and I made a note but continued to use the term

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<sup>106</sup> Sun, "The Study of Chinese Religions in the Social Sciences: Beyond the Monotheistic Assumption," 66–67.

<sup>107</sup> Leya, Conversation with author, Melbourne, 2017.

worship. That is, until an English-speaking participant raised the same concern. Luke quickly pointed out that he doesn't worship anything, although he does *baibai*:

Worship is when you're— when you think that thing is superior than you and have superior powers over you ... and then you actually admire and dedicate and put this sort of effort to it. So, you will feel you're inferior. But when I'm talking to [a] god in the temple, I'm kind of like asking an elder. ... I don't worship stuff.

As I was determined to be critically informed by the people I interviewed, and I was struck by two people raising the same point,<sup>108</sup> I made the decision to use the Mandarin *baibai* in place of the commonly used translation – 'worship' – with the exception of the two interviews conducted in English, where I use the terms that the participant chose, and when referring to scholarly works that have used the term.

The Taiwanese Ministry of Education's online dictionary resource includes the following in its English entry for *baibai*: "to pay one's respects by bowing with hands in front of one's chest clasping joss sticks, or with palms pressed together." It further notes that, in Taiwan, the term may also refer more generally to a "religious ceremony in which offerings are made to a deity."<sup>109</sup> When people *baibai*, they typically face the direction of a deity with their hands either pressed together or wrapped around incense. They tell the deity – in their head or quietly aloud – their personal details so they can be identified. Such details might include their full name, date of birth, their parents' or siblings' names, and their address. They then speak to the deity about whatever it is that has brought them there, before shaking their hands or bowing their head, often three times, or sometimes kowtowing. Any incense is then placed in the incense burner and left to burn down. I ask Freddie:

*And do you do that whole process in your name, and where you live, and what you are praying for. Do you do that for every god in the whole temple?*

Yeah. Most of the time.

*Does it take a long time?*

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<sup>108</sup> As most interviews were conducted in Mandarin, any discrepancy between English and Mandarin terms was not given opportunity to become apparent in all but two interviews.

<sup>109</sup> "Meng dian – bai bai."

I think I do it pretty fast. Compared to the others. Maybe I speak very fast in my mind or something, I'm not sure. I'm just like 'blah blah blah okay thank you, bye'. Kind of like that, yeah.

Reflecting on her own doctoral research in the early 2000s, Taiwanese scholar Fang-long Shih also points to differences between terms as expressed in Chinese and translated to English:

I was located in the UK and so had to write my research in English, rather than located in Taiwan and writing in Chinese. This is of significance for issues of voice/language, and objectivity and subjectivity. For example, the word I use to refer to deceased maiden-spirits is 'ghost' rather than '鬼'.

The English word 'ghost' does not convey the same power, sense or feeling of dread that the Chinese character '鬼' does.<sup>110</sup>

Indeed, nuances in the meaning words impart can shift depending on factors such as people's familiarity with them and people's cultural backgrounds. Accordingly, as outlined in this thesis's Introduction, I have used Chinese words (Romanised in Mandarin) instead of the common English translations for several terms that frequently appear throughout this work. In aiming to balance readability for non-Mandarin speaking readers with separating concepts from the assumed characteristics implied by the English translations when there is a significant difference, I have used the Chinese for *bai* (alternatively: *baibai*, *jibai*, *canbai*), *shen* (alternatively: *shenming*), *yinjian*, and *Zhongyuan*, and the English for all other terms, for which the English is closer to the meaning implied by the Chinese.

### ***Who are the Spirits?***

Spirits are a central element of Taiwan's popular religion. Yet, understandings of them vary considerably. Perhaps the most fundamental concepts are *shen* 神 (gods), *gui* 鬼 (ghosts), and *zuxian* 祖先 (ancestors), alternatively called *zuzong* 祖公. These are underpinned by concepts of soul, and diverse theories of how many souls one has and what happens to them after death. While specific concepts of soul are perhaps primarily theoretical and not strictly necessary to understand how popular religion plays out in

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<sup>110</sup> Shih, "Re-Writing Religion: Questions of Translation, Context, and Location in the Writing of Religion in Taiwan," 30.

daily life, contemporary popular religion remains grounded in them. It is for that reason that I have included an overview of understandings of soul. In an early work, Harrell aimed to clear up any dispute, arguing that there were “serious gaps” in scholars’ understanding of soul in Chinese (and Taiwanese) popular religion and suggesting there were two causes for this. The first was a tendency for ‘Westerners’ to have a sense of the meaning of ‘soul’ in the Western tradition, and, therefore, assume an understanding of the concept in the Chinese context. The second was that scholars who have studied soul in China or Taiwan have done so with an insufficient understanding of popular religion’s place within Chinese religions generally, or its relationship to the ‘great traditions’. Harrell suggests that popular religion’s active nature, in contrast to the analytical nature of the ‘elite religions’, makes it necessary to look beyond the doctrinal notions that inform other religions. That is, instead of looking to what people have been taught about the concept of soul, Harrell points to how people act in the practice of popular religion.

Pointing out that “almost every number [of souls] from one to a dozen has at one time or another been proposed,” Harrell suggests the best candidates in popular belief are twelve, ten, two, three, and one.<sup>111</sup> For Harrell, The concepts of ten or twelve are ruled out on the basis of their grounding in theory but omission in practice; while people might say there are ten or twelve souls when asked, the idea is incongruous with how people *act*. Harrell also discounts the idea of two souls on the same grounds, noting that this idea stems from the concept of *yin* and *yang*; ancient scholars taught that the *hun* 魂 is the *yang* soul, and the *po* 魄 its corresponding *yin* soul. Two is the minimum number of souls David K. Jordan found locals to believe every person has while documenting the practices of a small village in southwestern Taiwan between 1966 and 1968.<sup>112</sup> In Jordan’s observations, the *po* is the lower soul. Necessary for life but otherwise unimportant, it stays near coffins or graves and eventually disappears. The second soul is the *linghun* 靈魂,<sup>113</sup> alternatively called either *ling* 靈 or *hun* 魂.

Harrell’s explanation of *linghun* and *po* differs somewhat from Jordan’s. Jordan’s findings suggested that the *linghun* could go on to become either a god, ancestor, or ghost, while the *po* simply stays by the gravesite and eventually fades away. But Harrell suggests

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<sup>111</sup> Harrell, “The Concept of Soul in Chinese Folk Religion,” 521.

<sup>112</sup> Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*.

<sup>113</sup> A less-common variant of 魂 is 魄.



*hun* are traditionally associated with *shen*, while *po* are traditionally associated with *gui* (ghosts). Yet, as in Jordan's explanation, the *hun* is considered immortal, while *po* (and therefore *gui*) are believed to return to earth and fade away. What Jordan documented, however, is closer to the way adherents of popular religion actually think about souls. Which, as Harrell points out, contradicts the theoretical concept of *hun* as *shen* and *po* as *gui*:

While it is undeniably true that some Chinese folk believers know about the distinction between *hun* and *p'o* [*po*] on a theoretical level, it seems to fit badly, if at all, with the way they think about "souls" acting or behaving. So we must reject the idea of two "souls" as a basically analytical construct which has little bearing on the behaviour of folk believers.<sup>114</sup>

Then, how *do* souls present in the real-life practice of popular religion in Taiwan? Offerings are made to spirits at both the grave and the ancestral tablet (or joss in the case of *shen*), and spirit mediums are used to communicate with them in the spirit world (*yinjian* 陰間), leading Harrell to conclude that a soul is present in all three of these places.<sup>115</sup> The question, then, is whether there are three separate souls – one inhabiting the ancestral tablet or joss, one remaining by the grave, and one residing in the *yinjian* – or one soul simultaneously indwelling all three. For this Harrell has no definitive answer but observes that the way people talk about souls suggests there is only one. That is, that the *linghun* in the ancestral tablet, in the grave, and in the *yinjian* are not separate souls but rather the same soul in separate contexts. Alternatively, if there is more than one soul, Harrell argues, the practice of popular religion in Taiwan suggests there are no distinctive characteristics differentiating them from one another, and thus they are functionally one. In either case, Harrell does not address where the *po* might factor in, implying *linghun* is the only form of soul present in real-life practice of popular religion, with *po* merely an "analytical construct."

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<sup>114</sup> Harrell, "The Concept of Soul in Chinese Folk Religion," 522. While Harrell makes this point and it does accord with most of Jordan's findings, Jordan actually does report an informant explaining that gods are immortal, but ghosts are not and in fact can die, which would be in line with the *linghun* as *shen* and *po* as *gui* theory. Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*, 38.

<sup>115</sup> Harrell, "The Concept of Soul in Chinese Folk Religion"; Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village*; Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*.

As for the *linghun*, some believe it goes to hell (*diyu* 地獄) and is then reincarnated, while others believe it lives in the *yinjian*. The *yinjian* is invisible to the living yet occupies the same time and space, and the spirits within it require offerings from their descendants. If a *linghun* has descendants who take care of it, it is an ancestor. If a *linghun* is not provided for, it will turn vicious and become a ghost. If a person lives an exceptionally virtuous life before death, or becomes virtuous in their life as a *linghun*, they may be appointed as a *shen*, with a high-ranking position in the spirit world. As Ahern writes: “All three sorts of spirits are regarded as persons ... Being persons, each is believed to act on the basis of human-like reasons or motives suitable to his personal history and present status.”<sup>116</sup> Notably, while concepts of soul may logically underpin everyday practice and thus aid in understanding fundamental concepts of Taiwan’s popular religion, they did not appear in participants’ accounts of their popular religion in daily life.

Although it is not uncommon to see the term ‘supernatural’ used in literature on Taiwanese or Chinese religion, these human origins have led some scholars to argue that Chinese religion is in fact not focussed on the supernatural. Joseph Adler goes as far as suggesting that because *shen*, ghosts, ancestors, and the living are all considered a part of the natural order, Chinese religion does not allow for a supernatural.<sup>117</sup> Similarly, Paper laments that “the notion that religion minimally concerns supernatural entities or powers still persists among historians of religions.” Rather, “Chinese religion presents clear evidence that major forms of religion can so develop that they lose their primary reference to superhuman or supernatural beings,” Paper argues. That is, “assuming that the dead of one’s family are not superhuman, although they are spirits, and nature in and of itself cannot be supernatural.”<sup>118</sup>

One participant, Doris, makes this same observation. At one point in our conversation, Doris turns the questions around on me, asking whether my own culture includes ghosts and other spirits. *Not as much*, I reply, to which she responds:

Not as much, yes. But, for us, spirits [*guishen* 鬼神] are a very natural matter.

Believing there are ghosts and there are *shen* is very rational. And it may be that the thinking of the majority of Taiwanese people is like this. Having

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<sup>116</sup> Ahern, *Chinese Ritual and Politics*, 1.

<sup>117</sup> Adler, *Chinese Religious Traditions*.

<sup>118</sup> Paper, *The Spirits Are Drunk*, 269.

ghosts and having *shen* is all very reasonable. On this matter, there won't be very many who have much doubt towards this.

### **Gods/Shen 神明**

*Shen* are spirits of deceased people who, in acknowledgement of their upright behaviour either before or after death, have been appointed a position in the *yinjian*. Although 'god' is the widely used translation for *shen*, Harrell argues that it is a bad translation, instead suggesting 'saint' would be more appropriate. This is because *shen* are usually limited in power and of human origin.<sup>119</sup> *Shen* are enshrined both at home and business altars as well as at temples, and are most often provided offerings of incense, paper money, and food, which is later consumed by the living: after the *shen* has had their fill. While it is common for those paying their respects will offer paper money to *shen*, this may not to bribe them or pay for their help. A Taiwanese practitioner explained the ritual act to anthropologist Ahern: "Offering things to the gods is just like taking a gift to one's host. A stranger won't necessarily help you no matter how nice a gift you bring, and a good friend will help you even if you bring nothing at all." Both Jordan and Ahern liken the "celestial government" of *shen* to the governments of the living.<sup>120</sup> But when asking whether making offerings to *shen* was like offering a 'red envelope' to an official in return for a favour, Ahern received responses like the following:

Red envelopes are not given for no reason. The point is to make the other party be good to us and not make trouble for us. So police act one way to people who give them red envelopes and another way to those who do not. But gods are not like that. It is not that the more things you give them the more they will help you. It is only necessary to do good deeds and burn three sticks of incense and they will be enormously happy. A god is a being with a very upright heart. He is fair and just, rewarding without favouritism.<sup>121</sup>

In fact, many of Ahern's informants condemned the practice of using special offerings in efforts to manipulate *shen*, insisting such attempts were doomed to fail.<sup>122</sup> Similarly,

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<sup>119</sup> Harrell, "The Concept of Soul in Chinese Folk Religion."

<sup>120</sup> Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*; Ahern, *Chinese Ritual and Politics*.

<sup>121</sup> Ahern, *Chinese Ritual and Politics*, 99.

<sup>122</sup> Ahern, 118.

Feuchtwang reports a Taiwanese person recounting the story of how the current Tudi Gong 土地公 (the Earth God) came to be appointed after exposing the corruption of the former. While living, he believed the former Tudi Gong to be soliciting pay-offs and brought the matter to divine court. The accusation was ultimately proven true and the plaintiff became the new Tudi Gong when he died.<sup>123</sup>

Expecting practitioners to think of their relationship with *shen* as that between a citizen and an official, Ahern was “startled” to find most participants in fact thought of it as that between a parent and a child. As a Taiwanese informant explained to Ahern:

Parents teach their children to do good and the gods do the same. If you were sick your parents would want to help you. The gods are the same. As long as you do good deeds and respect them, they will exert their strength to the utmost to help. Parents will do likewise, if you are obedient and good. Neither gods nor parents want anything to do with delinquents and gangsters or useless, directionless people.<sup>124</sup>

Even making a pledge (*xuyuan* 許願) to a *shen* was likened to the relationship between a child and their parent: “It is like begging one’s parents for help: it shows how desperate our need is. When we are in need, gods and parents alike will really try to help us.”<sup>125</sup>

Similar sentiments were raised by this study’s participants. “Is it that you have to try hard yourself and only then *shenming* will help you?” Chris asks her brother. Da-jing replies:

We think and say that you have to try hard, then what the *shenming* will help with is making your exams all the things that you read when you were working hard.

*So, are other people also like this? If I want to baibai and ask shen to help me find a job, but I don’t try hard, will they still help me? Or—?*

DA-JING: No.

CHRIS: No.

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<sup>123</sup> Feuchtwang, *The Imperial Metaphor*, 97–99.

<sup>124</sup> Ahern, *Chinese Ritual and Politics*, 99.

<sup>125</sup> Ahern, 99.

DA-JING: Because, Taiwanese people will say that before you ask *shenming* to help, you must try hard yourself. If you put in effort, *shenming* will help you even more. ... Then, if you don't put in effort, the *shenming* don't feel like paying attention to you. Right.

CHRIS: We have a saying like 'divine help comes to those who help themselves' [*tian zhu zizhuzhe* 天助自助者]. That is, for the Heavenly god [*shangtian* 上天] to help, you help yourself, if you are someone who tries hard, right, so only then the *shenming* will want to help you.

Indeed, Da-jing comments, "If you do well on your exam, it's because the *shenming* protected you. If you did badly, it's just because you yourself didn't try hard enough!" Chris laughs heartily as she agrees.

Emphasis on respect for *shen* is also a recurring theme for this study's participants. When asked how she would explain to a foreigner how to *baibai*, the first thing Feng-jiao says is "*baibai* has been passed down because of tradition. It's to do with your mother-in-law and those older people having some concepts. But we're also too embarrassed to veto it." She goes on to describe her own habits, how she offers fruit and vegetarian dishes. And, finally, she adds, "I have to reflect on whether I have made any errors or not. This is the most important thing: not having superstitious belief. Superstition is still a big mistake. It's just a respect, not superstition." Similarly, Sean points to respect as an overarching attitude in his own practice. "I think this action is me respecting them [*shen*]; I don't wish they will help me with whatever."

Luke says that the efficacy of *shen* comes not from their individual position in the hierarchy but from the temple, explaining that people will want to go to bigger or more popular temples because, even if it's the same *shen*, they will be more effective. He also makes a major distinction between *shen* and ancestors, noting that he doesn't often pay his respects to ancestors outside the major festivals "partially because I don't know, I don't have a lot of memory of them, and, so, I don't feel I'm close enough to, to talk about my personal questions, or hesitations":

which is interesting because I don't know the god too, so, but it's— you know it's a kind of a mental thing ... because it's like, if you're talking to ancestors [it's] like personal, but if you're talking to god is like talking to a god. It's not that person. you're talking about personal issues, but they just

help you because it's kind of like their job, yeah. So, it's like, it's like you going to administration, 'can you file that for me? Can you do that for me?' kind of thing versus going to your parents then 'can I talk about something personal', you know?

Indeed, Luke explicitly contradicts Ahern's finding that the relationship between a practitioner and a *shen* was like that of a parent and child, instead reasoning that he prefers to talk about his personal problems with *shen* precisely because they lack the parental air of ancestors.

### **Ghosts/Gui 鬼**

In stark contrast to *shen*, ghosts are concerned not with helping the living but with helping themselves. Discussing religion in contemporary Taiwan, Weller explains that ghosts symbolise improper deaths. They are the spirits of those who have died young (and, therefore, have no descendants to worship them) or those who have died in violent circumstances. Without anyone to offer sacrifices on their behalf, they starve and are thus willing to forgo the morality thought to influence *shen*. Instead, they grant any request for the right price. A price that may include "buying them gold metals, giving money to their temple, [or] sponsoring operas for their pleasure." Weller describes this as "fee-for-service religion," likening it to cutting deals with local hoodlums. Lack of payment results in the ghost exacting "a nasty revenge":

They [the Eighteen Lords] inflict no set morality. They do not even suggest a morality by favouring an immorality; they just do not care about such issues. Their space is restless and chaotic, always filled with masses of people, but never the same people. No one has the authority to impose a unified interpretation on this, nor do interpretive social mechanism exist that might order it ... The ghosts are radically individualistic, serving people's selfish ends without regard for older social ties like family or community.<sup>126</sup>

Weller's findings suggest this sense of individualism and lack of community is reflected in how *gui* are worshipped. *Shen* worship sees incense burned in single pots combining the offerings of entire communities, and thus fostering a sense of community. But *gui*

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<sup>126</sup> Weller, "Living at the Edge: Religion, Capitalism, and the End of the Nation-State in Taiwan," 482.

“instead receive separate, single sticks of incense (often marked with the name of the donor) stuck into plates of food.” In this way, *gui* worshippers are also individualised, and any sense of community minimised.<sup>127</sup>

Da-jing describes his perception of going to a ghost-occupied *yin* temple, emphasising the risk associated with the need for explicit terms and the consequences of not holding up your end of the bargain:

Because, in Taiwan, if it's an *yin* temple and you go and request [*baituo* 拜託] things with them, then— you must discuss the terms with them. That is, if I tell them ‘if you let me do such and such a thing, after it happens I'll bring a lot of money to give you’ but if you don't bring the money to give them, then maybe you will be hit by a car on the road, this kind of thing. There will be some bad things that happen. Right. So, ordinary people don't much like going to *yin* temples.

In contrast, his sister Chris points out that *shen* do not hold practitioners to the same standard:

I think *shenming* are more upright. In other words, they walk the honest road. Just like, you, even though you go make a vow [*xuyuan* 許願], and then you also feel you have received protection. But whether you really follow up or you don't do too much to fulfil your promise [*huanyuan* 還願], or you don't, are too busy— if you didn't do it, there also won't be bad— not that many bad things that will happen.

Further, Jordan notes that family ghosts are the spirits of related deceased whose lack of descendants to make offerings to them means they are not provided for in the spirit world. These ghosts typically only receive attention when they are used to explain a disaster, such as illness that does not respond to Chinese or Western medicine. In this case, the type of spirit causing the issue is identified through divination. Where the problem is caused by a ghost, the person suffering must do whatever is necessary to placate them. A spirit medium identifies the problem and solution. For instance, the ghost might be demanding a ghost marriage, for their tablet to be moved to a different ancestral shrine, or a human host, or protesting that they are inadequately cared for.<sup>128</sup> Notably,

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<sup>127</sup> Weller, 482–83.

<sup>128</sup> Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*.

ghosts are not usually thought to inflict suffering arbitrarily. Rather, Laurence G. Thompson, who translates *gui* as 'demons', notes that they operate on karma. They bring misgivings because of improper burial or neglect in the afterlife, but not as evil simply working to its own end.<sup>129</sup>

In a general, collective sense, *gui* are known as the Good Brothers (*hao xiongdi* 好兄弟) or – the impolite – hungry ghosts (*egui* 餓鬼). As Jordan observed, the Good Brothers – who he labelled the Good Brethren – are considered dangerous and it is for this reason that sacrifices are made to them at the gate of the house whenever important sacrifices are made to other spirits: to avoid incurring their jealousy or wrath. Indeed, Jordan suggests, “there is no question that the Good Brethren are the single most common category of supernatural worshipped simply because they exact sacrifices whenever sacrifices are to be offered for any reason.”<sup>130</sup> Over half a century has passed since these observations were published in Jordan’s *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors* (1972), where such practices are labelled ‘village’ religion. Yet, it remains extremely common to see people burning paper money at the door of their home or business in rural and metropolitan areas of Taiwan alike. Paper money marked ‘好兄弟’ (*hao xiongdi*, Good Brothers) is readily available, sold at most supermarkets. This is true year-round, but never do *gui* reap more sacrifices than in the seventh lunar month.

At the start of the seventh lunar month (typically falling around August or September), the door to the *yinjian* is opened and the ghosts are freed for the month. Accordingly, although officially called Zhongyuan 中元, this period is also known as Ghost Month (*guiyue* 鬼月). Various rituals are held throughout to provide the long-suffering ghosts with the food and other material goods that they have little access to in the *yinjian*. And Buddhist and Taoist priests perform rites to alleviate their suffering. The largest Ghost Month ritual is the Pudu feast (*pudu* 普渡), which most often takes place on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month.<sup>131</sup> Temples, businesses, and households participate by laying out tables of food for the ghosts to feast on, before they are once again banished to the *yinjian* at the end of the seventh lunar month. Ghosts can inflict

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<sup>129</sup> Thompson, *Chinese Religion: An Introduction*.

<sup>130</sup> Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*, 34.

<sup>131</sup> The usual way for spirits to be provided with material goods is for paper replicas to be burnt. The most frequently burnt is paper money, but everything from paper houses, cars, and cigarettes to iPhones and iPads are available.



misfortune on the living at any time of the year, but the great number of them thought to be in the living realm during Ghost Month means they are considered much more dangerous during this period. Because of this, there are a number of things the living are traditionally advised to avoid for the month so as not to be possessed by or become the target of a ghost. These include swimming, as there is a risk of being pulled in and drowned by ghosts in the water, and leaning against walls, which could anger any ghost standing by them, among many more.

### **Ancestors/Zuxian 祖先**

*Gui* are the spirits of those without descendants to make offerings to them, but where a *linghun* does have descendants to provide for them – but has not earned a position as a *shen* – they become a *zuxian*: an ancestor. Ancestors are traditionally represented by wooden tablets, or slips of paper,<sup>132</sup> on altars in the home or in ancestral halls.<sup>133</sup> Like *shen* and ghost, people typically *bai* ancestors with incense, food, and paper money and goods to provide for them in the *yinjian*. As with most practices associated with Taiwan's popular religion, the details vary and participants' accounts offer insight into different versions of the lived reality.

Sean points out that his family doesn't often *bai* at home, unless they are visiting their hometown, because they don't have a *shen* table (*shenzhuzhuo* 神主桌). Sean explains that this is because such tables are typically passed down to the eldest son of the eldest son in a family. And, although his father is that person, the older generation is still alive and thus the table remains with them.

Indeed, possibly the most resounding feature of Taiwan's popular religion is that there may be many common features but each individual's or family's practices are different – their own. Intrigued by Freddie's description of his family's habits, I ask whether he knows if his family has spirit tablets (*paiwei* 牌位) for all of his ancestors or only some. "I think just, just some," he replies.

*Do you know, why, do you know why you have them for some and not for others?*

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<sup>132</sup> Feuchtwang, *The Imperial Metaphor*.

<sup>133</sup> Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*; Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village*; Feuchtwang, *The Imperial Metaphor*.

Actually I'm not so sure, yeah. But I think that you have the tablets for my grand grandparents, yeah. And then another one is from my like, like a very old ancestors when they were, when ancestors was in mainland China, yeah. So, I'm not sure how they select or to determine which tablet, I mean, which ancestors we would go with the tablets, but I think that maybe at that time that means that ancestors was quite kind of like famous or or there, there was a big family there, and ... they were famous at that at that city or location or something, yeah. So, I think that like maybe in Taiwanese family like maybe if we go with the same last name, yeah. We would sometimes mean we might pay respect to the same ancestors.

*You mean like even if you're not necessarily, like, related, if you have the same—*

Yeah. Maybe, because, maybe there are already too many years ago, yeah. The— we're paying the same respect to one ancestor, yeah. Even though we're not pretty sure we are from the same family.

In his own description of his family's practice, Willie emphasises that sincerity is the most important thing, rather than the details of how they offer sacrifices:

Offering sacrifices [*jibai* 祭拜], this is a, it's that kind of sincerity. Right, I think, because my Yeye [paternal grandfather] passed away, actually the most important thing for us is all remembering him and his years. We also hope that Yeye is getting on happier above. So we go with something to eat, then gold and silver paper.

Still, this is not the only way the living fulfil their filial obligation to maintain communication with their ancestors and do whatever possible to help them, as Thompson points out. Another is through divination.<sup>134</sup>

Divination – or fortune-telling – is another pervasive feature of popular religion. It involves acts of gathering information about the past, present, or future.<sup>135</sup> Divination comes in many forms, which Ahern divides into 'interpersonal' and 'non-interpersonal'.<sup>136</sup> Stéphanie Homola makes a similar categorisation in a 2013 paper.

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<sup>134</sup> Thompson, *Chinese Religion: An Introduction*.

<sup>135</sup> Homola, "Pursue Good Fortune and Avoid Calamity."

<sup>136</sup> Ahern, *Chinese Ritual and Politics*, 5.

Explaining that there are no blanket terms for fortune-telling in Chinese language, Homola creates an “artificial” categorisation, dividing those forms of fortune-telling that imply contact with a deity and those that do not.<sup>137</sup> Forms of divination that do not involve communication with a spirit are those such as *fengshui* 風水 (*geomancy*), calendar horoscopy (*mingli* 命理) – including the very common *bazi* 八字 (eight characters) method – physiognomy (*mianxiang* 面相), palmistry (*shouxiang* 手相), divination through the examination of bones (*mogu* 摸骨), analysis of Chinese characters (*cezi* 測字), name analysis (*xingming xue* 姓名學), and 占卜 *zhanbu*, a method based on the thousands-of-years-old *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes).<sup>138</sup> As for interpersonal forms of divination, these include the use of spirit mediums to ask questions of spirits, moonblock (*bei* 柶) divination, and *chouqian* 抽籤 divination.

Past scholarship also offers some insight into divination’s place in contemporary Taiwan. In discussing the practice and usage of *bei* 柶 divination, Jordan reveals something of how divination is typically practised as well as how religion works concurrently with modern knowledge. Jordan identifies *bei* as the most common form of divination. Indeed, while all of this study’s participants were asked whether they engage in divination, the throwing of moon blocks to communicate with ancestors or *shen* was the only form regularly mentioned. This is usually performed in temples or homes. The practitioner will first *bai* a spirit (usually either a *shen* or ancestor), then ask them a question, and throw a pair of *bei* (or moon blocks, two crescent-shaped pieces of wood that are flat on one side and rounded on the other). The spirit’s response to the question is shown by which way up the *bei* land.<sup>139</sup> The practitioner may also *chouqian* 抽籤. This usually takes place in temples and involves the practitioner first throwing *bei*<sup>140</sup> to ask a *shen* if they are willing to answer a question. After receiving a positive answer, the practitioner chooses from a tub of numbered bamboo sticks (*qian* 籤). They then throw *bei* again to confirm they have identified the correct *qian*, if necessary, repeating this process until the *shen* approves. Once the correct *qian* has been confirmed, the

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<sup>137</sup> Homola, “Pursue Good Fortune and Avoid Calamity.”

<sup>138</sup> Homola.

<sup>139</sup> Jordan, “Taiwanese Poe Divination: Statistical Awareness and Religious Belief.”

<sup>140</sup> This act is known as *babei* 跋柶 (with the Hokkien pronunciation – *puǎh-pue* – commonly spoken).

practitioner looks to the corresponding poem, which can be interpreted to answer their question.<sup>141</sup>

Da-jing explains that when he throws moon blocks, he treats the deity like a person:

When I ask something, I will first tell them where my family lives, then my name, then what the whole problem is that I am coming to ask them about today. Then, why, why did I want to come ask you this kind of thing. So, I will treat them the same as a person, and talk to them.

Jordan discusses the statistical probability of *bei* showing certain answers, considering the same response must usually be shown three times in a row to be considered official. Ultimately, Jordan theorises that, while the practitioners do not believe it is a matter of statistical probability, the 'rules' of how to use *bei* do indicate a general acceptance of the rules of probability. Practitioners are not allowed to ask the *shen* to do anything extremely improbable, such as having the *bei* land the same way many times in a row.<sup>142</sup>

Aside from filial obligations, Thompson suggests another motivation for divination is "the desire to understand the operations of the natural and supernatural forces in the environment so that one's own actions may be in accord with them, thus producing favourable results."<sup>143</sup> And, significantly, based on ethnographic case studies from Taipei, Homola discusses in depth the reasons, ways, and times Taiwanese people consult fortune-tellers, pointing to a very valuable role they fulfil: that of psychologists.<sup>144</sup> Such a finding is made all the more notable by popular religion's vast reach in contemporary Taiwan.

The psychological benefit of popular religion was also a recurring theme in the interviews on which this study is based. Chris, for example, says she doesn't largely believe and doesn't participate all that often, but still points to the psychological benefit of feeling the protection of deities easing her fear of ghosts. Willie says that whether the spirits will help people who *baibai* without believing "depends on whether that *shenming* is good or not." But, in general, he explains, it will help but not necessarily because the

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<sup>141</sup> Homola, "Pursue Good Fortune and Avoid Calamity."

<sup>142</sup> Jordan, "Taiwanese Poe Divination: Statistical Awareness and Religious Belief."

<sup>143</sup> Thompson, *Chinese Religion: An Introduction*, 17.

<sup>144</sup> Jordan, "Taiwanese Poe Divination: Statistical Awareness and Religious Belief."

spirits are assisting, but rather because of psychological benefits allowing people to feel more settled in the knowledge that they have asked for assistance.

Doris also points to the psychological benefits of popular religion, explicitly making a comparison to Western therapy:

Of course, one factor is this kind of thing is also considered to be our Taiwanese psychological treatment. It's a bit like western countries' *therapy* [English], that kind of concept. They are all— if you look at like Western countries all going to find a person to talk to, right? So, we're all going to talk to *shenming*.

### ***Burning Money***

Along with food sacrifices and throwing moon blocks, burning incense and paper money are some of the most prevalent features of Taiwan's popular religion. Thus, the following section is intended to give the reader an idea of how the above concepts generally manifest in people's daily lives. While there are (usually minor) differences between each participant's description, I have chosen a sample with the intention offering the unfamiliar reader a picture of what people are actually doing in these situations.

Firstly, Freddie notes, incense is usually available at the front of temples for a small fee. Chia Yin explains that different temples have different instructions posted on their walls:

The first step is usually always to go outside first, and *baibai* towards the sky [*duizhe tiankong baibai* 對著天空拜拜]. Then, after that, maybe each temple will be different. They will tell you that you must first *bai* whichever main hall [*zhengdian* 正殿] *shen*, which *shen*. Then, they will have a sequence they tell you, like this. So, if it's the majority, you'll all go *bai* in accordance with that temple's worship instructions [*canbai zhishi* 參拜指示].

When such instructions aren't clear, Chia Yin says, she follows the way her family does it:

As for our own family, we will first *bai* the Heavenly Grandfather [Tiangong 天公] outside. Then, after first inserting a stick of incense, we'll turn around and come to *bai* the main *shen* [*zhushen* 主神] inside the main hall [*zhengdian* 正殿]. Then, for every *shen* with an incense censer, we will first

*bai* and then insert incense, and then *bai* one more time. Then, in the middle, after we finish walking the *shen* at the shrines [*shendian* 神殿] in the middle. After, we will first walk all the right side, enter from the right side: Usually, for Taiwan's temples, they will have a front first, and after the first *shen* at the front, you can go around and enter from the right or left. There will usually be one behind it, and it will also have additional *shenming*, and so on. Then, it will also be the same: middle, right, left. Then, after you've gone around to the back, it's the same and you first *bai* the *shen* in the middle, then the one on the right and on the left. It's all more or less this order to *canbai* 參拜. Then, after you've finished *bai*, you just return to the front area with the main table and take the things you just offered. Then, you face the main *shen* [*zhushen* 主神] and just like, maybe just ask for peace, and so on. Then you can handle the offerings and paper money. You just take the paper money to burn, and take the offerings home to eat. Like this.

Notably, Chia Yin points out that not all temples allow the burning of incense and paper money these days. She also says that she might always burn them during times like Lunar New Year and other festivals, but on other days she would just use her hands: "It feels like when my mind wants something, I must burn incense and paper money, to feel— it seems like doing more ceremony like this, my mind, I think it affects my mind," she says, laughing.

Willie's description of the order to *bai* at a temple largely matches Chia Yin's, but whereas she confidently recounts the process, he says he doesn't really know and just follows other people. "But the most important thing is probably that you definitely have to *bai* the Heavenly Grandfather [Tiangong 天公] and the main god inside [*zhushen* 主神]," he says.

Specific events also call for different practices. For Tomb-Sweeping Day or Lunar New Year, Chia Yin explains, "at home we will arrange a metal stove [*jinlu* 金爐] and burn paper money and such. If we're at home, we will definitely burn paper money. We will not, not leave out this step. As for burning incense, we will also have that."

*Where is it done? Outside the home?*

Ehh— If it's at Tomb-Sweeping Day or Zhongyuan, first *bai* the stove, the stove god [*Zaoshen* 灶神] inside the house, right, the stove god, then— after

that's finished, you might go to the doorway to *bai* the Good Brothers, like this. First *bai* the kitchen god, then *bai* the Good Brothers, then burn paper money at the door.

Chia Yin offers a more detailed explanation of how to burn incense and paper money, offering the unfamiliar reader a clear idea of what exactly such practices look like in reality:

For burning incense, after our entire family has arrived, you bow three times, then after you've finished praying [*qiqiuwan* 祈求完], you will take the incense and insert it, and then— when it is almost burnt out, my mum will say 'you go burn three more sticks of incense'. Then, when it seems like the second three sticks have burned to half way, my mum would say 'okay, it's more or less done'. I'm not sure how long it takes, maybe it's half an hour or an hour. Then it's just like the ceremony [*yishi* 儀式] is finished and such, then you can prepare to go burn paper money. Then you can take—the incense that just now wasn't fully burned, and throw it in the metal stove [*jinlu* 金爐] together with paper money and so on, and then burn them together. Then, after they've burned, nowadays there's no more. Because, since my mum, she is now vegetarian, she won't use alcohol. In the past, after the incense finished burning you'd use— on the offering table [*gongzhuo* 供桌] there would be seven cups of drink. Some people would use soft drinks [*yinliao* 飲料], and some would use alcohol. So, in the past we would quite often use alcohol, and she would circle it [on the ground] around the metal stove three times; after it's finished burning, use alcohol to circle the metal stove, and such. Going around in three circles just represents saying it's already finished and such. Then, we would just take back the things on the offering table, and have lunch. Because most of the time it's perhaps this period of time from 9am to 11am for *baibai*, then at noon we can just eat the things on the offering table, whether it's vegetarian or non-vegetarian, it's just treated as lunch.

Sean adds that silver paper money is burned for the Good Brothers, while gold is burned for *shen*, "so you can't buy the wrong one," he says, stressing the importance. Conversely, Feng-jiao describes a more casual approach when she talks about buying the

correct type of paper money. She points to the social nature of popular religion, noting that there are different types of paper money but if you don't understand, they'll tell you which to get when you buy it.

Doris and Sean also emphasise the need to fold the individual pieces of paper money. "Because if the air can't circulate and it doesn't have a gap, in the end there will be some that has burned and some that hasn't burned," Sean says. Doris replies, "that way they can't take it," before again emphasising the need to fold individual pieces of paper money so that they can be properly burned and received by the spirits for whom they were intended.

Explaining how to burn paper money, Willie points out that his dad taught him how to fan out a pile in his hand and fold each piece to separate them before throwing them in the fire. "My dad said it's better to separate them like this." Willie also casually mentions restrictions on the burning of paper money at temples: but "now it seems the government prohibits it, so we can't."

Luke is surprised when I asked whether he burns paper money for ghosts or 'the Good Brothers': "No, not really. I don't— do people do that?" He says, "I'm not sure if that is a good thing, because if you give them maybe they'll ask more." He goes on to point out that not all ghosts are bad, but they could be bad. His warning of the potential risks shows a lack of clarity on how the *yinjian* works, but fear all the same:

It's like you don't want to really mess with them, with a ghost, it's like you're, you're dealing with the devil. ...The ghosts might not be bad, not all of them are bad, this ghost. So, it's not like devil, but they're ghosts. Ghost is like maybe not god, and not like— so, they're not god, but also not your ancestors, yeah I don't know how that works, but, but yeah. So, it might not be bad, but it could be bad. ... You have to be careful because you asking the ghost to come over and maybe they are not satisfied with the stuff that you gave them. So, they might be still with you, so, you don't want that.

Luke says he only burns paper money for his ancestors, and doesn't know but doesn't think people burn paper money for *shen*: "I don't know if people burn money for god, I don't think so, because they always go to temple with and the incense, incense is like the symbol for paper money." In general, Luke's descriptions of practices are similar to those above but reveal a lack of clarity despite his respect. When burning paper money, Luke also notes that each piece of paper money must be separated and folded slightly. "I don't



know the particular reason, I think is just for them to burn completely,” he says. While he is generally unsure of the details, he notes that different types of paper money serve different purposes:

Oh, for paper money they will have the white, white one, compared to the gold one, and the white one will have gold on it, but it's like much thinner and smaller, that is for ghosts. Because so, like they wouldn't, was— I think it's for the ghosts who deliver the money, or for the ghosts that are around so that they won't steal the money, I don't know. So, that's that. And, yeah, pretty much burning them until they're like no fire left, or you don't have time, yeah. That's it. It's not that hard.

He notes that his family do this together, but it's not a problem if they can't all make it, “as long as there's people doing it, it's okay.”

Indeed, just as one member can pay their respects on behalf of the entire family, one employee can *baibai* on behalf of their company. Doris recounts how that person is usually simply whoever has the time. Doris explains how, just as one would ordinarily tell the spirits their identifying information, the same is necessary when paying respects on behalf of the workplace: “Generally speaking, when you *bai*, in your mind you have to say ‘oh, Tudigong 土地公 [the Earth God], hello, I am from XX company. Our address is here and here. Then, I hope because we are currently doing a such and such a case, we hope it can smoothly obtain it’.”

Chuang points out that when placing paper money into a stove to burn, they will also say something along the lines of “whoever, please come and accept the gold and silver money and valuables I have burned to give to you here. Please come and take them, remember to take them.”

As some of the accounts included thus far suggest, concerns for the environmental impact of burning sacrifices is changing behaviour. Feng-jiao expresses concern for the environmental impact of burning paper money, pointing out that she tries to burn little and use environmentally-friendly incense, where the smoke doesn't burn black, even though they are more expensive. “Ordinarily, I don't burn any anymore,” she says, “but say when I *bai* my ancestors, I will burn a little bit only then. Because if you don't burn it, you will feel— I don't feel peaceful.” Rosely takes this moment to point out that paper money is the equivalent of giving the spirits money to use in the *yinjian*. “It's their money,” she says.

Rosely also points out that the practice of circling burnt paper money with alcohol is to mark who it belongs to. “For example,” Feng-jiao adds, “this surname, our family name just did this, you other people can’t snatch it. It’s what our family burned to give our own ancestors.” It’s how you can tell whose is whose, Rosely explains. “Let me tell you,” Feng-jiao adds, “that is to comfort yourself. Absolutely, to comfort yourself.”

MJ’s own telling of how to *bai* largely echoes Chia Yin’s but he also recounts asking his ancestors if they’ve eaten their fill before removing the offerings, noting that his parents taught him how to *baibai*. He says that for a time after his parents first passed away, he would travel to his hometown and they would arrange offerings, which they’d later share with the neighbours before returning to Taipei. “The first time, you’d ask my mum and dad in the *yinjian* whether they’d eaten their fill or not,” he says, explaining that they would throw moon blocks to communicate and couldn’t take the offerings until his parents had finished. “In my memory, it’s that smoke, you had to wait until after the incense smoke was half burned and then go ask them, say ‘have you eaten enough?’ And if they hadn’t had enough, you’d continue.” They’d ask every ten minutes or so until their parents indicated that they’d had enough. After that, they’d burn paper money and then eat the offerings as a shared meal. But, MJ chuckles, the last time he participated in the paper money burning, his chest felt uncomfortable so he told his older brother “if you want to burn it, in the future you can burn it yourselves, I won’t burn it anymore.”

When describing how to *baibai*, MJ makes a big point about buying offerings that you yourself want to eat. He says that “Taiwan is also slowly improving,” in that in the past to *bai* you would have to have “the three sacrificial animals<sup>145</sup> and five gifts [*sansheng wuli* 三牲五禮]” but that was too greasy and it’s slowly become fruit, which everyone washes and eats afterwards. He explains that in the past his wife would buy some fancy foods to offer, which would remain in the fridge for a year before being thrown out because they wouldn’t eat it. So, now he says they should buy whatever it is they want to eat. “My thinking is like this: you don’t want things because of their appearance, it’s because we want to eat them that we will go *bai*.” MJ links this to the changing times and more materialist nature of modern society, noting that now people can turn down food they don’t feel like eating, whereas in the past they would be fighting over it.

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<sup>145</sup> Originally, cow, sheep, and pig; later pig, chicken, and fish.

Willie also notes that his family prepares different foods for different occasions, for example offering the traditional *zongzi* at Dragon Boat Festival, and their offerings will change if they have to travel. He cites the example of Tomb-Sweeping Day, when they return to visit his grandfather and thus take seven or eight small lunchboxes of food and some fruit and drinks.

### ***Further Notes on Temples***

Aside from individuals attending temples for ordinary practice, temples also host larger events and form networks with other temples. Da-jing notes that sometimes when big temples engage in an activity or practice, smaller temples in the area will assist or join in. In some cases, there are also relationships between the deities enshrined in temples:

Actually, in the north, many *shenming* in Taipei are from the south using a – we call it *fenling* 分靈 [shared spirit]. That is, maybe the spirit in this southern place was divided and then brought to Taipei, then it's here in Taipei. So, the temple in Taipei will often go to the south to burn incense [*jinxiang* 進香; used to refer to pilgrimages]. Then we'll take a tour bus to go burn incense. So, burning incense is because this *shenming* came to Taipei from the south. So after this *shenming* came to Taipei, they sometimes want to return home: to their real home. So, they would 'burn incense'. Right, just like go to this, this— Just like, say I came from Kaohsiung [city in southern Taiwan], then just like I go to Kaohsiung once a year. It's like this: taking the *shenming* down south.

Chia Yin says that people go to the temples when they are confused or seek peace, in the hope that the *shen* can guide them in a direction. Even so, she notes, "but you can't say for sure that the *shenming*'s response is definitely correct. Of course, it's treated as a reference."

When asked whether they had any thoughts about how temples were managed, Rosely was clear that it's a necessary part of the system, especially because people donate money and someone needs to manage that money.

MJ is particularly lively when talking about how wealthy temples are. He says that the land from "all" the big temples is acquired through donation. He laughs as he excitedly lists off famous temples in Taiwan and repeatedly points out that the land was donated. My first assumption is that MJ looks on this practice negatively, but when I ask more

explicitly how he feels about temple management, he also jumps to cooperation between temples and points out that “it’s normal, it’s nothing, this is very reasonable,” again chuckling, before further describing his understanding of how temples are managed. Although, when I ask for further clarification on this topic, he points out that relationships between temples are usually not “co-operation” (*hezuo* 合作) but rather “mutual visits” (*huxiang baifang* 互相拜訪), “mutual visit,” he repeats, this time with the “visit” in English for my benefit.

MJ says he isn’t “very clear” on how temples are managed but understands that bigger temples are run by management committees and smaller temples are managed by one or two attendants (*miaogong* 廟公). “The committees are all rich,” he says. He explains that large temples having management committees “seems to be a government regulation; they have to pay tax.” Indeed, MJ’s discussion of temples often centres on their wealth, but when asked what he thinks of temple management, he is quick to reply “oh, in any case, that’s a folk tradition [*minjian de xisu* 民間的習俗]. I have no particular opinion.” He goes on to point out that, although he lives right next to a medium-sized temple and they make noise on the first and fifteenth of every lunar month and on other special days, it doesn’t bother him and they “get along peacefully.” “This is something I have heard since I was small; I don’t notice any of it,” he says. Even so, MJ has a lot more to say about temple wealth, commenting that “temples are all extremely *rich* [English] ... people often say that if you don’t have anything, just go be a temple attendant [*miaogong* 廟公] to guarantee you!” He is very clear that “for me, it’s normal. Having a lot of money is ordinary. Only not having money is strange,” stressing this point repeatedly. He recounts:

A resource from when I was small was like this, that’s material from forty or fifty, forty years ago, material from Madou [MJ’s hometown], I don’t know. That *document* [English] I saw was that our Wuwang Temple [*Wuwang miao* 武王廟] in Madou; one month’s donations was ten million New Taiwan Dollars. At that time, ten million NTD could buy I don’t even know how many houses. I’m talking about ten million NTD forty years ago. Not today’s ten million NTD. Now, ten million NTD could buy one house, in the countryside, it can buy one house. But, at that time, ten million NTD could buy a thousand houses!

But the majority of that wealth comes from individuals putting small amounts of money in donation boxes each time they attend a temple, he says.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

This chapter is about some of the most fundamental elements of Taiwan's popular religion. Firstly, it addresses how the diffuse, diverse, and changing nature of popular religion presents challenges in identifying and naming it. In incorporating the accounts of this study's participants, it also shows different ways of thinking about and understanding that nature. This is particularly evident as we see how change, long acknowledged in scholarship as a fundamental feature of Taiwan's popular religion, also underpins participants' ways of talking about their popular religion; for some, a changing popular religion is a sign of progress, while for others it is just the way things are, or indicative of a loss of past knowledge.

Different ways of understanding Taiwan's popular religion remain evident when it comes to the various scholarly approaches to the issue of definition and identification. In analysing these, we gain a deeper understanding of the features that shape ways of thinking about Taiwan's popular religion in everyday life as well as the practical considerations that underpin this study. Ultimately, this study adopted the 'folk religious attitude' approach to identifying Taiwan's popular religion, incorporating both the practices performed and practitioners' attitude towards them.<sup>146</sup> As such, a detailed discussion of the major concepts of Taiwan's popular religion was necessary both to aid in identifying the popular religious attitude and to allow readers who may be unfamiliar with such things to better understand the practical features that are repeatedly referenced in participants' accounts throughout the rest of this thesis.

Those major concepts – worship or *baibai*, temples, *shen*, ghosts, ancestors, divination, and the burning of paper money and incense – are here considered from both scholarly and theoretical perspectives as well as their practical expression in the everyday lives of the participants in this study and thus the understandings formed through that lived experience. Doing so further highlights some of the diversity in experiences and practices of popular religion and how the literature and participant experiences are able to work together, to offer a more true-to-life picture of Taiwan's

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<sup>146</sup> Wong, "Defining Chinese Folk Religion."

popular religion. Indeed, utilising both academic literature and lived experience allows insight into both *how* and *why* those concepts may mean different things to different people.

Such an approach allows for a more accurate and nuanced understanding of Taiwan's popular religion in the present. This is especially important if we are to take Li Yih-yuen's view that Chinese popular religion does indeed have doctrine, but it is integrated into the daily lives of the people rather than in scripture or institutions.<sup>147</sup> In that case, it is only by talking to the people about popular religion in the context of their everyday lives that we gain insight into its doctrine.<sup>148</sup> But, furthermore, an approach such as this one also allows for the building of a participatory history and public memory. Indeed, in considering participants' accounts of their popular religion, informed by the lived experience of daily life, we both see and *create a record of* how theoretical concepts manifest in practice; what the practice of popular religion actually looks like in contemporary Taiwanese daily life, and how that is experienced and understood by its practitioners.

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<sup>147</sup> Li, *Zongjiao Yu Shenhua Lunji* 宗教與神話論集.

<sup>148</sup> Wong, "Defining Chinese Folk Religion."



Figure 3: A metal stove, incense, and paper money for sale at a supermarket in Taipei: May, 2016. The paper money is labelled 'Good Brothers' (hao xiongdi 好兄弟).

Photograph by Tegan J. Farrell.

## Chapter Three: Chinese

This chapter examines the relationships between Taiwanese culture and Chinese culture through the lens of the contemporary lived experience of popular religion in Taiwan. Here, participants reflect on the place of popular religion in their own subjective identities. The chapter begins by canvassing the historical treatment of Taiwan as representative of China and Chinese culture in scholarship. It then moves on to discuss and analyse the various ways that participants in this study understand popular religion as it relates to both Chineseness and Taiwanese-ness, drawing on related academic scholarship. This is tackled in three main sections: the first addresses the idea of popular religion as Taiwanese; the second discusses it in terms of Chineseness or Sino-culture; and the third considers the idea that Taiwan's popular religion is neither Chinese nor Taiwanese, but rather a series of discrete regional cultures. Ultimately, this chapter is about the significance of voice and the right to self-definition. It demonstrates how amplifying the voices of those with lived experience is important, not only because the stories those voices tell may differ to the literature produced without them, but also because including them we allow the space for self-identity. In doing so, we see how the question of whether Taiwanese popular religion is Chinese popular religion is wholly separate from whether Taiwanese are Chinese or whether Taiwan is China in daily life. For some participants, the Chineseness of popular religion in Taiwan may remain linked to questions of Taiwanese versus Chinese identity. But, in seeing how people tell their own stories, we also see how popular religion can be part of what makes Taiwan Taiwan, and still be Chinese popular religion. We also see the different ways in which popular religion is integrated with personal identities and the discourses of identity, belonging, unity, and politics that underpin the ways participants talked about Taiwan's popular religion in relation to Chineseness.

While cognisant of the importance of – and high degree of interest that scholars have taken in – the topic, initially my research did not seek to directly address questions of alliance or opposition between Taiwanese and Chinese cultures or identities. Rather, the question of whether Taiwan's culture or popular religion is Chinese was considered primarily to help select the terminology to be used in this study. This is itself an important consideration, as, Mark Harrison points out, different ways of referring to Taiwan “indicate the multiple meanings that have been ascribed to the island of Taiwan. Under



each term particular historical trajectories are privileged or suppressed and certain social distinctions are valorized or erased.”<sup>149</sup> Indeed, Harrison argues:

Simply naming the island Taiwan in English, Chinese, or Japanese constitutes a Taiwanese identity. Each time the island is named Taiwan and not Formosa or China, Taiwan as a legitimate object of meaning is being differentiated from other meanings that can encompass the island under other names. When one writes phrases such as “Taiwanese popular culture” or “Taiwan’s democratic transformation,” ... its meaning is being rehearsed, elaborated, and contested at the boundaries of what Taiwan can mean. However, this is not a neutral and homogeneous discursive process that simply unfolds the truth about Taiwan ... Rather, it is structured in terms of power and replete with omissions, effacements, and priorities that privilege certain events, themes, and cultural practices.<sup>150</sup>

Thus, interviewees were asked whether Taiwan’s popular religion is Chinese to aid in determining how it would be referred to throughout this thesis: is it *Taiwanese* popular religion or *Chinese* popular religion? This approach was driven by an assumption that questioning the concept of Taiwanese opposition to Chineseness – and its relationship to understandings of popular religion – which is salient in the literature, would not yield new findings. However, the process of interviewing proved otherwise. As this chapter will show, none of this study’s participants said they think Taiwanese popular religion or culture is the same as in the contemporary People’s Republic of China (PRC). That said, only four spoke in terms of an opposition of ‘Taiwanese’ and ‘Chinese’. Most referred to ‘Taiwan’ when speaking about it in conversation, but all acknowledged its emergence from a broader shared tradition of Chinese culture, *Zhonghua wenhua* 中華文化, or what Shu-mei Shih translates as ‘Sino-culture’.<sup>151</sup> Indeed, several participants also referenced relations to other diasporic Chinese communities where popular religion remains practised, such as in Malaysia and Singapore. Aside from what this tells us about the issue of Chineseness as it relates to Taiwan’s popular religion – and the world as it is

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<sup>149</sup> Harrison, *Legitimacy, Meaning and Knowledge in the Making of Taiwanese Identity*, 2. See chapter one, in particular, for analysis of the many ways Taiwan has been labelled.

<sup>150</sup> Harrison, *Legitimacy, Meaning and Knowledge in the Making of Taiwanese Identity*, 5–6.

<sup>151</sup> Shih, *Visuality and Identity*.

experienced through the lens of Taiwan's popular religion – this chapter also demonstrates the need to consider lived experience in the discussion of concepts so integrated into daily life. We not only gain critical scholarly insight but also allow space for the complex everyday reality of Taiwanese identity and popular memory.

### *A Brief History*

Taiwan's political history has differed significantly from that of the PRC. Its "political status has never been unassailable," Wachman argues. China has been governed "by Chinese exercising dominion over the entire empire, by Chinese exercising power in regions that competed for control of the whole empire, and by foreigners who wrested control of China from Chinese, but who were ultimately routed and replaced by Chinese rulers." Conversely, Wachman contends, "Taiwan has not always been considered part of China, has often been governed by non-Chinese, and has never been ruled exclusively by people who consider Taiwan as home."<sup>152</sup>

The first Chinese inhabitants of Taiwan arrived in the sixteenth<sup>153</sup> or seventeenth<sup>154</sup> century. Yet, Brown suggests the era of Dutch rule from 1624 to 1661 represents the first attempt to politically control the entire island, where the majority population was Aboriginal, despite it having been inhabited for thousands of years.<sup>155</sup> Regular Chinese migration began during this period, when the Dutch regime encouraged Han migration from China, primarily from Fujian province, to increase agriculture on Taiwan.<sup>156</sup> Estimates suggest the population of Chinese in Taiwan in the mid-seventeenth century was approximately 25,000.<sup>157</sup> These numbers increased rapidly after 1661, when Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga), along with 25,000 troops, invaded Taiwan and took control. The Zheng period was short-lived, lasting only until 1683. Still, migration of supporters from mainland China saw the population of Chinese on Taiwan increase significantly in that time. Indeed, Knapp estimates it grew to approximately 350,000 by 1683.<sup>158</sup> In 1683,

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<sup>152</sup> Wachman, "Competing Identities in Taiwan," 19–20.

<sup>153</sup> Mendel, *The Politics of Formosan Nationalism*.

<sup>154</sup> Wachman, "Competing Identities in Taiwan"; Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*

<sup>155</sup> Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*, 36–37; Knapp, "Chinese Frontier Settlement in Taiwan," 43.

<sup>156</sup> Knapp, "Chinese Frontier Settlement in Taiwan"; Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*

<sup>157</sup> Knapp, "Chinese Frontier Settlement in Taiwan."

<sup>158</sup> Knapp, 44.

forces of the Qing government – the Manchu<sup>159</sup> regime that had controlled the mainland since 1644 – took control of Taiwan, bringing it under the same government as China for the first time.<sup>160</sup> “Thereafter virtually no attention was paid by the imperial authorities to the island,” Knapp states.<sup>161</sup> Taiwan was considered a prefecture of Fujian province, the southern Chinese province situated on the other side of the Taiwan Strait, and an official ban saw migration heavily reduced until its rescission in 1732. Following, migration, primarily from southeast China, continued and was later encouraged by the Qing regime. The result was over three million Chinese in Taiwan by 1887.<sup>162</sup> In 1895, at the end of the Sino-Japanese war, Taiwan was ceded to Japan. It remained a Japanese colony until 1945.<sup>163</sup>

The Japanese government made significant efforts to develop Taiwan during its tenure. It constructed roads and bridges, hospitals, sewerage and irrigation systems, as well as a railroad running the length of Taiwan. It also expanded agriculture on Taiwan and instituted a public school system (taught in Japanese), a corruption-free criminal justice system, and made medical services more available to the people of Taiwan.<sup>164</sup> The people of Taiwan, however, were not considered equals by the Japanese.<sup>165</sup> And, Harrison explains, while “Taiwan enjoyed the best of Japanese liberalism” this was followed by “the worst of Japanese militarism from the 1930s.”<sup>166</sup>

Although Ahern and Gates state that “the Japanese did not intentionally alter Chinese customs and social relations,”<sup>167</sup> there are conflicting accounts. Separating cultural practices from religious ones, Brown suggests the Japanese largely did not attempt to “radically” alter the former, except to end the practice of foot-binding and enforce sanitation and hygiene measures: “spitting in public was prohibited in cities, and police

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<sup>159</sup> Wachman, “Competing Identities in Taiwan,” 20. Wachman states that the Qing “were, themselves, alien rulers of China. Although the Manchus adopted Chinese manners, values, and administrative systems, they were foreigners.”

<sup>160</sup> Knapp, “Chinese Frontier Settlement in Taiwan”; Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*; Wachman, “Competing Identities in Taiwan.”

<sup>161</sup> Knapp, “Chinese Frontier Settlement in Taiwan,” 44. See also: Mendel, *The Politics of Formosan Nationalism*, 13–14.

<sup>162</sup> Knapp, “Chinese Frontier Settlement in Taiwan,” 45.

<sup>163</sup> Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*; Wachman, “Competing Identities in Taiwan.”

<sup>164</sup> Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*, 54–55.

<sup>165</sup> Brown, 54–55.

<sup>166</sup> Harrison, *Legitimacy, Meaning and Knowledge in the Making of Taiwanese Identity*, 1.

<sup>167</sup> Ahern and Gates, *The Anthropology of Taiwanese Society*, 8.

sometimes knocked holes in the walls of homes to ‘encourage’ people to put in windows.”<sup>168</sup> As far as religious practices, though, Brown points out that the colonial government “did not generally interfere with local religious practices,” until the late 1930s, when, in its efforts to instil loyalty to the emperor in preparation for war, traditional religious practices were suppressed and the population were instead ordered to worship Shinto deities. Brown’s interviewees reported Japanese police destroying all attainable images of deities, though many were able to be hidden and thus saved.<sup>169</sup>

As a result of these considerable efforts to both develop and shape Taiwanese society, Wachman argues:

The legacy of Japanese rule runs deeply among those residents of Taiwan old enough to remember and has shaped mannerisms and customs on the island. Japan’s presence is visible even to those who have no personal memory of Taiwan’s days of a colony because Japan directed the construction of industrial base and transportation infrastructure that is often cited as a contributing factor in Taiwan’s subsequent “miraculous” economic development.<sup>170</sup>

The period of Japanese rule ended with Japan’s defeat in 1945 and Taiwan was returned to the Republic of China. It was formally surrendered on October 25, 1945 to the KMT, who, under Chiang Kai-shek, were seen as governing the Republic of China.<sup>171</sup> But, undoubtedly, this history leaves its legacy on contemporary Taiwanese life, including popular religion and the ways in which Taiwan’s people see and experience their culture, as does what followed under KMT rule of Taiwan (addressed in detail below).

### ***Chinese Culture***

Academically, Taiwan’s culture has a long history of being considered Chinese. Historically, academics have considered the history of Taiwan’s culture in relation to Chinese identity and culture and often equated the two. Yet, such scholarship fails to compare or connect with the lived experience of Taiwanese people and their practice of popular religion today. In *Re-Writing Religion*, Fang-long Shih acknowledges the

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<sup>168</sup> Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*, 56.

<sup>169</sup> Brown, 56.

<sup>170</sup> Wachman, “Competing Identities in Taiwan,” 20.

<sup>171</sup> Wachman, 20.

historical issues with scholars studying Taiwanese religion as a substitute for China. Still, the Taiwanese scholar of religion states: “Throughout this paper I will shift, perhaps inconsistently, between ‘Taiwanese’ and ‘Chinese’ as a means of describing religious ideas and practices in Taiwan. This shift reflects Taiwan’s own ambivalent relation to China that combines not only a cultural debt but also a unique history of its own.”<sup>172</sup> The “ambivalent relation” Shih references is evident in much of the interview responses included in this chapter, where clear answers are few and far between and we instead see discourses of identity, belonging, unity, and politics as participants share their own views based on lived experience.

“Between the 1960s and 1980s,” Fang-long Shih writes, “for all kinds of reasons – part political, part due to the methodological and theoretical fashions of the period – religion in Taiwan was written as a sign of Chineseness and thus a window through which a greater China and a pan-Chineseness could be brought into view.” Anthropological studies of religion in Taiwan increased during this period, when the PRC’s closed borders left international scholars without access to mainland PRC and the newly arrived KMT authoritarian government was presenting Taiwan as the true China: the protector of Chinese culture. Scholars were directed to Taiwan as a culturally rich and accessible surrogate for China – with funding – leading to its treatment as representative of China and Chinese culture in scholarship.<sup>173</sup> Yet, as we see above, Taiwan’s history has differed significantly from that of the PRC.

Scholars of popular religion in Taiwan once also routinely referred to it as Chinese, with some fundamental works framed in terms of a perceived representation of China.<sup>174</sup> Yet, in more recent times, the labels given to popular religion in Taiwan are somewhat varied, reflecting the complex, political, and ongoing conversation about Taiwanese identity. Some scholars have continued to treat it as Chinese. But others have termed it ‘Taiwanese folk religion’,<sup>175</sup> while another view proposes there is a smaller subset of Taiwan and Southern China with a shared popular religion.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Shih, “Re-Writing Religion: Questions of Translation, Context, and Location in the Writing of Religion in Taiwan,” 16.

<sup>173</sup> Shih, “Re-Writing Religion: Questions of Translation, Context, and Location in the Writing of Religion in Taiwan.”

<sup>174</sup> For example: Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village*; Freedman, *Family and Kinship in Chinese Society*.

<sup>175</sup> For example: Tsai, *Religious Experience*; Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*

<sup>176</sup> Lupke, “Reflections on Situating Taiwan in Modern Chinese Cultural Studies.”

A further complication in the terminology used to refer to popular religion is marked by the difference between 中國文化 (*Zhongguo wenhua*) and 中華文化 (*Zhonghua wenhua*), both usually translated into English as 'Chinese culture'. The first term, 中國 (*Zhongguo*), is China as a country, literally the 'middle kingdom', and is typically used to refer to the PRC. Accordingly, 中國文化 (*Zhongguo wenhua*) is 'Chinese' culture in the sense that it is the culture of the PRC. However, 中華 (*Zhonghua*) is what Wachman terms a conceptual, "poetic, archaic reference to China." While Wachman's theorisations of Taiwanese identity and associated methods have been called into question,<sup>177</sup> the work is nevertheless helpful in illustrating various understandings as well as differences between terms. Wachman explains:

While *Chung-kuo* [*Zhongguo*] implies a centralization of power in a single state and reflects the way the Chinese empire actually emerged out of a morass of smaller, sovereign states, the term *hua* evokes an indistinct image of splendor that might be more appropriately applied to the Chinese nation and its culture than to the Chinese polity. For this reason, Chinese people who do not want to associate themselves with the Chinese state may identify themselves as *Hua jen* [*Huaren*], not *Chung-kuo jen* [*Zhongguoren*].<sup>178</sup>

One of Wachman's interviewees explains: "I prefer to say, 'I am a *Hua jen* [*Huaren*].' A Chinese, yes... but a *Chung-kuo jen* [*Zhongguoren*], no."<sup>179</sup>

A helpful interpretation of these terms comes from Shu-mei Shih, who translates 中國文化 (*Zhongguo wenhua*) as 'Chinese culture' and 中華文化 (*Zhonghua wenhua*) as 'Sino-culture'. Notably, of the participants in this study who did identify Taiwan's popular religion as Chinese, most spoke in terms of Sino-culture. Da-jing was the only one to suggest it could be either *Zhongguo wenhua* 中國文化 as 'Chinese culture' or 中華文化 *Zhonghua wenhua* as 'Sino-culture', whereas Rosely and Feng-jiao said they were not able to distinguish between the two terms.

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<sup>177</sup> For a detailed analysis of theorisations on Taiwanese identity, see Harrison, *Legitimacy, Meaning and Knowledge in the Making of Taiwanese Identity*.

<sup>178</sup> Wachman offers the term 'Cathay' as a comparison. Wachman, "Competing Identities in Taiwan," 39.

<sup>179</sup> Wachman, 39.

## *Taiwanese Culture*

When asked whether Taiwan's popular religion is Chinese (with the term 'Chinese' in English), several participants insisted that it is neither *Zhongguo wenhua* 中國文化 nor *Zhonghua wenhua* 中華文化. Doris believes popular religion is both an important part of Taiwan's culture and solely Taiwanese despite its Chinese origins. "I don't think it is either *Zhongguo wenhua* 中國文化 or *Zhonghua wenhua* 中華文化," she says, "because at the current time and place, here it is a part of Taiwan's culture." Doris points out that all cultures have multiple historical roots, but that Taiwan's culture has evolved with a variety of regional distinctions. In speaking about such regional distinctions, her discourse creates clear separations between contemporary Taiwanese culture and Chinese culture, but it does not appear to be outwardly negative towards China. She notes the fact that there are numerous regional cultural variations within China itself before explaining how such regional evolution has also taken place in Taiwan. "We brought many things with us [from China]. Afterwards, it was preserved on this piece of land. So, with so-called *Zhongguo wenhua* 中國文化, I think there is still regional separation, now it is a Taiwanese culture."

Freddie offers a similar perspective, speaking confidently about the Taiwanese-ness of popular religion. "Chinese? No, I will call it Taiwanese," he responds quickly to being asked whether Taiwan's popular religion is Chinese. He points out that religions can originate from different places but "when it gets somewhere it became one of their cultures ... starting at that time it doesn't matter where the origin is from, in my opinion." For Freddie, the historical origin of Taiwan's culture or religion is wholly separate to its contemporary identity. Notably, in his final comments on this topic, Freddie emphasises the importance of how people understand and define their own religion or culture: "It depends on how people actually define," he says, summing up his explanation of how cultures that are historically linked to China are now all distinct from one another.

Similarly, when asked about the relationship between popular religion and national identity, MJ is quick to deny any such connection. "I personally think it doesn't have any relation," he says. Explaining his reasoning, MJ highlights popular religion's Chinese history, pointing to the influence of mass emigration of both people and customs from Southern China. Even so, he steadfastly argues that popular religion itself is not Chinese. "I don't believe so," he responds defensively, citing Taiwan's colonial history and drawing

an immediate link between Taiwan's popular religion being Chinese and Taiwan being Chinese:

This has a clash, because Taiwan's culture is *impact*[ed] [English] by Chinese [*Zhongguo* 中國] culture's influence. No one will deny it, but if we are Chinese people [*Zhongguoren* 中國人], I'm sorry, I can't concede it. Speaking for me, personally, I can't admit it. This has nothing to do with them. I'm affected by the culture, this is *OK* [English], no one will deny it. Because Taiwan has previously been under the control of the Netherlands, has been under the control of Zheng Chenggong [Koxinga], has been under the control of many Japanese, has been under the control of China, ah, now the Democratic Progressive Party, that government is more of a local party. In that case, because this is *impact*[ed] [English] by China, it is impossible to escape. Because these people are from, most people, apart from the aboriginal people, this blood lineage has all been *mix*[ed] [English] from there. In that case, after all, we don't know how it is *mix*[ed] [English], I don't know. But I have already been *mix*[ed].

Alongside discourses of identity, belonging and political friction, MJ refers to language, specifically Taiwanese Hokkien (Tâi-gí), as another example of how things evolve to become a localised version distinct to a specific region or identity. "Taiwan's language is Taiwanese [*Taiwanhua* 台灣話]," he says, arguing that while it originates from southern Fujian, it has evolved to an extent that "they, over there, can no longer understand our speech." He chuckles. "This is not wrong. Just that Taiwanese has a big *mix* [English] of Japanese." MJ further points to how language evolves in response to historical influences in the same way culture does:

It's like we say we have been influenced by Chinese [*Zhongguo* 中國] culture, but do you say you are a Chinese person [*Zhongguoren* 中國人]? Why am I Chinese? Why on Earth do I have anything to do with China now? It's best if there isn't any relationship, right? Just the same as Singaporeans are Singaporean Chinese [*Xinjiapo de Huaren* 新加坡的華人]. If you tell him he is Chinese [*Zhongguoren* 中國人]— The *Minnanyu* 閩南語 he speaks and the language we speak is also the same, he [will say] 'I am Singaporean, why on Earth am I Chinese [*Zhongguoren* 中國人]?' Right? It's the same, this



kind of political China [*zhengzhi de Zhongguo* 政治的中國] and cultural China [*wenhua de Zhongguo* 文化的中國].

When asked further about other cultures with Chinese roots, MJ cites the reasons people chose to leave China as a reason that Taiwan's culture can be seen as distinctly Taiwanese. In doing so, he points to the importance of his ancestors' own desire to escape China and re-define themselves.

*Then, you think these kinds of places like Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia— Overseas Chinese [Huaren 華人].*

*Places with Overseas Chinese [Huaren 華人] are all—*

*Many customs are the same, yes, the things they bai are the same. They also bai Matsu, they also bai— they also bai Guan Gong, bai Wu Wang temples [Wuwang miao 武王廟] ... that's also all the same.*

MJ's discourse emphasises both Taiwan's and his own family's history of migration. He points to the reasons for that migration as a significant factor in contemporary labels and identities, indicating the importance of self-definition.

*They are all influenced from China ... Because, to be honest, why do they want to go there? Because it's not good, the life is not good. This is quite a normal phenomenon. Why did my ancestors come from there? It's not because of a war, they only came because the life was not good. Otherwise why would my ancestors come? ... We emigrated because my ancestors didn't live well. That's the point. ... Over 90 per cent are like this.*

Despite his initial response that popular religion is wholly unrelated to national identity, the way he talks about popular religion – repeatedly and passionately denouncing its contemporary relationship to China – suggests otherwise.

In contrast to MJ, Willie argues that popular religion is strongly linked with Taiwanese national identity. His initial response is to exclaim "I seem to have never thought about this question!" But, shortly after, Willie describes how he perceives the relationship between national identity and popular religion: "I think, it is a bit related," he proclaims. He points to popular religion's propensity to unite people – a discourse addressed more fully in the following chapter. "Popular religion can be considered to be

one thing, one way, one heart, one, one form, one method of uniting a country and bringing together all the people.”

Even so, he continues, “I also don’t think I can say it is totally equal to a national identity.” Rather, he sees popular religion and national identity as related but not for everyone: “It may only account for a portion of people. Yes, it is genuinely related for this portion, right.” Willie identifies himself as one of those people for whom popular religion and national identity are linked. He explains that this is because he considers popular religion to be a part of Taiwanese culture and Taiwan, but points out that it is not the only factor in his national identity:

Because I think popular religion is part of Taiwan’s culture and part of the country. But, but, even without this, we still have Taiwanese culture, still grew up on Taiwan’s land. Yes, so I will still identify with this country.

When asked if Taiwan’s popular religion is Chinese, Willie initially responds that it is indeed Chinese, using the English word, before quickly moving on to emphasise the localisation that has resulted in a change to Taiwanese.

*So, do you think these things are Chinese [English]?*

Good question, um, it’s *Chinese* [English], because, after all, many of these beliefs came from other places, maybe southern Fujian! They come from places like this, but every time a culture or religion goes to a place ... they will all localise. So ... comparing the development, it has also become more of a Taiwanese culture. That’s right. So, when I say *Chinese* [English], I think ... it’s still better to talk about Taiwan’s culture. The place of development is not necessarily Taiwan, but it integrates a lot of Taiwanese, local ways of thinking, and a belief. So, I think it is more, it can be regarded as Taiwanese culture, right.

Willie points out that, while many of the beliefs that now make up Taiwan’s popular religion may have originated from Fujian in Southern China, that is not the case for all of them. “But a lot of culture is localised,” he continues, again emphasising that such localisation means that it can now be considered Taiwanese: “In fact, to this day, it may now be different from southern Fujian and China. It has become a more distinctive culture of Taiwan, right.” I ask whether it no longer counts as Chinese, hoping to clarify Willie’s thoughts. “Umm—,” he responds.

*It’s hard to say?*

Yes, I think this question, I don't know, there will be different ideas. Yes, myself, I think it is Taiwan.

Willie's discussion of this topic has consistently tended towards uncertainty but shifts to be even more uncertain at this point. I seek further clarification, asking: *You think maybe some people think it is Chinese [English]?*

Yes.

*Those people, do you think they think it is Zhonghua wenhua 中華文化 or Zhongguo wenhua 中國文化, or—?*

It's more like *Zhonghua wenhua* 中華文化. Yes, I think. Because, I don't know whether or not China is still doing the same activities, the same, the same practices, the same customs, the same, that is, the same rules and laws. Actually, I'm not very sure. ... Yes, so I would be better to think that ... these years in Taiwan have gone on to produce some, some Taiwanese localisation. And later the resulting culture, I think, yes, so I think this is more biased towards Taiwanese culture.

Willie's contemplation is illustrative of the complexity of Taiwan's identity. Despite his apparent lack of confidence in articulating his thoughts on this issue, Willie is consistent in his conclusions. For him, Taiwan's popular religion may have Chinese origins but it is now Taiwanese.

Such responses align with the literature, which points to an opposition of 'Chinese' and 'Taiwanese'. In the context of Taiwan's political history, Shu-mei Shih argues the conflation of 中國文化 (*Zhongguo wenhua*, 'Chinese culture') and 中華文化 (*Zhonghua wenhua*, 'Sino-culture'<sup>180</sup>) has resulted in the opposition of 'Taiwanese culture' to 'Chinese culture': "[T]hose who continue to appreciate classical Chinese culture risk being identified simplistically as unificationists (*tongpai*) [統派],<sup>181</sup> while Taiwan-centered cultural purists hasten to construct Taiwan's unique cultural history based on its unique cultural geography, climatology, colonial history, and archaeology against China and Chineseness."<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Along with "Sinophone culture" (*huayu wenhua* 華語文化)

<sup>181</sup> In contrast to independentists (*dupai* 獨派)

<sup>182</sup> Shih, *Visuality and Identity*, 121–22.

In the study of popular religion, this takes the form of scholarly efforts to show ‘Taiwanisation’ or ‘indigenisation’ of the popular religion practised in Taiwan, which is commonly acknowledged as having originated from mainland China. Such studies aim to show that popular religion in Taiwan has grown to differ from that practised in the PRC, citing a variety of factors, including distance, differing levels of state interference in the two regions, and Japanese, indigenous Taiwanese, and even early European influence. Shiwei Li, for example, notes, “most Taiwanese popular religion originated on the mainland, but because of Taiwan’s geographic distance from the continent, and the limited official presence, Taiwanese popular religion developed to some extent in its own manner.”<sup>183</sup> “A desire to describe and delineate a tradition unique to Taiwan clearly motivates the research of some scholars,” Sangren explains:

By the same token, scholars who frame their work in terms that transcend Taiwanese/Mainland boundaries are frequently criticized for an inappropriate research focus, by implication one that legitimates the notion of a greater “cultural” China. The term itself, *wenhua zhong'guo* [文化中國 cultural China] is often invoked as an unflattering epithet affiliated with the assumed pro-reunification sympathies of scholars who implicitly or explicitly assume some measure of Chinese cultural unity in their studies.<sup>184</sup>

The reliability of some studies aiming to show indigenisation of religious practices in Taiwan has been called into question,<sup>185</sup> and more work needs to be done in this area. Still, research to date would indicate that there *are* clear differences between the popular religion seen in Taiwan and that seen in the PRC. For instance, Brown, who differentiates ‘Taiwanese folk religion’ from ‘Han folk religion’, traces the cultural history of Taiwan’s Plains Aborigines and details how non-Han religious customs integrated with – and in many, but not all, ways gave way to – ‘Han folk religion’.<sup>186</sup> Similarly, Moskowitz provides

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<sup>183</sup> Li, “A Survey and Evaluation of Postwar Scholarship of Popular Religion in Taiwan (1950-2000),” 51.

<sup>184</sup> Sangren, “Anthropology and Identity Politics in Taiwan: The Relevance of Local Religion,” 273.

<sup>185</sup> See Katz and Rubinstein, *Religion and the Formation of Taiwanese Identities*; Katz, “Cult of the Royal Lords in Postwar Taiwan.”

<sup>186</sup> Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*

a fascinating in-depth study of the foetus ghost phenomenon in Taiwan, theorising that it was inspired by the Japanese practice, given it is also found in Japan, but not in the PRC.<sup>187</sup>

Even so, some argue that such differences are not significant enough to consider Taiwanese culture separate from that of China. Although stating “it is evident that Taiwanese differ from most Mainlanders in that they speak a different dialect, worship different deities, have cultivated a self-referential literature, perform distinct forms of folk-opera and puppetry, and practice different funeral and burial customs,” Wachman states “Taiwanese culture is a regional variation of Chinese culture.” Wachman argues “every civilization that extends over a wide territory and a vast population is bound to have regional variations and discernible differences in practice, customs, and beliefs. These differences do not necessarily constitute a different culture.”<sup>188</sup> In the case of the popular religion practised in China or Taiwan, its very nature sees it change rapidly and vary significantly between localities, temples, and even individuals.<sup>189</sup> So it is not at all surprising that popular religion in Taiwan is not identical to that in the PRC. Further, while they will likely continue to diverge, perhaps to such a point that they should be considered discernibly unique traditions, the current, albeit limited, literature on popular religion in Taiwan and China suggests the two primarily continue to share beliefs and practices derived from a broader shared tradition; that is, from *Zhonghua wenhua* 中華文化. In fact, scholars have continued to study ‘Chinese folk religion’ in Malaysia, Singapore, and even Western nations, all of which have differences to the Chinese popular religion practised in the PRC.<sup>190</sup>

The difference in the Taiwanese case, Shu-mei Shih explains, is the legacy of the KMT’s campaign to Sinicise Taiwan, which spanned most of the second half of the twentieth century and ultimately caused ‘Taiwanese culture’ to be viewed as opposing ‘Chinese culture’. Thus, while “other diasporic Han communities and societies... have long historicized and theorized their ‘Chineseness’ in terms of their diaspora and immigration, taking it as fact that their ‘Chinese’ is cultural to a limited extent of heritage, and that

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<sup>187</sup> Moskowitz, *The Haunting Fetus: Abortion, Sexuality, and the Spirit World in Taiwan*.

<sup>188</sup> Wachman, “Competing Identities in Taiwan,” 49.

<sup>189</sup> Ahern, *Chinese Ritual and Politics*; Wong, “Defining Chinese Folk Religion.”

<sup>190</sup> For example: DeBernardi, *The Way That Lives in the Heart*; Goh, “Chinese Religion and the Challenge of Modernity in Malaysia and Singapore: Syncretism, Hybridisation and Transfiguration”; Woo, “Chinese Popular Religion in Diaspora: A Case Study of Shrines in Toronto’s Chinatowns.”

theirs is a local culture with no necessary relationship to contemporary Chinese culture from China”:

In Taiwan, the confusion over distinctions between Sino-culture or Sinophone culture and Chinese culture is... an unnatural consequence of the Guomintang [Kuomintang] ideology that Taiwan alone represented authentic Chinese culture, even though it was clear from the beginning that this was an impossibility. This is a textbook example of how ideology can be false consciousness bordering on hallucination. The legacy... leaves the Taiwanese feeling ambiguous about Chinese culture and Chineseness, even after extensive and sustained analysis and theorization of Taiwan’s cultural difference from China throughout the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>191</sup>

When Taiwan was handed to the Kuomintang in 1945, the KMT set up a provisional government on Taiwan. Taiwanese scholar Chang Mau-kuei explains that this new government, with “exclusive and absolute power bestowed by Chiang Kai-shek,” was “just like” the previous Japanese system: “In retrospect, the Taiwanese compared the new government to the Japanese, and found the new government to be just like the old colonial government, except that it was more ‘backward’, ‘poorer’ and less capable.”<sup>192</sup>

After Japan surrendered Taiwan, the KMT’s initial ideas to take advantage of the Japanese-built infrastructure – which included the education system and power plants – to develop Taiwan into a “model province” for China gave way to plans to use Taiwan’s resources and people to support the reconstruction of the war-torn mainland.<sup>193</sup> Wachman explains, Taiwan was thus “plundered for booty that could be used to support the KMT’s battle with the Communists on the mainland.”<sup>194</sup> Ultimately, Wachman argues that it was this period that saw a divergence in Taiwanese-ness and Chineseness:

Taiwan existed as a part of the larger national picture, not merely for itself. Taiwanese were told it was time to “give back” to the motherland. Shortly after, young Taiwanese men were drafted and Taiwan’s economic resources were appropriated to support the civil war against Communist insurgencies in the mainland. This was equivalent to re-implementing the

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<sup>191</sup> Shih, *Visuality and Identity*, 122–23.

<sup>192</sup> Chang, “On the Origins and Transformation of Taiwanese National Identity,” 63.

<sup>193</sup> Chang, 64.

<sup>194</sup> Wachman, “Competing Identities in Taiwan,” 20.

duty-morality attitude of the Japanese, except that the new ruler was now thought to be more abusive and corrupt. It was at this juncture in history that the Taiwanese and the motherland diverged. The Taiwanese wanted to regain their "right" to rebuild their own homeland and return to "normal" life, while the Chinese required them to perform more national "duties" and to make more sacrifices. The moral horizons of the Chinese and Taiwanese were so different that mutual understanding and respect was impossible despite their common origins.<sup>195</sup>

Indeed, when the KMT government retreated to Taiwan in 1949, the Communist Party of China (CPC) having taken control of the mainland, Taiwan was viewed as a temporary residence. The KMT aimed to regain control of the mainland, which it still considered to be – along with Taiwan – the Republic of China (ROC), and return home. To achieve this, the KMT needed the loyalty and support of the people already living on Taiwan, as well as the newly-arrived Mainlanders.<sup>196</sup> Hence, concerned that, after fifty years under Japanese rule, the residents of Taiwan required indoctrination to become fully Chinese and sufficiently loyal to the mainland,<sup>197</sup> the KMT set out “to educate all citizens, regardless of their origin, towards loyalty and to undertake this anti-Communist and reunificationist mission.”<sup>198</sup> Indeed, Harrison explains:

China ... had been imposed on Taiwan by the KMT with a powerful and complex set of meanings: state, nation, culture, history, and Nationalist (as distinct from Communist). The KMT had established the institutional and state apparatuses with which to propagate those meanings. But from the moment the KMT soldiers docked in 1945, that legitimacy began to crumble. The power of China over Taiwan, as the most powerful or the most legitimate moment of identity for the Taiwanese, had collapsed under the KMT's corrupt and inefficient governance even before 2-28.<sup>199</sup>

Thus, the KMT's Sinicisation mission proved difficult as the people of Taiwan's discontent with their newly-imposed government caused tensions between the two. Brown describes how “corruption was rampant at all levels of government and the

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<sup>195</sup> Chang, “On the Origins and Transformation of Taiwanese National Identity,” 64.

<sup>196</sup> Chang, 65.

<sup>197</sup> Wachman, “Competing Identities in Taiwan,” 27.

<sup>198</sup> Chang, “On the Origins and Transformation of Taiwanese National Identity,” 65.

<sup>199</sup> Harrison, *Legitimacy, Meaning and Knowledge in the Making of Taiwanese Identity*, 83.

military, inflation skyrocketed, and the Mainlanders kept coming – some one to two million of them by the autumn of 1949.”<sup>200</sup> KMT officials seized all Japanese and ‘considerable’ Taiwanese property, and KMT officials sold portable pieces of infrastructure in Hong Kong and Shanghai for personal profit. The resulting tensions led to the uprising known as the 2-28 Incident. This was followed by the implementation of martial law.<sup>201</sup> Until the end of martial law in 1987, the KMT maintained control over the officials of interest groups, “who thus acted more as agents of the state than lobbyists for their constituents.”<sup>202</sup> Weller explains that, by the end of the 1950s, the KMT had “broadly penetrated all official interest groups” with some, such as the Farmer’s Association, having become “central instruments for policy implementation.” Describing personal experience living in Taiwan in the 1970s, Weller states, “while local economic life was relatively unfettered, the hand of the state lay heavy indeed over other aspects of life, especially when there was any imaginable political consequence.”<sup>203</sup>

In its efforts to ‘re-educate’ and Sinicise the Taiwanese, the Kuomintang attempted to impress onto them the language, history, and culture of the mainland Chinese elite. Before 1945, Taiwanese Hokkien and Hakka were the Chinese languages spoken in Taiwan, where the people had also been made to learn and use Japanese as the national language under the preceding 50 years of Japanese rule. Both Hokkien and Hakka are mutually unintelligible with Mandarin, which most people in Taiwan could not speak or understand.<sup>204</sup> Yet, Mandarin, as the national language of the ROC, became the only language allowed for official matters and in government offices, on radio and television, in businesses, public places, and in schools,<sup>205</sup> where students heard speaking Taiwanese received fines or corporal punishment.<sup>206</sup> Schools also taught the history, geography, language, and literature of the mainland, and not Taiwan.<sup>207</sup> One of Wachman’s interviewees describes his experience with KMT education:

Under KMT indoctrination...we not only don’t know much about Taiwan...we learn[ed] to despise Taiwanese-ness, Taiwanese language.

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<sup>200</sup> Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*, 9.

<sup>201</sup> Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*, 9.

<sup>202</sup> Weller, *Alternate Civilities*, 45.

<sup>203</sup> Weller, 45.

<sup>204</sup> Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*, 59.

<sup>205</sup> Wachman, “Competing Identities in Taiwan,” 52–53; Brown, *Is Taiwan Chinese?*, 59.

<sup>206</sup> Wachman, “Competing Identities in Taiwan,” 53; Weller, *Alternate Civilities*, 46.

<sup>207</sup> Wachman, “Competing Identities in Taiwan,” 52.



They said Taiwan has no language, no culture. Taiwanese history started from the day the KMT arrived in Taiwan. Taiwan has no purpose in itself. The purpose of Taiwan is to be a stepping stone to go back to China. It is a transition. It is like a hotel. So, the only hope for Taiwanese is the mainland. The ultimate goal is in the mainland. Everything here is so small. Mountains are small, rivers are so short. [There are] volcanoes, earthquakes. "So, how can we stay here [Mainlanders asked]?" The KMT brought that kind of philosophy, that kind of view to Taiwan and imposed that ... view on Taiwanese. So, we feel humiliated ... downgraded ... We have no hope because we are too small. We have no culture.<sup>208</sup>

Streets were renamed to those of mainland cities, KMT ideals, or Confucian values,<sup>209</sup> and Taiwanese customs, popular religious practices were also targeted and labelled 'local', 'backward', 'superstitious' and "harmful to national unification and/or national modernisation," with the traditions of the Chinese officials instead "upheld as the high culture of Taiwan."<sup>210</sup> The KMT made these efforts to promote and perpetuate the Chinese culture familiar to the newly-arrived elite, allowing for the advancement of the reunification cause, itself seen as reliant on the people of Taiwan's identification with the mainland.<sup>211</sup> However, in contrast to the KMT's intentions, Wachman argues, the effect of these efforts to assimilate the people of Taiwan into mainland Chinese culture emphasised the difference between the long-term Taiwanese and the newly-arrived Mainlanders:

What the KMT did not anticipate is that by promoting Chinese identity as exclusive and trivializing or denying the validity of sentiments Taiwanese had for their own subcultural forms, the KMT ended up emphasizing, rather than muting, the differences between its view of culture and that of the Taiwanese. The very effort that the KMT made to foster a sense of identity—because it insisted on the exclusivity of that identity—impelled Taiwanese to cling to and cultivate their own sense of self.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Wachman, 55 (edits included in original).

<sup>209</sup> Wachman, 55.

<sup>210</sup> Chang, "On the Origins and Transformation of Taiwanese National Identity," 65.

<sup>211</sup> Wachman, "Competing Identities in Taiwan."

<sup>212</sup> Wachman.

For the Kuomintang, Taiwan was the last bastion of the real China. And so, they sought to preserve 'authentic Chinese culture' while the communists on the mainland aimed to eradicate it.<sup>213</sup> Thus, that is how the Kuomintang presented its Taiwan to the world: as the true China and the guardian of Chinese culture. Shu-mei Shih describes this presentation as "in the mode of 'competitive authenticity': Taiwan's 'Chinese' culture is more authentic than China's Chinese culture, because it inherited and protected the classical qualities of that culture overthrown by communism in China."<sup>214</sup> This led to Western scholars of Taiwan – and popular religion in Taiwan in particular – treating it as a surrogate for the closed-off mainland and representative of China and Chinese culture.<sup>215</sup> Ultimately, the literature suggests, it led to the people of Taiwan seeing themselves as 'different'<sup>216</sup> and viewing 'Taiwanese culture' in opposition to 'Chinese culture',<sup>217</sup> and consequently, Shu-mei Shih notes, the "tendency to excise indiscriminately what is 'Chinese' from all aspects of Taiwanese culture."<sup>218</sup> Wachman offers a summary of this phenomenon:

It would be wrong to attribute the animosity and distrust between Taiwanese and Mainlanders today to cultural differences, as some have tried to do. Essentially, Taiwanese culture is a regional variation of Chinese culture. It is not wholly unique and shares a good deal with the culture of southeastern China, particularly of Fukien [Fujian] province, across the Taiwan Strait. Yet, the identity Taiwanese feel and the reason why some have tried to promote the idea that Taiwan has a separate culture has to do with Taiwanese reactions to political repression. The frustration Taiwanese have endured has caused them to challenge the legitimacy of the KMT and all it represents. That has created an atmosphere in which regional distinctions that might otherwise have been ignored have become

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<sup>213</sup> Shih, *Visuality and Identity*, 121.

<sup>214</sup> Shih, 121.

<sup>215</sup> Shih, "Re-Writing Religion: Questions of Translation, Context, and Location in the Writing of Religion in Taiwan."

<sup>216</sup> Wachman, "Competing Identities in Taiwan," 49.

<sup>217</sup> Shih, *Visuality and Identity*, 121–22; Harrison, *Legitimacy, Meaning and Knowledge in the Making of Taiwanese Identity*, 83.

<sup>218</sup> Shih, *Visuality and Identity*, 121–22.

potent symbols of a group consciousness, or identity, that empowers Taiwanese to see themselves as different.<sup>219</sup>

Adding to this, Katz suggests, is the CPC's continued claim over Taiwan. The question of whether Taiwanese popular religion is Chinese popular religion has been drawn into the conflict over Taiwan's autonomy and used in arguments of identity by scholars from both Taiwan and the PRC. While the former have argued Taiwanisation of popular religion is indicative of Taiwan's separateness from the PRC, the latter claim the shared religious tradition is indicative of their sameness.<sup>220</sup> Thus, scholars of Taiwan (and Taiwanese scholars in particular) are given incentive to claim popular religion in Taiwan as separate from popular religion in the PRC. As a result, since political liberalisation has allowed Taiwanese scholars to study Taiwan's own history, culture, and religion, some have used the study of popular religion for political agendas as they aim to present such practices and beliefs as part of a cultural tradition "unique to Taiwan, or at least different from that in mainland China." Thus, Katz further explains, "scholars who view Taiwanese popular religion as being linked to China's cultural heritage have been accused of legitimizing KMT ideology, while those who emphasize the uniqueness of Taiwan's historical development have been scolded for kowtowing to local 'politically correct' tenets."<sup>221</sup>

### *Sino-Culture*

That said, not all participants spoke in terms of an opposition between Chinese and Taiwanese, and there was no obvious correlation with age or other demographic markers. This topic was one that provoked plenty of robust discussion between participants, too. For Luke, the relationship between Chinese and Taiwanese culture is similar to that of other places with colonial legacies:

It is part of the Chinese culture, but it depends on how you define Chinese. It was part of the Chinese history, but now since Taiwan got recognised as a country so it becomes Chinese Taiwanese culture. ... It's like when English people came over to the US they brought their Christianity over there, but

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<sup>219</sup> Wachman, "Competing Identities in Taiwan," 49.

<sup>220</sup> Katz, "Identity Politics and the Study of Popular Religion," 163–65.

<sup>221</sup> Katz, "Cult of the Royal Lords in Postwar Taiwan," 113–14.

people might modify it. ... So it's like the modified version of it. So now it becomes their own culture ... from a common historical culture.

This perspective has similarities to the scholarly works aiming to demonstrate 'indigenisation' or 'Taiwanisation' of Taiwan's culture, in that he, like many of other participants, clearly says it has changed since coming to Taiwan, but it does not indicate the same opposition of 'Chinese' and 'Taiwanese'. Participants with this understanding acknowledge that popular religion has changed since emerging in Taiwan – and it has – but they don't denounce its origins or its connection to China. Rather than 'Taiwanese culture to the exclusion of Chinese culture', most spoke in terms of a Taiwanese culture with ongoing links to Chinese culture. Luke further explains that he sees clear regional differences, noting that popular religion in Malaysia and Singapore, for example, share "a common history, culture, yeah. They have the same root but different." But, for Luke, such localisation does not appear to sever its links to China.

Similarly, Chia Yin identified Taiwan's popular religion as Taiwanese, but noted that it could also be considered *Zhonghua wenhua* 中華文化. In talking about the relationship between popular religion and national identity, she says: "I think religious belief is an important part of every country." Chia Yin goes on to talk about how popular religion has become a part of the political process in Taiwan:

Hmm— In many big temples, the mayors and presidents will inscribe plaques. When there are important events, they will all issue red envelopes there, or perhaps the president will do it. If the president changes, they [the new president] will immediately send new plaques to the big temples. So, this is a bit like, I think this might be passed down from China's customs. Just like, it might be like an ancient emperor.

Even so, she argues that popular religion is "a little bit related" to national identity in Taiwan, "but it's not very relevant, because Taiwan's national identity is more complicated." In contrast to MJ, Chia Yin points to Taiwan's history of immigration to explain why popular religion *is not* strongly related to national identity:

Because the majority, seventy or eighty per cent of people came from China. Then I know it as *waishengren* 外省人 [people from other provinces], but those who moved from China hundreds of years ago, we might call them *benshengren* 本省人 [natives, people of this province, Han Chinese people

in Taiwan other than those who moved to Taiwan from China after 1945 and their descendants]. Relatively speaking, those natives have a higher sense of identity with Taiwan. And this is a general concept. We definitely can't say that people from other provinces definitely have no sense of identity with Taiwan. It is relatively speaking. Therefore, national identity is another piece. I think it isn't a hundred per cent related to identity with Taiwan's popular religion. It doesn't have a proper relation.

Even so, when asked whether Taiwan's popular religion is Chinese, Chia Yin is quick to respond, exclaiming "I think it's not!" She points out that "it used to be a part of *Zhonghua wenhua* 中華文化" but "it has already been hundreds of years." Before continuing, Chia Yin takes the time to muse on the meaning of 'Chinese' before concluding that localisation means that it is now Taiwanese.

Because the word *Chinese* [English], I believe it has many meanings. It can mean *Zhongwen* 中文 [Chinese language], *Zhongguo de* 中國的 [of the PRC], *Zhonghua wenhua de* 中華文化的 [of Sino-culture]. It has many types of meanings. So I think it used to be part of *Zhonghua wenhua* 中華文化. Then, speaking for now, after decades of changes, I think in terms of localisation, it is now Taiwanese culture and has become a special cultural behaviour. Because when you are in other places, because there are many ethnic Chinese communities, maybe you also see it but there are some local Taiwanese ceremonies, that then you can only see in Taiwan.

At this point, I seek clarification by asking whether Chia Yin is saying that the customs that can only be seen in Taiwan are Taiwanese culture or that because some elements of popular religion are only present in Taiwan, popular religion as a whole is now Taiwanese. And Chia Yin responds by explaining that is indeed *Zhonghua wenhua* 中華文化. Ultimately, she again points to localisation and concludes that popular religion is therefore Taiwanese, but her discourse as a whole suggests she does not see a significant opposition between the two concepts.

Hmm— I think it is *Zhonghua wenhua* 中華文化. You can also say it is part of *Zhonghua wenhua* 中華文化. Spiritually, I think it is. But it has some practical aspects, some rituals or *Bajiajiang* 八家將 culture, it means that you are in Taiwan and it is already different from other countries.

Especially, in China, several decades ago they experienced a campaign to suppress culture. I've forgotten whatever the actual term is. So, ... their beliefs and local worship culture are not as prevalent as Taiwan's. With regards to this part of Taiwan or preserving temples, it's also more concentrated, more prevalent. Right, so I think this is a part of Taiwan's culture.

As in many parts of their interview, brother and sister Da-jing and Chris had differing views on whether Taiwan's popular religion is Chinese, with some questions eliciting insightful discussion between the two. While Chris did not see a link between popular religion and national identity, Da-jing did:

*Then do you think it has any relation with national identity?*

CHRIS: No, I don't think there is. I think there is no relation at all between national identity and belief. I think it's like this.

DA-JING: I think there is.

CHRIS: Why?

DA-JING: Because I think this culture represents Taiwan. Foreigners come to Taiwan to participate in this temple culture. Why do they come to Taiwan? Because other places don't have it, only Taiwan has it—

CHRIS: What about mainland China [*Dalu* 大陸]?

DA-JING: So, I think it must be that mainland China is not as extreme as Taiwan. Taiwan is very enthusiastic about this thing, very crazy. ... I think this is why we have to work hard, work hard on this culture, it's because other places don't have it. ... Like, there are *raojing* 遶境, or some big *raojing* in Taipei, or some Dajia Matsu, the news all reports on it. That is, it is us. Our Ministry of Culture thinks these are already some of our country's cultures. Then, these cultures now represent Taiwan. So I think if foreigners come to Taiwan, I will introduce them to it. This is, for me, my identification with the country. Yeah.

Hearing Da-jing's rationale, Chris reasons that popular religious or cultural activities might be related to national identity, but the religion as a whole is not. She instead speaks

of popular religion's shared Chinese history as a reason that popular religion transcends Taiwanese identity.

CHRIS: I think if it is in terms of activities, this part may be more in line with culture. So there may be a feeling of symbolising the country. ... But if it's speaking in terms of religion, I will not think it is related to national identity, because it is a kind of overseas Chinese [*Huaren* 華人] ... this religion is not limited to Taiwan.

Chris points out that “wherever there may be overseas Chinese [*Huaren* 華人], there will be these types of deities [*shenming* 神明], or temples,” explaining that as such when one sees these things, they will not immediately think of Taiwan. Rather, they represent “the entire Greater China [*Da Zhongguo* 大中國], a representative of the entire Chinese society [*Huaren shehui* 華人社會],” she says. For Chris Taiwan's popular religion can not be limited to a national symbol of Taiwan: “Because I think this religion is bigger than the country.”

When asked whether Taiwan's popular religion is Chinese, Chris's initial reaction is to clarify what Chinese means in this instance:

CHRIS: Hmm ... When you say *Chinese* [English], are you saying *Huaren de* 華人的 [of overseas Chinese]? Or?

*Is it Zhongguo de 中國的? Is it Zhonghua de 中華的? Or neither? Or—?*

CHRIS: Hmm—

DA-JING: I think it's *Zhonghua wenhua* 中華文化, because it's wherever there are overseas Chinese people [*Huaren* 華人] —

“Not if it's Buddhism,” Chris responds, starting a conversation about how the origins of religions relate to their contemporary identities.

DA-JING: Buddhism is China [*Zhongguo* 中國].

CHRIS: Because India also has it.

DA-JING: Really?

CHRIS: Buddhism came from India, just saying—

DA-JING: Thailand also has Mahayana Buddhism.<sup>222</sup>

CHRIS: Yes, it was divided into many branches in ancient times. But we only later spread it to here. So I think if you are Taoist, I think Taoism, this part, for example it's like Guanyin, Guan Gong, Matsu, it's more like China [*Zhongguo* 中國], the religion of China after the transformation.

DA-JING: But people in Singapore and Malaysia also believe this.

CHRIS: No, but they are overseas Chinese [*Huaren* 華人]. In the past they were residents who emigrated from China [*Zhongguo* 中國]. They just settled down there. They are overseas Chinese [*Huaren* 華人].

DA-JING: The real Malays also don't believe it.

CHRIS: Right, overseas Chinese [*Huaren* 華人]. They are just overseas Chinese [*Huaren* 華人] who live in Singapore or Malaysia, or Southeast Asia.

DA-JING: Hmm— Yes, then it should be regarded as Chinese culture [*Zhongguo wenhua* 中國文化]. Or speaking of *Zhonghua wenhua* 中華文化, it can also be, because *Zhonghua* 中華, the entire Greater China region [*Da Zhonghua diqu* 大中華地區]. Malaysia there, also don't believe this too much. Only the Chinese [*Zhongguoren* 中國人] over there believe—

CHRIS: No, it's not. It's overseas Chinese [*Huaren* 華人], they're all *Huaren* 華人.

DA-JING: It's China [*Zhongguo* 中國]. I think *Zhonghua wenhua* 中華文化 or *Zhongguo wenhua* 中國文化 can both be used. They're not separated that clearly.

Chris's argument ultimately leads Da-jing to conclude that Taiwan's popular religion could be considered either *Zhonghua wenhua* 中華文化 or *Zhongguo wenhua* 中國文化. But Chris remains adamant that it is *Zhonghua wenhua* 中華文化, showing opposition to the idea of it as related to the PRC specifically (*Zhongguo wenhua* 中國文化).

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<sup>222</sup> Note: Da-jing says Mahayana Buddhism (Dasheng Fojiao 大乘佛教) but this is incorrect in relation to Thailand and should be Theravada Buddhism.



Like Chris and Da-jing, Rosely and Feng-jiao also engage in a conversation about different types of Chineseness. Although they could not specify whether Taiwan's popular religion was *Zhonghua wenhua* 中華文化 or *Zhongguo wenhua* 中國文化, they agreed that it was one of these. When asked whether popular religion is related to national identity, Rosely explains how some popular religious activities have gained international recognition:

ROSELY: Because they go out like this, this kind of message or they go out and travel like this, many internationally recognise Taiwan and see Taiwan as a small country, yes. So I think they have brought about international recognition of this country, Taiwan.

*Do you agree?*

FENG-JIAO: I agree, I agree.

Rosely and Feng-jiao agree that popular religion is related to Taiwanese national identity and Rosely's discourse on the matter shows her confidence. But the pair's responses to being asked whether Taiwan's popular religion is Chinese are much less certain:

*So— do you think this kind of popular religion or religious culture is— is— Chinese [English]?*

FENG-JIAO: What does it convey? ...

*Is it Zhonghua wenhua 中華文化? Or is it Zhongguo wenhua 中國文化? Or what?*

FENG-JIAO: Actually this is very difficult to explain.

The friends continue to muse in a back and forth about the difficulty of defining the Chineseness of Taiwan's popular religion.

*But you believe Taiwan's popular religion and Taiwan's religious culture are— it's one, but you don't know which one it is?*

ROSELY: Yes, yes, I don't know where they are defined by academia. Yes, if I think it's, because, I think it's *Zhongguo wenhua* 中國文化 or *Zhonghua wenhua* 中華文化. This is for academia to define. They should classify which one it belongs to, but for those of us who usually *follow* [English] this type of popular religion, we won't particularly go—

FENG-JIAO: —go talk about this part.

ROSELY: —Go to understand where it should be defined, right. But, no mistake, it is a type of traditional culture from Chinese people [*Zhongguoren* 中國人].

FENG-JIAO: Right.

Here, Rosely and Feng-jiao differ from the rest of the participants in that they do not take the opportunity to offer their own definitions. They appear not to value self-definition in this instance and would rather defer to academics, but it is also possible that they value self-identity highly to the extent that they want only the most qualified of cultural historians to provide answers on this issue. This second possibility is supported by their apparent concern with needing academics to ensure the answer provided is correct.

The linking of Taiwanese and Chinese culture that is evident from the interviews included in this section also correlates with Taiwanese adherents of popular religion making pilgrimages to ‘mother’ temples in mainland China,<sup>223</sup> suggesting those adherents think of their religion as Chinese. But such behaviour can also be seen as indicative of a shared local culture apart from either Taiwanese or Chineseness.

### ***Local Culture***

Another theme that emerges from literature on Taiwan is the idea that Taiwan’s culture is neither that of the PRC or solely Taiwan, but rather shared between areas of southern China and Taiwan. Katz, for instance, states, “Taiwan should not be viewed as representing a ‘typical’ Chinese culture, and neither should any other region. However, while China’s cultural regions have yet to be clearly defined, it appears that Taiwan may belong to an area that includes Fujian and parts of other southwestern coastal provinces.”<sup>224</sup> Similarly, anthropologist of popular religion, Sangren, theorises a Minnan identity, based on a shared culture between Taiwan and Fujian. Sangren argues that the Taiwanese who embark on pilgrimages – both religious and otherwise – to Fujian province in southern PRC “are inspired by a notion of Fujian as the ancient and authentic source of their own cultural traditions, their identity.”<sup>225</sup> However, Sangren is careful to

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<sup>223</sup> Yang, “Goddess across the Taiwan Strait.”

<sup>224</sup> Katz, “Identity Politics and the Study of Popular Religion,” 172.

<sup>225</sup> Sangren, “Anthropology and Identity Politics in Taiwan: The Relevance of Local Religion,” 258.

point out that the issue of Taiwanese identity extends beyond Taiwan's relationship to the PRC or to Fujian:

The political salience of the "Taiwan question," however, should not divert our attention from the fact that disputes over identity issues are not limited to the longstanding tensions between Taiwanese and "Mainlanders," or between the PRC and Taiwan. Most obviously, the identity status of Taiwan's aboriginal peoples (of Austronesian heritage) further complicates any straightforward definition of what constitutes "Taiwanese"; more demographically significant are distinctions between the Taiwanese who trace their ancestry to Hakka areas of China's Southeast Coast macroregion, and to Zhangzhou and Quanzhou prefectures.<sup>226</sup>

Arguably, this smaller subset of Chinese and Taiwanese identity also represents a lack of opposition between Taiwanese and Chinese. It is an identity that transcends geopolitical boundaries. And, it perhaps best describes the way participants spoke about the Chineseness of Taiwan's popular religion, particularly if expanded to include other areas with significant Minnan influence such as Malaysia and Singapore.

Chuang is one participant who felt very strongly that Taiwan's popular religion can only be understood in terms of local cultures. While she explains that "we should say that popular religion shaped Taiwan and shaped a lot of Taiwan's culture," she also feels there is little relation between Taiwan's popular religion and national identity. In talking about it, she highlights the ongoing connections between popular religion in Taiwan and China in spite of the broader political issues:

The country, like the Republic of China on our side, the People's Republic of China on the opposite side. But many of the popular religious customs are related to the PRC's Minnan area, Fujian area, or Xiamen, those coastal areas. Because many of our ancestors came from there, yes, so it spread to here from there. And as it spread over here, we continued it or changed some of it. But our temples also burn incense, and we will return to Fujian, Meizhou, Meizhou's Matsu and so on in China. This part of the culture is very interconnected. Yes, so even if there are some tensions between the

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<sup>226</sup> Sangren, 256.

two sides of the strait or different countries on both sides, this will not affect it [popular religion].

When asked whether Taiwan's popular religion is Chinese, Chuang adamantly responds: "It doesn't matter, it has nothing to do with this, it doesn't matter." I seek clarification on her views:

*Is it Zhonghua wenhua 中華文化? Or none of these?*

Local culture.

*Local culture.*

Yes, because as I just said, many of our ancestors came from Fujian and Minnan, so they brought the local customs from there. But if you talk about Shanghai, or wherever, in Guangdong, or in Shandong, their customs are different from here.

When I clarify further that Chuang believes we cannot consider popular religion to be Taiwanese because each individual region has its own distinct culture, she concedes that, "It can be said that it is from Taiwan, because Taiwan is small enough. But different small places in Taiwan have still derived some small differences of their own." Chuang's explanations are consistent: She understands popular religion as something bigger than politics or national identities. Despite seeing popular religion as divided into many regional cultures, her discourse emphasises a sense of greater unity resulting from popular religion's transcendence of such issues and the historical connections between said different regional cultures that persist today.

Whereas Doris understood Taiwan's popular religion as Taiwanese, her boyfriend Sean also thought of it in terms of local or regional cultures. When asked whether Taiwan's popular religion is related to national identity, like Rosely, Doris cites international recognition of some popular religion. She refers to a "very famous person in Taiwan," Wu Chien-heng 吳建衡, who travelled to various places in the world dressed as the deity Santaizi 三太子, drawing international attention:

And then this thing was illuminated a bit internationally. And for the people of Taiwan, everyone felt very proud of this thing. So, I think universally ... the people feeling that this matter also deserves pride, I think this is indeed related to a certain degree of national identity. They think that we have this

kind of special culture and feel very proud. So it has an influence on national identity, I think.

The role of Santaizi, also known as Nezha the Third Prince, as a symbol for Taiwanese-ness on the world stage is one that has also garnered scholarly attention. Fang-long Shih has observed that, in the digital area, Nezha performances promote Taiwanisation and represent opposition to Chinese oppression.<sup>227</sup> Indeed, Shih argues that Nezha performers “at a national level, attempt to revive Taiwan’s cultural pride, and to inculcate habits of self-assertion.” In parallel to conflict between Nezha and his father, “by recovering their physical strength and desire for subjectivity, they make themselves in an effort to resist Chinese domination.”<sup>228</sup>

Conversely, Doris’s boyfriend Sean argues that popular religion is unrelated to national identity. He says “each region has its own unique culture, so it should be more focused on regions.” He believes the whole country contains “too much” to be classified as one. Sean goes on to describe how each area in Taiwan has its own major popular religious events or activities, emphasising that such regional cultures belong to the people for whom they are meaningful: “Yes, so it’s the local people’s local culture. They feel and experience it especially deeply.”

When asked whether Taiwan’s popular religion is Chinese, Doris acknowledges the Chinese origins but argues that localisation means that Taiwan’s popular religion is now “a Taiwanese culture.” “I don’t think it is, um, whatever *Zhongguo wenhua* 中國文化 or *Zhonghua wenhua* 中華文化,” she says, elaborating that Taiwan’s popular religion now has some distinctions from that of the PRC. “Now it’s a Taiwanese culture,” she says.

But while Sean likewise does not contend that Taiwan’s popular religion is Chinese, he also argues that it could not be wholly labelled Taiwanese on a national scale. Instead, he explains, “this should be regarded as Taiwan’s local cultures. Then if you want to divide it into more detail, maybe it’s Chiayi or New Taipei City, etc. Yeah, I think it’s all related to the place and region.”

Both Doris’s and Sean’s accounts highlight how popular religion is integrated with personal identities. For Doris, this is in the national pride that comes with international recognition of her culture. And, for Sean, it comes from the way understanding popular

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<sup>227</sup> Shih, “From Politics to Culture: Taiwanization Discourses and the Techno Nezha Performance.”

<sup>228</sup> Shih, 160.

religion as comprised of numerous regional cultures allows the people of those regions to “feel and experience it especially deeply.”

The integration of Chinese and Taiwanese popular religion as expressed in many of the above interviews is also evident in literature on Taiwan and China’s culture. Sangren laments the emergence from debates over a Chinese cultural unity of “a vague consensus that ‘culture’ is not discrete; it is not a quality that one either possesses or not.” Instead, Sangren argues:

In principle, one need not be *either* Chinese *or* Taiwanese. Rather, culture is a complex patterning of processes that manifest *both* in characteristic patternings of social relations (including power relations, gender roles, political life) *and* representations (ideology, systems of symbols, beliefs). Commonalities in social relations and cultural life may be discernible among locales that also differ in significant respects. In other words, the concept of culture must embrace both the possibility of commonalities and of variations. Were this not the case, every individual, family, village, market system, and so on, could make a plausible claim to possess a unique culture. Thus, while it is true that Taiwan does not represent Chinese culture as a whole in any typifying sense, neither does any other locale.<sup>229</sup>

Indeed, while the question of whether Taiwanese popular religion is Chinese popular religion is sometimes conflated with whether Taiwanese are Chinese or whether Taiwan is China, they are distinct. This is demonstrated throughout this chapter as we see the various ways participants understood and conveyed their own identities and those of Taiwan’s popular religion. Arguably, for the academic study of popular religion in Taiwan, the important point is not actually whether it is Chinese. Rather, the important question is whether it is the same popular religion practised in China: whether the beliefs and practices of popular religion in Taiwan are derived from the greater shared tradition of Chinese popular religion – which can be traced across transnational Chinese communities – and that what scholars are studying as ‘Chinese’ popular religion, is the same as what they are studying as ‘Taiwanese’ popular religion.

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<sup>229</sup> Sangren, 273.

## *Concluding Remarks*

In a compelling 2011 ethnographic film, anthropologist Marc Moskowitz suggests that “because of Taiwan’s remarkable religious freedom, in many ways what one finds in Taiwan today is more authentically Chinese than in China itself.”<sup>230</sup> It is an assertion that proffers a significant corollary to the kaleidoscope of voices presented within this thesis, highlighting one of the ways in which popular religion can be both Chinese and uniquely Taiwanese. Indeed, what is evident from the understandings of this study’s participants, as articulated here, is that popular religion can be part of what makes Taiwan Taiwan, and yet be ‘Chinese’ popular religion.

As Lupke argues:

As scholars we need to eschew a hypostasized and positivistic notion of “China” as synonymous with mainland China and instead recognize that the entire Chinese-speaking East Asian milieu is extremely complicated, contradictory in some ways, not easily dissected, and that political borders do not always mark the terminus of scholarly inquiry.<sup>231</sup>

Treating Taiwanese popular religion as entirely separate to Chinese popular religion for political reasons risks robbing us of valuable insight into popular religion in Taiwan, China and other Chinese communities:

By foreclosing the attempt or desire to [move beyond political boundaries] simply because Taiwan is different politically, ethnically, and now even socially from mainland China, the Chinese studies community risks closing itself off from fruitful comparisons and contrasts that will doubtless lead to a better understanding of the complex world of East Asian culture.<sup>232</sup>

Indeed, popular religion in culturally Chinese communities remains under-researched, and, as Katz points out, systematic comparisons between popular religion across regions would be highly valuable.<sup>233</sup> But, more than this, treating Taiwan, and Taiwan’s popular religion, as separate from Chineseness risks leaving behind the voices of the people whose identities we are theorising. In amplifying those voices, we instead

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<sup>230</sup> Moskowitz, *Dancing for the Dead: Funeral Strippers in Taiwan*.

<sup>231</sup> Lupke, “Reflections on Situating Taiwan in Modern Chinese Cultural Studies,” 59.

<sup>232</sup> Lupke, 61.

<sup>233</sup> Katz, “Identity Politics and the Study of Popular Religion,” 172; Katz, “Bridging the Gaps.”

gain insight into a multitude of different ways of understanding Taiwanese-ness and Chinese-ness, both in relation to popular religion and identities more broadly. For the majority of this study's participants, the opposition of Chinese and Taiwanese culture described and present in the literature was not apparent in their understanding of Taiwan's popular religion. Notably, there were no obvious patterns in the age or family background of participants who felt Taiwan's popular religion is 'Chinese' and those who didn't. What were apparent in participants' understandings were discourses of identity, belonging, and unity.

Socio-cultural anthropologist Sangren has pointed to "the obvious fact" that:

It is the Chinese, the Taiwanese, and Min'nan people themselves who will determine the parameters and contextual significance of their variously defined and practiced identities; it is not for Western scholars to pass judgment upon which among the various possibilities has the greatest historical, cultural, "objective," warrant.<sup>234</sup>

But, even so, writing about Taiwan inherently means participating in the discursive production of its identities.<sup>235</sup> "The challenge," Harrison argues:

is to write about what the island has come to mean to the people who have lived there in a way that recognizes the continuity of the evolution of its meaning through history, while also understanding that Taiwan is only meaningful in a subjective, lived experience in a given singular moment. Taiwan as an idea may reach back into history to legitimize itself, but in its present moment that means creating a history as it goes from the vantage point of the present, with recourse to an ever-expanding and legitimized discourse on Taiwanese identity.<sup>236</sup>

Indeed, this is an area where the expertise garnered through lived experience is especially vital. Exploring Chinese-ness and Taiwanese-ness through the lens of popular religion – a fundamental element of both cultures – as understood in life contexts is one way that we are able to gain insight into how those various identities are understood in practice. Popular religion is inherently 'of the people', and it is the people we should be

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<sup>234</sup> Sangren, "Anthropology and Identity Politics in Taiwan: The Relevance of Local Religion," 258.

<sup>235</sup> Harrison, *Legitimacy, Meaning and Knowledge in the Making of Taiwanese Identity*.

<sup>236</sup> Harrison, *Legitimacy, Meaning and Knowledge in the Making of Taiwanese Identity*, 58–59.



looking to when we study it. When we do so, we become privy to the complex reality whereby individuals hold multiple identities for themselves and their popular religion simultaneously.



*Figure 4: Moon blocks and qian sticks for divination, along with offerings at a temple: October, 2018. On the outside of the cylinders, numbered drawers are visible; these contain the poems that correspond to the numbered qian 籤 sticks drawn for divination.*

*Photograph by Tegan J. Farrell.*

## Chapter Four: Popular

This chapter investigates the ‘popular’ aspect of popular religion in multiple ways. It considers the prevalence and perceived prevalence of popular religion. And it delves further into the social nature of popular religion, as described by this study’s participants. It begins by examining the use of ‘popular religion’ and thus ‘folk religion’ as terms, through a review of academic literature. However, while the terms used to identify it in academia are important, they remain largely separated from the lived reality of most of this study’s participants, as addressed in the following chapter: Religion. As such, this chapter goes on to examine matters more closely related to everyday life. Firstly, it offers a comparison of available statistics on popular religion with how prevalent participants perceived it to be. It thus highlights a disconnect between the increasing numbers of people identified as practising popular religion and participants’ accounts of popular religion’s decline. Next, this chapter sheds some light on possible reasons for said disconnect, as it considers the ways in which people reported talking about (or not talking about) popular religion in the everyday context. Finally, it examines both participants’ accounts of the ways in which popular religion is social and the discourses underpinning these accounts. In doing so, it illuminates both the everyday lived reality of popular religion and the prevailing discourses of deference, social unity, and the mundane that underpin it.

The ‘Chineseness’ versus ‘Taiwanese’ question is far from the only terminological problem in the study of popular religion in Taiwan. Early studies of popular religion in Chinese communities tended to categorise religions into ‘elite’ and ‘folk’ or ‘peasant’ religion, with the institutionalised traditions considered ‘elite’ and popular religion labelled ‘folk’, ‘peasant’, ‘local’, or ‘communal’. Bell explains that such terminology results from a view of religion as “variously reflecting the social distinctions of its adherents, thereby emphasizing ethnic boundaries or differentiating social groups.”<sup>237</sup> Accordingly, Wong argues, this terminology is “clearly” based on a belief that social elites engaged in institutional religions, while popular religion was primarily practised by “lower-class peasants.” Yet, as Wong notes, adherence to popular religion is not actually restricted to any particular social class or locality – as we will see below, in

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<sup>237</sup> Bell, “Religion and Chinese Culture,” 42.

the case of contemporary Taiwanese popular religion adherents. Nor is that lack of restriction a new development. The prevalence of popular religion across social strata has long been documented in academic literature. C.K. Yang states in work first published in 1961:

The essential function of religion was to provide a collective symbol that would transcend the divergence of economic interests, class status, and social background, so as to make it possible to coalesce a large multitude into a community. People from all walks of life thus could tread the common ground of popularly accepted cults. Whatever the occasion of the public religious observance, whether it was the holding of a temple fair, praying for rain, or celebrating a popular festival, religion came to serve as a symbol of common devotion in bringing people out of their divergent routines and orienting them toward community activities.<sup>238</sup>

Freedman also questions these terms in his 1974 work, believing the terms to be inappropriate as the 'peasant religion' practices were in fact embraced by peasants and elites alike.<sup>239</sup> And Paper notes of Imperial China:

China is not bicultural, although there are of course a range of cultural behaviors. Aside from the Imperial family, the elite were not a hereditary caste. Entrée to elite status was based on written examinations, and biographical studies indicate that families tended to maintain this status for an average of no more than three generations. Moreover, there was a substantial middle class of professionals, government clerks, and others, many of whom were part of the social and intellectual milieu of the elite... the basic religious practices of all Chinese are essentially the same, only the details vary according to region and status.<sup>240</sup>

Wong argues that scholars who adopted this approach "made a wrong conclusion that folk religion was passively derived from or deeply influenced by those elite religions, while in reality it was actually the one that had influenced the elite religions." That said, Yang and Hu explain that many scholars continue to use the term 'folk religion' not only

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<sup>238</sup> Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, 81.

<sup>239</sup> Wong, "Defining Chinese Folk Religion"; Freedman, "On the Sociological Study of Chinese Religion," 19–32.

<sup>240</sup> Paper, *The Spirits Are Drunk*, 13–14.

because there is no better term, but also because the corresponding Chinese (*minjian zongjiao* 民間宗教) does not necessarily imply a negative bias.<sup>241</sup>

The commonly used alternative is ‘popular religion’, which Bell suggests was adopted to reflect religion’s capacity to act as a “medium for unity above and across social boundaries” – what is labelled a “second-stage position”:

In a typical second-stage position, that is, one emphasizing cultural unity, the term "popular religion" is used to indicate the very basis of this unity. Popular religion may be variously characterized as a set of fundamental values, traditional practices, and attitudes that span all classes or regions, or as a distinct set of social organizations that have come to mediate elite and peasant worldviews. In both characterizations, however, popular religion functions as the medium for the diffusion of common values to a variety of subgroups, each of which may appropriate them in distinctive ways. Hence, the development of the term "popular religion" in this second-stage argument involves the appreciation of a dynamic role for religion as a sociocultural system: religion does not merely reflect and reinforce social identities and cleavages, but it also acts as medium for unity above and across social boundaries.<sup>242</sup>

In the senses of “suitable to the majority” or “frequently encountered or widely accepted,”<sup>243</sup> ‘popular’ might more accurately describe this religion than ‘folk’, which does not very well convey its nature as pervasive throughout all social classes, professions, education levels, and localities. Yet, while scholars such as Yang and Hu note that referring to it instead as ‘popular religion’ avoids the implied bias against lower social classes that comes with ‘folk’,<sup>244</sup> Von Glahn argued that “the term ‘popular religion’ itself has fallen into disrepute because even when shorn of the implication that ‘popular religion’ is tantamount to vulgar superstition, it nonetheless tends to replicate the artificial dichotomization of ‘elite’ and ‘popular’.”<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>241</sup> Yang and Hu, “Mapping Chinese Folk Religion in Mainland China and Taiwan.”

<sup>242</sup> Bell, “Religion and Chinese Culture,” 42.

<sup>243</sup> Merriam-Webster, “Definition of Popular.”

<sup>244</sup> Yang and Hu, “Mapping Chinese Folk Religion in Mainland China and Taiwan.”

<sup>245</sup> Von Glahn, *The Sinister Way: The Divine and the Demonic in Chinese Religious Culture*.

Citing Davis's *From Popular Religion to Religious Cultures* – whose concept of 'religious cultures' is discussed below – Bell also examines some issues with the term 'popular religion'. As Bell notes, Davis takes issue with the lack of specificity in the term, "lamenting that broad and ambiguous usage had obscured any analytic power it might have had." Bell writes:

At best, for Davis, it indicated what people actually did rather than simply what they were supposed to do, and thus served to extend the definition of religion "beyond formal doctrine to widespread belief and beyond prescribed piety to actual practise." Still ... while it had been used to describe religious practices that could not be assumed to belong to just one social class or segment of society, it clearly could not simply mean "widespread" practices, as various studies of popular religion had made clear. ... Thus, on one level, it was unclear whether "popular religion" pointed to particular classes or to particularly pervasive social practices. On another level, it was unclear whether it indicated an attitude developed within medieval culture or an analytic tool developed by modern historians.<sup>246</sup>

Bell suggests this "growing ambiguity" appears to be "due in part to an increasing distance from the historical conditions in which the term first emerged as a corrective of earlier dichotomies":

As a revisionist term, it was most useful for suggesting the existence of social attitudes and practices that cut across the categories of previous analyses. Yet when removed from this historiographical context, "popular religion" either became a trendy substitute for "folk religion," or it was reified as a third level of social interaction that mediated the poles of the earlier dichotomies.<sup>247</sup>

Another predicament that arises when referring to these beliefs and practices as 'popular' is that the term 'popular religion' is often used as a collective term to refer to institutional religions that are popular in the 'frequently encountered or widely accepted' sense. Thus, while scholars of Chinese religion might assume the meaning of 'Chinese

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<sup>246</sup> Bell, "Religion and Chinese Culture," 38; Davis, "From 'Popular Religion' to Religious Cultures."

<sup>247</sup> Bell, "Religion and Chinese Culture," 38–39.

popular religion' to refer to what is also often labelled 'folk religion', this is very often not immediately clear to others in the same way 'folk religion' tends to be. As such, the term 'popular religion' has a tendency to require 'translating' into more familiar language and thus reinforce the stratification of academia from the everyday. If we are aiming to make our research accessible to those outside our fields, 'popular religion' may be unnecessarily confusing.

That said, in the absence of any better terminology, and in accordance with scholarly convention in Anglophone studies of Chinese religion, this study both adopts the term 'popular religion' and inquires deeply into its meanings and how such meanings are formed. Indeed, some of the criticisms levelled against the term serve to indicate its suitability in a study such as this, primarily concerned with lived experience and public memory. If the term 'popular religion' "indicated what people actually did rather than simply what they were supposed to do, and thus served to extend the definition of religion 'beyond formal doctrine to widespread belief and beyond prescribed piety to actual practise'," it aligns well with the methodological approaches that underpin this thesis.<sup>248</sup>

### ***Who are the Folk?***

Contrary to how scholars once understood popular religion, its practice in Taiwan is not limited to any particular category of people. Rather, it is practised by people of all classes, professions, education levels, and localities. Data gathered from population surveys hint at its prominent position in contemporary Taiwanese society. The Taiwan Social Change Survey (TSCS) is performed by the Taiwanese government's Ministry of Science and Technology annually. The survey topics are alternated, with religion addressed every fifth year. The most recent surveys document a continuous increase in the number of TSCS respondents identified as popular religionists. In the 2019 survey, 49.3 per cent of respondents were identified as practising popular religion, compared to 48.3 per cent in 2014 and 42.8 per cent in 2009.<sup>249</sup> These figures indicate a significant increase on the previous three studies: 31 per cent in 1994, 33.6 per cent in 1999, and 30.6 per cent in 2004. Notably, these numbers are determined through combining the numbers of those

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<sup>248</sup> Bell, 38; Davis, "From 'Popular Religion' to Religious Cultures."

<sup>249</sup> Fu, "2018 Taiwan Social Change Survey (Round 7, Year 4): Religion (Restricted Access Data) (R090060) [Data File]."

who self-identify as popular religionists and those who *bai shen*. But, while the overall numbers of those identified as popular religionists for the purposes of the survey increase, the percentage who self-identify as popular religionists started low and is declining. Indeed, in the 2019 TSCS, the percentage of respondents who self-identified as practising popular religion was 1.5 per cent, down from 2.5 per cent in 2014 and 3.1 per cent in 2009. Although Taiwanese or Chinese have traditionally not identified as religious despite engaging in what scholars might call religious behaviour (see Chapter Two and Chapter Five), the decrease in those who self-identify as popular religionists in the context of an overall rise in popular religion may be indicative of different ways of thinking about what makes one a popular religionist.

Other surveys have focussed solely on the topic of religion. Between September 2009 and January 2010, researchers undertook an interview-based survey of religious engagement in Taiwan. Utilising stratified random sampling, the *Religious Experience Survey in Taiwan* (REST) returned 1,714 valid responses from adults throughout Taiwan.<sup>250</sup> Ming-hua Yu presents information on popular religion in Taiwan based on the REST, concluding that popular religion is “by far the most popular religion in Taiwan.”<sup>251</sup> Indeed, 38.39 per cent of REST respondents were identified as practicing popular religion, while only 18.61 per cent were Buddhist and 13.31 per cent Taoist.

The survey showed popular religion to be prevalent across all age brackets. The highest concentration of identified popular religionists was in the under 29 years of age category, where 40.1 per cent of respondents were identified as adherents of popular religion. This was closely followed by the 50 to 59 year age bracket, with 39.5 per cent of those respondents identified as practitioners. That said, the numbers remain similar across the board, with 39.0 per cent of respondents aged between 30 and 39, 36.1 per cent of those between 40 and 49, and 37.2 per cent of respondents aged 60 or above identified as practitioners of popular religion. Similarly, while popular religion was more prevalent among female respondents – with 39.2 per cent identified as popular religionists – this is only marginally higher than the 37.5 per cent of male respondents identified as practitioners.<sup>252</sup>

The REST also shows that adherents of popular religion span all education levels,

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<sup>250</sup> Tsai, *Religious Experience*.

<sup>251</sup> Yu, “Folk Religion and Religious Experiences in Taiwan,” 42.

<sup>252</sup> Kuan, “A Profile of Religion in Contemporary Taiwan.”



although the percentage of identified adherents decreases significantly as education increases.<sup>253</sup> A total of 45.4 per cent of respondents with a “primary or below” education were identified as popular religionists, while this percentage reduced to only 24.7 per cent of respondents with a graduate school education.<sup>254</sup>

Although, as Yu notes, adherents of popular religion are more concentrated in central and southern Taiwan, they span its entirety. Of respondents identified as popular religionists, 28.7 per cent were living in ‘emerging cities’,<sup>255</sup> 23.6 per cent in ‘average rural areas’,<sup>256</sup> 14.6 per cent in ‘metropolitan areas’,<sup>257</sup> 13.5 per cent in ‘average cities’,<sup>258</sup> 10.2 per cent in ‘aging rural areas’,<sup>259</sup> and 9.4 per cent in ‘traditional industrial cities’.<sup>260</sup> Notably, the data provided lacks a breakdown of what percentage of these populations popular religionists comprise; we can see that 14.6 per cent of those identified as popular religionists live in ‘metropolitan areas’, but what percentage of respondents living in ‘metropolitan areas’ identify as popular religionists? Such data could offer meaningful insight into the roles of popular religion in different population centres throughout Taiwan.

The REST also considered respondents’ income levels. Yu states that the majority – 24.8 per cent – of respondents identified as adherents of popular religion reported a monthly income of between 20,000 and 50,000 New Taiwan Dollars (NTD), with 19.5 per cent earning 20,000 NTD or below, and 17.2 per cent earning 50,000 to 80,000 NTD per

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<sup>253</sup> Kuan.

<sup>254</sup> Kuan. Interestingly, only 7.4 per cent of those with a ‘primary or below’ education identified with no religion, while this number increased more than four-fold, to 32.5 per cent amongst those with graduate school educations.

<sup>255</sup> Qidu District, Keelung City; Zongli, Taoyuan City; Pingzhen, Taoyuan County; Fengyuan, Taichung County; Longjing, Taichung County; Taiping, Taichung County; Xiaogang District, Kaohsiung City; Daliao, Kaohsiung City; and Qiaotou, Kaohsiung City.

<sup>256</sup> Beidou, Changhua County; Zongpu, Chiayi County; Wandan, Pingtung County; and Shoufeng, Hualien County.

<sup>257</sup> Songshan District, Taipei City; Banqiao, Taipei County; Sanchong, Taipei County; Zhonghe, Taipei County; Yonghe, Taipei County; North District, Taichung City; East District, Tainan City; Sanmin District, Kaohsiung City.

<sup>258</sup> Wenshan District, Taipei City; Nankang District, Taipei City; Beitou District, Taipei City; Xindian, Taipei County; Xizhi, Taipei County; Luodong, Yilan County; Taoyuan, Taoyuan County; East District, Hsinchu City; South District, Tainan City; and Pingdong, Pingdong County.

<sup>259</sup> Fengyuan, Changhua County and Lucao, Chiayi County.

<sup>260</sup> Hukou, Hsinchu County; Toufen, Miaoli County; Xigang, Tainan County; and Shanhua, Tainan County. Yu, “Folk Religion and Religious Experiences in Taiwan.”

month. According to Yu, these numbers are in line with adherents of other religions, and show that popular religious believers, along with religious believers of all denominations, primarily fall into the middle- and low-income brackets.<sup>261</sup>

The REST also offers a convenient demonstration of the diffuse and diverse nature of Taiwanese popular religion. The large majority of respondents identified as practitioners of popular religion did not belong to any specific religious groups. And the objects of their worship ranged from their ancestors to bodhisattvas or arhats, 'neighbourhood gods' and other traditional Chinese gods, such as Matsu, to God, Jesus, and Saint Maria.

Strikingly, while 38.39 per cent of REST respondents identified as popular religionists, the actual number of practitioners may be greater, as Yu notes. This is because some respondents who did not consider themselves religious reported experiences that could be considered popular religious, such as ancestor worship or the use of 'magic' talismans. That is precisely the argument Yang and Hu make when drawing on data from the REST and the 2009 TSCS to map popular religious participation in Taiwan.<sup>262</sup>

Pointing to the 87.9 per cent of REST respondents who reported paying respects to ancestors or local deities, they argue such behaviour is indicative of adherence to popular religion. Thus, Yang and Hu assert that in actuality 87.9 per cent of REST respondents are popular religionists. Multiplying this number by the population of Taiwanese over 20 years of age (based on 2009 census data), they suggest that 16 million Taiwanese adults engage in popular religion. This is only an estimate and is reliant on the assumption that all those who *bai* ancestors are practitioners of popular religion. But, it is nevertheless clear from both the TSCS and REST that popular religion is the most widely practised religion in Taiwan: its practitioners represent a significant segment of Taiwan's population. This is also true of Taiwan's capital city, Taipei, where this study's participants are based.

Notably, the distribution of those identified as popular religionists does not in itself present an accurate picture of who practises popular religion. While the under-29-year-olds surveyed were most likely to be identified as practicing popular religion, the participants in this study broadly agree that almost all Taiwanese engage in popular

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<sup>261</sup> Yu.

<sup>262</sup> Yang and Hu, "Mapping Chinese Folk Religion in Mainland China and Taiwan."

religion, but many say it is diminishing, especially among the younger generations. Indeed, the expertise garnered through lived experience offers a much more complex picture than identification and participation statistics alone. Luke (aged 23 at the time of interview) and Freddie (31 at the time of interview) both state that popular religion remains prevalent in contemporary Taiwan. Luke says that all Taiwanese engage with popular religion to different degrees, owing to its status of culture rather than a religion. He explains that even those who are explicitly tied to other religions, such as Christianity or Islam, “will believe in certain degree, yeah. I mean if you're Christian you still go to *Yuelao* 月老. I don't think the god discriminate.” His account reveals a discourse of inclusivity, but also of popular religion as transcendent beyond even the bounds of other major religions.

Freddie also says that the cultural nature of popular religion means it is “a big part of the Taiwanese,” but explains that it is more common in southern Taiwan compared to Taipei. “Actually, previously, I did not go to southern Taiwan very often. Yeah, but, because recently I kind of attend a school there and I need to visit there, and I know more people there and I just realised that religions and ... their activities is taking much larger parts than I think when I was living in Taipei.”

Conversely, when questioned on this topic, Chia Yin is quick to say that there are “quite a lot” of people who don't believe in popular religion. She points to those who believe in other religions instead, before explaining that “most Taiwanese all go *baibai*, but there will be differences in degrees.” She explains that some people will go into a temple to *baibai* because they passed it, whereas some people will pass without going in. She hypothesises that 80 per cent of Taiwanese engage in popular religion “because even if many people don't especially have religious belief, but they grew up in Taiwan and were impacted by such an environment, maybe they will go *baibai*, but they might not necessarily especially believe in Buddhism or Taoism.” Indeed, Chia Yin's explanation highlights just how powerfully intertwined popular religion is with prevailing social structures and attitudes in Taiwan. Even so, she states that the rate of people who engage in popular religion is lower than in the past, as more people now have no religious beliefs and there is a greater proportion of people involved with other religions, like Christianity, as well as more options for other religions such as Yi Guan Dao: “Because when everyone has more understanding with regards to this world, their choice is no longer a single one.” She also says that, while family has a large influence on whether or not someone

participates in popular religion, those who participate include people of all backgrounds, although the background may influence which main deity is enshrined.

The link between popular religion and family is a major and consistent theme in participants' accounts of popular religion, but there has been significant change in Taiwan's family structures since the mid twentieth century. Taiwan's fertility rate has declined rapidly since the 1950s, and fell below replacement in 1984, where it has remained.<sup>263</sup> This, combined with increased life expectancy, has seen Taiwan become an aging society. Other societal changes have seen marriage and child-bearing occurring later, as well as a decrease in marriage rates and an increase in divorce, and, ultimately, an increase in single-person and single-parent households. Furthermore, in their analysis of population trends, Wang and Yang found that the number of people within a household has declined – in 1990, there were 4.1 people per household but this had reduced to 3.0 by 2010. Urbanisation in the 1950s and 1960s also resulted in breakdowns of extended families from shared homes into smaller units, and as such patrilocal family structures became less common after the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>264</sup> The nuclear family had taken over as the most common structure by the late 1980s and has remained. However, for many, family ties remain strong: Based on data from the 2001 Taiwan Social Change Survey, Tung, Chen, and Liu found that 53.9 per cent of families could be classified as a “neo-extended family,” having frequent contact with at least one close relative who lives nearby but not in the same household.<sup>265</sup> They also found that such family types were more likely to provide support (either practical, emotional, or financial) to relatives, but that actually over 80 per cent of people in all family types – including alienated families – reported providing some type of support to relatives, thus revealing the prevailing family ties in contemporary Taiwanese society.

Chuang links demographic changes to a perceived decline in popular religion, pointing to urbanisation and industrialisation as the reasons why less people are participating than in the past. Like Chia Yin, she also points to institutionalised religions as a reason for declining participation in popular religion and makes a clear distinction between popular religion and religion:

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<sup>263</sup> Wang and Yang, “Changes and Trends in Family Structure in Taiwan, 1990 to 2010.”

<sup>264</sup> Tung, Chen, and Liu, “The Emergence of the Neo-Extended Family in Contemporary Taiwan.”

<sup>265</sup> Tung, Chen, and Liu.

More and more people, they become more separated from popular religion because of religion. That's because of Catholicism, Christianity and, yes, these. Basically, it's still at a different level. Then, because there are many popular religions and different sects' teachings have some conflicts, then of course they will use, many people will use their own religion to rely on. That rules out these kinds of conflicting popular religions.

Chris and Da-jing also point to a decline in popular religion participation rates. They both agree that "most but not all" Taiwanese engage in popular religion. But, in contrast to the statistic-based literature discussed above, their estimates of the number of people who participate are lower, with Da-jing speculating that approximately 50 per cent of people participate, compared to 80 per cent in the past, possibly because people nowadays are busier with work. Da-jing also says that this is further causing practices to be simplified compared to the past. He worries that this type of culture is declining and might one day disappear. Da-jing further highlights inclusivity in his belief system as he explains that people of all backgrounds participate, and that deities don't treat people differently based on factors like how much money they have. "*Shenming* won't say 'because you're especially amazing, I will give you some extra care.' And they won't say 'because you are not amazing, you don't have as much money, I won't take care of you.' Not at all. So, I think people of any background who *baibai* all feel and say that they hope they can be taken care of in their hearts."

Willie also points to a decline in popular religion, especially among younger people. He says that although people of all backgrounds participate, fewer people participate in popular religion compared to the past, and he points to the exposure to a greater number of cultures, ideas, and religions as a reason that popular religion is less important to younger generations. Like Da-jing, he points to a simplification of popular religious practices over time. He speculates that at least half of Taiwanese are religious, if you include foreign religions as well as the traditional ones. And, also like Da-jing, he says popular religion is becoming a smaller and smaller part of society and slowly disappearing. Still, he says participation in popular religion is the same in different areas of Taiwan.

Doris and Sean both say that they think popular religion was taken more seriously in the past. They say people of all backgrounds would have participated, and Sean describes it as "more strict," while Doris says it was "a universal phenomenon." "And, previously, if

you didn't *bai*, you would be scolded," Sean adds. Sean echoes the idea that popular religion is becoming less prominent over time. Talking about his mother's side of the family, he says: "Like, for my grandmother there, it's more obvious, then my mother's generation has become a little bit less, then by my generation it's actually already very little." Indeed, Sean says that fewer and fewer Taiwanese are participating in popular religion. And Doris agrees, but notes that almost everyone will participate in Tomb-Sweeping Day. Even so, they explain that participation in the festival is still not as strict as in the past: "Mum and Dad really want you to go, but really, everyone will say 'ah, but I'm out working and I'm very busy with whatever, so—'." They agree that people of all backgrounds participate, but the deities and the extent to which they believe or participate differs.

Rosely and Feng-jiao offer insight into another side of the generation 'gap'. While Feng-jiao also says that most Taiwanese *baibai*, Rosely says that that's still true for older people or those who live in the countryside, but that younger people and especially those who move to the city tend to gradually lose the habit. Feng-jiao agrees, noting that things are different for your children: "You can't force them," she says. Both think this isn't necessarily a problem, but rather just how things are. "It's not like before, but we have to grow with the environment," says Feng-jiao. They say that people of all backgrounds *baibai*, but, like Chia Yin, they explain that the deities may be different as certain *shen* are known to look out for different professions.

Together, the above accounts highlight the very different and multi-faceted understandings of reality that emerge when considering lived experience rather than statistics alone. While young people might be more likely to meet criteria to be identified as popular religionists, participants' accounts would suggest they are actually less likely to practise, perhaps pointing to a shift in how 'popular religion' as an identity is understood.

Indeed, MJ offers a more nuanced analysis of participation statistics, theorising that most people participate but an increasing number do so without having their heart in it, which may explain the discrepancies in the other participants' reports. MJ employs discourses of nostalgia, tradition, and defiance as he focuses on the importance of popular religion in rural areas compared to Taipei. He explains that there are 270 temples in his hometown of fewer than 40,000 people. "In the countryside, money is not required, life is not required, but there must be temples. It is the centre of their *baibai* and belief." In

contrast, he says that temples in the city are limited by the need to be considerate of their neighbours, meaning their activities are restricted and they don't make as much noise, pointing to the impact of urbanisation that was touched on by other participants. MJ also believes that younger generations are less likely to participate in popular religion: This is true of his own family, and what he has observed of his friends' families.

My personal view is that the younger you are, the less likely you will be to arbitrarily *bai*, the less likely to *baibai*. Ah, if you get older, of course there is that taste of combined tradition that is passed on from generation to generation. There is. But, because it's come from a continued tradition, I think they are also just passed on and that's it.

Still, he says that people of all backgrounds *bai*, including those who feel guilty or innocent. "We used to say, people who break the law will *baibai* the most, [laughs] because they're scared! [Chuckling] Scared people will come looking for them!" He explains that praying for peace is the most fundamental part of Taiwanese religion, and uses the example of retired judges turning to religion to settle their consciences. Even so, he still thinks people are less and less enthusiastic to participate. But he notes that the Taiwanese government is working to turn Matsu *baibai* into a cultural relic, creating a dedicated period for many people to participate, which MJ thinks is very good, although he himself only watches. His own religious participation is characterised by not taking the initiative to act by himself. And he says most Taiwanese participate in popular religion but thinks the number of people like himself is around 10–20 per cent, and growing. That said, he is clear that the number of people who disbelieve popular religion entirely or think it fake is "very, very small."

The other disconnect highlighted by practitioners' accounts is that many perceived popular religion to also be less prevalent in general, whereas Yang and Hu found that 87.9 per cent of REST respondents practised. Further consideration of the lived experience that generates such accounts also helps make sense of this discrepancy. Indeed, when considering participants' tellings of the social aspects of popular religion, another factor that could contribute to individuals' impressions that popular religion is less prevalent than the statistics suggest becomes apparent. That is: a lot of people don't talk about it.

In describing his own experience of this, Luke's account embraces both the mundane and deference to family and others. When he needs information relating to popular religion, like how to practise, Luke says he turns to the internet rather than discuss it with

other people. He says he's happy to talk about popular religion (for example, with me for this research) but he doesn't feel there is a necessity. "It just feel like everyone knew, so, why talk about it, you know? I can talk about when I introduce my culture ... but it's sort of [like] explaining Christmas in Western culture." On the one hand, his discourse reveals a conception of popular religion as mundane: so common and everyday as not to warrant talking about. On the other hand, Luke speaks also of deference to, and trust in, his parents but also of the community more generally when it comes to popular religion. He shares an example of how his parents tell him what to do, but not necessarily why:

Sometimes they just tell you to not do things and not explain it, like 'don't blow the incense with your mouth' you always have to, like, either you use your hand to blow the incense, 'cause when you light the incense you sometimes caught fires. ... If it's because it's disrespectful, they explain that. But some, something like the order I have to follow them but they don't really explain why. So, I just follow.

Luke says that he doesn't do things that seem disrespectful, but he finds it hard to be as serious as his parents, "so, that's why I say my parents is more, I guess, religious than me."

Despite his lack of emphasis on the importance of talking to each other, Luke still says the social element of popular religion remains strong. He suggests that, in comparison to reporting on other topics, media don't impact people as much when it comes to popular religion because people are more likely to trust each other than the media:

I think you have to, you have to keep in mind the fact that *minjian xinyang* 民間信仰 [popular religion] is based on *minjian* 民間 [among the people; popular] is based on people, so ... [what] really matters is who you do the tradition with. So, if you go with the friends, you go with family, we'll follow their rules, unless you have your own rules.

Because of this, he explains, "it's not really that easily affected by the media."

It's like, if you do— for example, if you eat chicken instead of turkey in Thanksgiving, and then suddenly you realise in the media that you doing it wrong, but we're used to what you've been doing for 20 years, will you change it? No, because it's *minjian xinyang* 民間信仰 [popular religion] ... different people do it differently, so, there's no standard. So, of course they will stick to what have been told, which is mostly from parents, not from



media. Media would not be their first source to know *minjian xinyang* 民間信仰 [popular religion].

Willie and Chuang also talk in terms of family and deference to others. For Willie, the social element of popular religion also centres upon his family, to whom he turns first when he needs information: “My family really also isn’t an especially traditional approach, but ... I think it’s better.”

Chuang also says she “doesn’t especially” talk about it, even though her work as a ceremonialist means she has close professional ties to popular religion. When Chuang needs information relating to popular religion for her work, she turns to her seniors, and in her personal life she seeks out the “more traditional” members of her family – her grandmother and uncle – but she tends not to discuss it with other people. It sometimes comes up in small talk, for example in the context of what someone is doing on a certain day, but that’s it. As for why, she speculates:

Our generation, regarding these things, we haven’t had it passed down as much. It’s weaker. We still do it but there’s nothing to talk about. Just like I have friends and their house is still very traditional. Every month there’s still whatever big festival. They will cook many dishes at home all going according to tradition. They *bai* their ancestors, like this. But they just don’t chat about it. We all know they will *bai* ancestors. It’s just like this.

Conversely, Feng-Jiao speaks overtly in terms of age and opportunity when it comes to her own and her friend Rosely’s experiences of talking about popular religion. Rosely says she doesn’t often talk about it, possibly because she doesn’t practise regularly. But she does talk about it when other people bring it up with her. Feng-jiao, the older of the two, speculates that the reason Rosely doesn’t talk about it is because “she has fewer opportunities and she is young.” Yet, when Feng-jiao is asked whether she talks about popular religion, she is quick to reply “yes,” describing its relevance for guiding people through life’s challenges:

Just like, friends or people who have encountered difficulties, right? But you have to use good to go guide them. Say, for example, it’s really hard or you’ve run into a setback. Or say someone in their family has something happen, it’s very hard, very difficult, right? If we can’t guide them, I say ‘you go to the big temple’.

Like Luke, Freddie also relies on social transmission for religious knowledge. He

shares several stories of a past girlfriend introducing him to different religious experiences. Even so, he explains that he's actually not too interested in other religions. He speculates that this is because he's already exposed to both Buddhism and Taoism due to his parents' beliefs. And, when asked whether he talks about popular religion with other people, he quickly responds "no, never" before clarifying that he might talk about it with family sometimes but never colleagues or friends. Family members, he explains, talk about the practicalities:

Sometimes my mom would say that some of her friend go to a temple and they pay respect to specific god and that's very helpful or something. At that time, we will talk about this. Or sometimes, maybe like, my grandparents ... go to a hospital like maybe ... their life is in danger or something, and they, my parents would ask me to read the name or certain specific god or goddess, and pray for my grandparents ... they will introduce me [to] that all, that that god because you read the name ... that means you can pray for health or something, they will mention that, in that time.

As for why he doesn't talk about popular religion with his friends or colleagues, Freddie considers whether that's simply because his participation in, or attention to, popular religion is not high: "Maybe that's the reason why I didn't talk much about it, yeah." Here, discourse of pragmatism coincides with ideas of mundanity and deference.

But Freddie also argues that popular religion no longer has the impact on social relations that it once did. He makes a clear distinction between family and broader society:

*Do you think that these sorts of things help with like community links or social relations...like shehui ningju 社會凝聚?*

Oh, I think for a family yes. You're talking about people from outside?

*Just in general, like I guess in in any area, like, does it help people connect with each other?*

Oh, yeah. Yeah, I think yes. But I think it's better, is stronger for previous communities, not really for our generations anymore. ... For my parents, yeah. They do they attend a lot of— camp or festivals in the temple or something to— they have connections there during their gatherings. But not really for our generation, I think. Not many of my friends would even

talk about religions things, yeah. Barely. If they do, most of time, they are Christian ...

*Why do you think that is?*

I'm just not heard of it very often, but ... when I was a child, maybe some of my classmates or friends what, we had talk about it because their parents told them something, yeah. But not, not after I grow up, yeah.

It is almost in passing that Freddie makes the point that he would discuss religion among his friends in childhood but not as an adult. But that is a notable feature of this research sample of discourse on popular religion in Taiwan: for many of these participants, talking about religion with people outside of their direct family was just not something they did. To most, this is not because it was considered taboo — indeed, most appeared delighted to talk about it when asked. Instead, it was considered not to be a topic of conversation per se. “No, never,” Freddie replied confidently when asked whether he talks about things related to popular religion with others:

*Never?*

Yeah. You mean friends or colleagues, right? ... Maybe just family sometimes and sometimes when there are other foreigners come to our country, and ... they want to take a look or something, if I need to introduce, then I would need to do some homework, something like that, at that time I will mention these religions.

Although Freddie's discourse underlines a view of popular religion as grounded in the everyday, this shifts noticeably when he discusses its representation in popular culture. For instance, he reflects on how the news media induces in him a tendency to “be careful” when he comes across religion in his daily life. Indeed, while being interviewed, he realises that news reporting of religion may also be impacting the unwillingness to discuss religion outside direct family that he identified earlier. “I think that could be a threat for me,” he says, musing that perhaps the reason he doesn't talk about popular religion with friends is that everyone may have their own taboos and could be offended. He theorises that this is exacerbated with negative news reports of religion:

People like to discuss with religious stuffs with other people, yeah ... when the news brought up this topic, it brings everyone's attention and especially when you're bringing the negative way. So, maybe they tried to

do this. So, [it] can grab everyone's attention, not just for me, but for the people around me, my family my friend, so it rings our bell.

Thus, unlike Luke, Freddie does talk in terms of taboo. He also notes that it, bolstered by negative news reporting on religion, affects his family and their willingness to discuss religion with others – he and his parents are “afraid” to talk about popular religion with friends or colleagues as they might be offended:

I mean, if we discuss it in the families then they would— might not have this concern, so we will discuss it in the more in-depth way.

*How so? How does it affect them?*

... When I speak of certain religions ... they think that the purpose ... is not good, yeah. They have something in mind that may hurt you ... or hurt your own families or something. They are afraid that if they are brought to that bad religion, I will become a bad guy, yeah.

In contrast, MJ says he doesn't talk about popular religion – but speaks neither in terms of the mundane (as with Luke) or taboo and fear (as with Freddie). Rather, MJ talks in terms of individual luck. He explains that he used to talk more about religion when he was young. Back then, he and his peers would have different views and would “*argue*” [English] or discuss it. But now that he's older, he doesn't have any current setbacks or frustrations; his luck in life means he doesn't feel the need to seek out popular religious practices.

Unlike the above participants, Chia Yin describes a more openly social experience of popular religion, with discussion extending outside her family group. Indeed, Chia Yin says she often talks about popular religion with her sister and her high school classmates, usually in the context of them having encountered something related, like a passing pilgrimage.

Da-jing also emphasises an overtly social popular religion. His sister, Chris, says she talks about popular religion with others quite little, explaining that she and her friends don't go to temples much so there's not much to talk about, and they talk about it at home only occasionally in reference to the practicalities of specific activities – such as when she is being told to *baibai*. But, conversely, Da-jing, who is heavily involved in popular religious activities and seeks to preserve it for future generations, says he talks about it often. He says that, because his friends are also very devoted, they often discuss the

details of events and whether they will participate.

Sometimes, we will come to talking about why they will have this event, or explain what this event's *shenming* are, then what the purpose of holding this event is. Or why is it, in the past why did they hold this activity? We all go to understand. That is, we, through every time, every time we chat, then more, we understand this religion more and more.

He emphasises both the social nature of his own experience with popular religion and a deeper view of popular religion as grounded in the transmission of information so as to allow a deeper understanding.

Like Freddie, Doris talks in terms of taboo, highlighting a deference between the light discussion of the everyday and deeper conversation. Her boyfriend, Sean, says he only talks about matters relating to popular religion in the context of planning to go places or participate in events, explaining that he doesn't have any immediate beliefs so he doesn't usually talk about it directly. But Doris says she talks about it with colleagues. For example, when something isn't going well, people will suggest paying respects to certain deities, but she doesn't talk about it in depth:

But if you say deeply talking about it, speaking genuine opinions— ... If they're interested, I will share my way of thinking. But I won't take the initiative to talk about it. Because I think, for Taiwan, religion is still ... a bit taboo. ... Whether it's in Western society or here, religion is still always a little like politics. There will still be some conflicts between everyone's thoughts that will easily cause some misunderstandings.

Both Doris and Sean also indicate a deference to their families and a general understanding without the need for detail. When it comes to who will take over their family's altars or *shenzhuo* in future, both have a general idea of who will be responsible, but they haven't discussed it in depth. When asked whether she and her family will discuss the matter, "not at all" is Doris's reply. "It seems like we roughly know, but like it's not important enough to be discussed," she says. Sean agrees that this is common for their generation, but says that the previous generation, like his parents, would talk about it when they were getting married.

There is much to learn from the above accounts of how and when people talk about popular religion in their daily lives. Firstly, they offer a possible explanation for the apparent disconnect between the statistics and perceived prevalence of popular religion.

But, significantly, the ways in which these participants report talking about popular religion also demonstrates its integration into daily life. For those who do talk about popular religion, it's largely in practical terms: where to go and when, rather than theoretical discussions about the nature of popular religion or the reasons behind beliefs or activities. Even amid discourse of deference to family, and for some, of taboo, there is concurrent discourse of popular religion as being so mundane or everyday that it doesn't warrant discussion at all.

### ***Social Unity***

Despite an overall theme of popular religion largely not being talked about, participants still point to its benefitting social relations and speak in ways that emphasise social unity. In doing so, they also reveal broader social ideologies and ways in which views of popular religion are connected with – possibly both shaping and shaped by – understandings of society more generally: popular religion is understood as benefitting society because it is seen as increasing unity, peace, and stability, as well as by encouraging people to be “good.”

For Chia Yin, popular religion increases social unity because popular religion or temples can literally bring people together, even though she draws on an understanding generated through watching others rather than her own experience:

I think it depends where it is. Because, speaking for Sanchong [district in inner-city Taipei], as for where I live now, because it is considered more special: just like its concentration of temples is extremely high. Then, as a result, it might influence the surrounding neighbours. For example, there is one near my home, approximately twenty metres away. The temple closest to my home. Then, near the temple, there will always be neighbours there chatting— just like, maybe it's older people who have already retired, don't go to work, so everyone will just be over there chatting, sitting over there, from morning to night, like this [*chuckles*]. Maybe it's strengthening the bonds of friendship. Because I also haven't participated. I am thinking they are very often over there chatting, like this. Right, so maybe it can advance this area's connections.

She also says that large events are helpful for social cohesion as they bring together many people. But, even as her discourse overall emphasises togetherness, she explains that

when she participates in popular religion it's to seek individual guidance, and she speculates that that's true for the majority of people.

She suggests a view of the social aspect of popular religion as more linked to history than the contemporary context. She references political traditions to explain:

The mayor or president will send plaques to many large temples. And, when there is an important event, they will always hand out red envelopes there. Then, if, say the president is— every— if each appointed president is replaced, they will give new plaques to the big temples. So, this is a bit like, I think this may have been a custom previously passed down from China or something. Like, maybe it's a little like ancient emperors in the past ... a long time ago. The reason Taiwan's temples flourished was because, it was also because temples were built near your home. Then, a long time ago, what you just asked me was a question to do with community, but I think maybe now it's less clear. Maybe in earlier times, several decades ago or one or two hundred years ago, the temple in relation to the local peoples' belief or relations, I think it seems more obvious speaking with regards to that generation. Right. Because, including say, like nearby Taiwan's temples will definitely be very lively. Older people will drink tea and play chess there, or many temples even have small night markets. Then— it extends outwards from the temple.

Chia Yin also says that when temples become popular, the surrounding area benefits from increased tourism in a "type of mutually-beneficial relationship," but she speculates that this is less likely when the area is already commercially developed – where an area "already has this commercial environment present," as is the case for Taipei, "they're less likely to have that big of an influence on the surrounding commercial district":

Because Taipei itself already has this commercial environment present. Maybe it's that after there were many people, the temples flourished, and not that because the temples flourished afterwards the nearby commercial district only then started to thrive. The relationship sequence might be a little different.

Indeed, despite her explanation that her own participation is due to individualised motivation, and that's the case for the majority, Chia Yin's overall account highlights a power of popular religion to bring people together and act "as medium for unity above

and across social boundaries”<sup>266</sup> and, in doing so, reveals the value placed on social unity. This theme is common among the discourses participants utilised when speaking on this topic.

When asked whether popular religion benefits the community, Da-jing encourages his sister to answer first. Chris says it does, and links this to her broader worldview as she explains that the practice of set activities at set times allows people to have goals and a sense of achievement. She further explains that “because people feel this belief, they will want to turn towards good ... then this society will be more peaceful.” Da-jing also sees popular religion as beneficial to society but focuses on social unity as he talks about each area having its own temple and bringing people together. His account points to a wholly positive view of temples as he explains that the temples in each area promote the local culture and have their own activities based on what was done to benefit that area in the past, such as if people in that area were sick or passed away. Like Chuang, Da-jing says – and Chris agrees – that people participate for other reasons, and the social and community benefits are simply an added consequence.

When asked whether they see popular religion as important, Doris brings up the topic of social benefits and utilises a discourse of social control to explain how religions in general, and popular religion specifically, compel people to be “good.” She says that “of course it is also very helpful for stabilising all of society, because generally, religion urges people to be good. Very few religions ask you or encourage you to do bad things.” She explains that belief in the spirits acts as a deterrent because, without them, people are able to do bad things without the knowledge that *shenming* are beside them to see. Her boyfriend Sean also believes popular religion is beneficial to the community. He points to valuing social unity and an ability of popular religion to combat people being colder to one another as he speaks about activities bringing people together:

There is this aspect of belief that requires people, they have a centripetal force to gather in that place. So, I think there is a part of it that will help. But, as I said, our current social structure is changing. It's like I said, we people in Taipei are really a little colder, so I actually think it helps. But it's only helpful for those who have faith in this respect. If there is less belief in this aspect, it is not helpful. Because they will not go and participate.

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<sup>266</sup> Bell, “Religion and Chinese Culture,” 42.



Willie also thinks activities that bring people together mean popular religion benefits social relationships. Indeed, he says that even though he doesn't participate in big events like Matsu pilgrimages, he often hears his friends talking about going and it's for this reason that he believes popular religion is "helpful for Taiwanese society as a whole." In contrast to both Da-jing and his own statements that popular religion is slowly disappearing, when speaking about participation rates, Willie says the nature of Taiwan's popular religion is such that it won't disappear: "This kind of a religion, a culture, can also go out and spread, letting even more people see it. It won't just kind of fade away in the tides of time."

Willie is confident that politicians and governments in Taiwan also recognise popular religion as beneficial. When asked whether the government has anything to do with popular religion, he is quick to point out that political candidates often go to temples and donate money as well as pray for success and increase their recognition among other temple-goers. "I think there must be some relationship. Maybe it's less in plain sight like that. But because Taiwan's temples, after all, are also a very important part of Taiwan. So, no matter what, the government will always try and also go assist and support them." He explains that "culture is quite an important asset" that the government must "preserve and protect." But, despite his overall assessment that governments and politicians in Taiwan recognise the importance of popular religion, Willie suggests they could do more. He points to the example of Japan, explaining that "we all go especially to see their ceremonies, because I think Japan have, they have tried to display their culture to the entire world." He refers to government-run websites introducing such elements of Japanese culture. "But, I think currently in Taiwan, maybe in comparison there is not that many pipelines to go and find out about these things. But, I think, actually some of Taiwan's culture is very interesting. It's not at all inferior to Japan or any other country."

Rosely and Feng-jiao also both say that popular religion is beneficial to the community and speak in terms of valuing unity and togetherness. Rosely explains that everyone participating together brings "the strength of togetherness." Feng-jiao adds that it allows people to see each other and socialise with their neighbours, in turn creating a sense of community strength and neighbourhood peace. Even so, when asked, both are quick to point out that this is an "add-on," to quote Rosely, rather than the reason people participate in popular religion. "Everyone getting together is absolutely not because this is the important reason. Rather, it's only because they want to *baibai* that everyone

aggregates.”

While MJ also expresses certainty that popular religion is beneficial to society, he says the degree to which it is helpful might be changing. He explains that “if you’re my age [in your sixties], or people with lower education, you will be more likely to participate more in religion.” In explaining how popular religion benefits society, MJ focuses on its capacity to help people maintain peace and provide stability and comfort in uncertain times. He also explains that, particularly in rural areas, popular religion benefits society by bringing people together, which he sees as unchanging:

In Taiwan, this is inevitable. It can’t be extinguished. But the people might be bit less. Ah, it’s impossible, it’s not possible to have none. Because ... this has always been like this from the start of Taiwan’s history up until now. Until now, it’s the same. This cannot be changed. Some things, you cannot change.

Chuang talks in terms of a similar social unity, before emphasising the roles of family and word of mouth. Like Chia Yin, she is confident that popular religion is beneficial to communities. She points out that many of Taiwan’s temples have brought about communities and community strength. “Different villages jointly believe in the same deity [*shenming* 神明], so it’s because of this common belief that these villages start to establish ties and become united, or start helping each other. This is extremely common to see in Taiwan.” She says that this can be less obvious in metropolitan areas, but is apparent in the northern countryside and central and southern Taiwan, whether in the countryside or cities. She says that this connection is not the reason people participate in popular religion, but rather is a natural outcome of their shared belief.

Chuang also emphasises that popular religion is spread and passed down through families and, in doing so, repositions social attitudes and practices as contingent on a belief system anchored inter-generationally in a normative conception of family. Her work has her deal with multiple areas in northern Taiwan – Taipei, New Taipei, Keelung, and Taoyuan, she says. As a result, she is especially aware of variations in popular religion.

Because different families will spread different rules. Like, what your mother tells you, or what your grandma tells you. And then, maybe you have neighbours who tell you. And, in the end, your own experience will be added. When quite a few generations are altogether passed down like this, passed down to you here, told to you, and your tenth previous generation

said it, it's definitely not the same things anymore. Because the environment will be different, and the time and place will also not be the same. So, I think, these things can all be called 'handed down'. Indeed, it's us who have made them into regulations. It's the people of the present who have turned them into rules.

Chuang's interpretation takes a step back from the tenets of popular religion as a hard reality to instead position it as a belief system integrated into daily life through family and based in ignorance and fear:

So, what I like, actually, I think is if as family members you think and talk about it carefully. Then, even if whatever I must not do, however I can't do it, I go do that, then what will happen? No one knows. Nothing much! Really, it's because on top of these matters, there are a lot of strange taboos. Then everyone gives rise to fear. Then that fear is continuously fermented in hearts. So, actually I got a bit side-tracked. I think inside popular religion, if we just return to talking about these few characters, truthfully, inside there is still some ignorance and the fear it brings. Then, the taboos it brings about. From a modern point of view, we may all be able to think a bit: in the end, is there such a need?

For Chuang, it is significant that these types of beliefs and practices are only spread through families. "Schools don't teach it, so your home, if your home itself doesn't have popular religion concepts and these activities, generally, your next generation in this home will just have less of these experiences. Then, they don't have personal experience, then they are again less likely to pass it on to their next one, the next generation." She describes a popular religion that is simultaneously underpinned by taboo and fear but also creates social unity in a cycle: Fear drives people to hold on to a belief system that is tied to real and symbolic structures of social relations through which the beliefs – and fear – are continually passed down.

### ***Social Stories***

Anecdotes on popular religion's social nature prevailed in the interviews gathered for this research and offered insights into another apparent contradiction. That is, despite many participants' claims that they did not talk about their religion, word of mouth

emerged as a dominant theme in descriptions of the everyday experience of popular religion.

Strikingly, although Chris is adamant that she doesn't talk about popular religion with others, she and her brother both emphasise word of mouth. Da-jing explains that temple popularity has always been determined by word of mouth, and in doing so ties cultural and social capital to financial and structural capital through a cycle that sees word of mouth result in increased monetary income that allows for expansion and, ultimately greater trust in the temples efficacy:

I think the temples in Taiwan are like this: When the temple was starting, if nothing special happened, not many people would go there. If there was, if one person went to *baibai*, and then something very good happened, then they told others 'if you *baibai* at this temple, good things can happen', and then he also told others, passed through word of mouth, everyone heard and passed it on, many people went to *baibai*. Then this temple became bigger and bigger. Then, many people *baibai*, and many people give money to the temple. Then after the temple has a lot of money, it also modifies the temple to be larger. So, the temples in Taiwan were small at first, but they became bigger and bigger, right, more and more went to *baibai*, like this.

Hearing this explanation, Chris explains that this is still the case: "Usually we look for, comparatively, ones that already have a reputation, just like everyone through word of mouth says to each other that this is, we say 'efficacious' [*lingyan* 靈驗].":

Just like, they go, right, we go and ask for peace [*qiqiu ping'an* 祈求平安], or go and ask for something. Then it happens, so they say 'oh, this temple is efficacious!' Then it will attract more people to go. Then, we will also look for this kind of big temple. That is, ones that are already known, right, and only then would we go *baibai*.

"Yes," Da-jing agrees. This explanation is also framed in terms of deference to others.

Chris and Da-jing both describe their participation in popular religion as motivated by social influences, but in different ways. Chris says she goes because she went as a child with her family and "it's just a kind of habit." But Da-jing participates because he thinks it is meaningful to Taiwan's culture and wants to contribute: "If I am able to go and pass on this culture, I think, it's very significant for the development of Taiwan's entire culture. So I go and participate." Together, their accounts highlight two of the key discursive

themes repeated in this chapter: family and the bringing of people together.

Doris also emphasises word of mouth. Indeed, she links this feature of popular religion to a broader reliance of word of mouth in Taiwanese culture. Acknowledging that Taiwan has “very many” different customs, Doris says that most are spread through word of mouth.

I should say, in Taiwan a lot of things that you know are reliant on word of mouth. You just have to say ‘recently I have run into some whatever situation’, then when you chat with other people, suddenly there will be people telling you ‘ah, I know, you can go to there and buy that medicine! Or you can go *bai* that *shen*! In the past, so-and-so who I know, they went there. They had originally met some whatever situation but after, when they went to *bai*, this matter was resolved!’ So, in these circumstances, usually it’s all you talking with other people. And there will be people making suggestions. ‘You can go *bai* that temple’s *shen*’, like this.

Responding to Doris’s explanation, Sean notes that they also often ask the staff at temples for information such as the correct method to *bai*. However, he quickly moves on to emphasise the need for respect. “But, the most important thing,” he says:

is really that when you go, you respect them, you must not be having fun with them. If you toy with them, they will come and toy with you. Right, so long as you just embrace that attitude, really usually there won’t be any big concerns, right. Because it’s fear, actually now the scarier thing is mixing it with amusement. Like when we go travelling and mix it with that kind of entertainment; usually, at that time, if we are more relaxed, for us, sometimes it will offend them.

In contrast, Doris employs discourse that is far more relaxed. She speculates that many people join pilgrimage tours (*jinxiangtuan* 進香團) when they are bored because it is a cheap form of entertainment, allowing people to tour around Taiwan while chatting and singing karaoke on the bus. For this reason, she says it helps with social cohesion, especially for those who have retired. She cites examples of people she knows who have made many friends this way. “So, you could say it’s capable of bringing together communities. I think they really find happiness within it. So, really because of this kind of power of community, after they will continuously return to join like this.”

But, despite her emphasis on popular religion’s capacity to bring people together and

insistence that popular religion, like many things in Taiwan, is spread through word of mouth, Doris also says that her family members “don’t especially influence each other” when it comes to religion, noting that her and her mother practise at different places. “Because, maybe, in my opinion, it’s a personal matter. Right, there is no particular talk of having to go force others.” This sentiment echoes a statement from Feng-jiao discussed earlier in this chapter, where she explained that you can’t force your children to participate.

Chuang also doesn’t talk in terms of being forced, but does emphasise intergenerational knowledge and a deference to it:

Unless, there are some people who tell you— there are some people who maybe will stubbornly refuse to [lit. die rather than: *dasi bu na xiang* 打死不拿香] hold incense, and not *bai*, because maybe he thinks he doesn’t know what this is that they *bai*. Maybe he thinks he is paying respects to [*bai*] something carved, carved wood, a carved tablet. He thinks it’s meaningless. But, even if it is such a person, even though we don’t know what we *bai*, most people will still follow and *bai*. Because we also don’t want to spend a lot of effort to resist this thing. Because this is probably a type of thing that has been passed down on this piece of land, through this kind of bloodline of people. They feel it’s a very ordinary thing. Like, I asked my Ama [maternal grandmother] and Ama, she couldn’t possibly go and think about it, do these ancestors live inside the spirit tablets, after all? For her, there is no need to think at all. These ancestors live in the spirit tablets. So we must go and *jibai*, go and burn incense, and prepare a lot of offerings for them to eat. So, this is my grandmother’s generation, she is in her eighties and I’m in my thirties. Then, we might ask, and be sceptical, are they really inside there? Or what? This is a generational difference in view. But, we don’t need to go and resist this matter with her. She says *bai*, and we *bai*. Right, for us, it’s nothing. Just *baibai*, and after we *bai*, everyone in the entire family reunites and eats the things that have been offered [*bai guo* 拜過]. For us, it’s a family gathering.

This explanation of Chuang’s is illustrative of many of the overarching themes apparent in the ways participants talked about the matters addressed in this chapter: it presents

discourse of practicality as well as both a deference to one's family, elders, and culture and a sense of the unifying power of popular religion to bring people together.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

This chapter is one of contradictions. It presents a reality of popular religion that is not talked about but also relies on word of mouth; that is marked by discourses of taboo and fear but also a perceived need for social unity, deference and mundanity; and where statistics show increases in the percentage of Taiwanese identified as popular religionists but participants' perceptions are of its decline. Indeed, this chapter presents a complex and multi-faceted picture of popular religion in contemporary Taiwanese daily life. This is clear in the comparison made between the prevalence and perceived prevalence of popular religion, based on available statistics and participants' accounts. It is apparent that the expertise garnered through lived experience offers nuance and context to the statistics and, in highlighting the disconnect between the increasing numbers of people identified as practicing popular religion and participants' accounts of popular religion's decline, reveal different ways of understanding Taiwan's popular religion.

In considering a possible reason for this disconnect, this chapter takes seriously the role of discourse, exploring the ways in which people reported talking about – or not talking about – popular religion in their everyday lives. In this respect, specifically, we gain insight into *how* popular religion is integrated into daily life and the ways in which participants' behaviour is underpinned by deference to family, taboo and, perhaps most prevalently, popular religion as so grounded in mundanity and the everyday that it doesn't warrant discussion at all.

However, despite many participants reporting popular religion not being talked about in general society, discourses of social unity were prevalent in their accounts. Indeed, analysing participants' views on the social aspects of popular religion revealed connections to broader social ideologies that likely both shape and are shaped by popular religion. We see that participants valued social unity and the ways in which some understand popular religion as benefitting society through increasing unity, peace, and stability, and by encouraging people to be "good." Significantly, we also saw one participant's understanding of popular religion as a cyclical belief system – grounded in family but underpinned by taboo and fear – that is passed down through the social unity it creates.

Finally, this chapter considered both participants' accounts of the various ways in which popular religion is social and the discourses utilised to talk about them. Here, we gain a sense of a different cyclical aspect of popular religion and how social capital can be tied to financial and structural capital. Indeed, a participant explains that temple popularity is determined by a cycle whereby word of mouth results in increased monetary donations that allow for expansion and, ultimately greater trust in the temple's efficacy. This only underscores the value of hearing participants' accounts of the ways in which popular religion are social, thus providing a window onto – and a record of – the practical realities of popular religion in contemporary Taiwan as well as the process of meaning-making that it both shapes and is shaped by.





*Figure 5: A small temple in Sanchong District of New Taipei City: October, 2018. An incense censer stands out the front, with a sign describing the temple's services visible to the right. Photograph by Tegan J. Farrell.*

## Chapter Five: Religion

*Are you yourself religious?* It's a question I ask Chia Yin, who smiles back at me across the small study-room desk we share several storeys above the bustling streets of central Taipei. "I believe in Taiwan's popular religion," she replies confidently. It's six words, twelve Chinese characters, but the meaning embedded in them counters almost everything I had learned from the literature about Taiwan's popular religion.

The very term religion and conceptions of it are at the centre of some major debates within the study of Chinese religion. Is the term 'religion', scholars ask, at all appropriate to use in relation to China or Taiwan, where people don't think of themselves as religious and religion is an alien phenomenon? Do alternative classification systems like 'religious cultures' make more sense? If not, and Chinese or Taiwanese religion should be viewed in terms of discrete religions, does popular religion count? Yet, in six words, Chia Yin has cut across these debates: She *does* think of herself as religious. Religion is not alien to her. She *does* see religions as separate to one another and not as part of a broader religious culture. And, for her, popular religion *is* one of those separate religions.

Chia Yin's response was the tip of the iceberg. Far from unified, the varied views of the participants in this project perhaps only underscored the difficulties of defining popular religion in Taiwan. Still, clear patterns emerged in this study – as participants revealed personal conceptions of religion, spoke in terms of separate religions rather than a broader religious complex, and contradicted one another on whether popular religion is a religion. Strikingly, the concept of religious cultures, a complex of "interconnected beliefs and practises"<sup>267</sup> that are "made and remade by the people who live them,"<sup>268</sup> appears to aptly describe how both Taiwanese popular religionists in general, and these participants specifically, act in relation to religion. But the need to consider the understanding of the people we are describing becomes apparent when we contemplate that all participants spoke in terms of religion and separate religions, indicating that they do not share the 'religious culture' perspective.

This chapter unpacks some of the patterns that emerged in discourse on personal conceptions of religion. It does so with primary reference to five of the participants – Chia Yin, Chris and Da-jing, Chuang and Luke – whose interview material proffers a valuable

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<sup>267</sup> Davis, "From 'Popular Religion' to Religious Cultures," 322.

<sup>268</sup> Davis, 331.

opportunity to investigate a variety of ways of making sense of the roles of religion in both lived experience of popular religion and Taiwanese daily life. First, it explores how participants articulate their own religiosity. Then we delve into what the broad concept 'religion' means to them. Finally, we explore the variety of contrasting views on whether popular religion can be considered religion at all. Throughout this analysis, we consider how these conceptions of religion relate to relevant academic research, and consider the ways discourses of belonging, identity, and struggle shape understanding of Taiwan's popular religion, too.

### ***'Religion' in Contemporary Taiwan***

Addressing the study of 'religion' in Eastern contexts broadly, McCutcheon argues:

*'religion' is a slippery signifier ... because many of the peoples that we study by means of this category have no equivalent term or concept whatsoever.*

*"Religion" is an emic folk category scholars acquire from a rather limited number of linguistic/cultural families, a category that we simply take up for the sake of etic analysis and use as if it were a cross-cultural universal.*

Thus, for McCutcheon, "in using this Latin-derived term as a technical, comparative category, even the most ardently sympathetic religious pluralist is, from the outset, deeply embedded in the act of intellectual, if not cultural, imperialism or theoretical reduction."<sup>269</sup>

In a similar vein, in the case of Taiwan and China, although the Chinese term '*zongjiao* 宗教' is ordinarily translated as 'religion', Fang-long Shih argues that there is actually no term equivalent to 'religion' in either Chinese or Hokkien:

*This signifies that Chinese/Taiwanese people have no concept of religion as it has been known in the West, where religion is commonly conceived of as a separate or autonomous realm of belief and practice defined by belief in a Transcendent Being or God and certain associated doctrines. It has been said that the Chinese/Taiwanese have no religion if religion is understood in terms of an other-worldly faith similar to that seen in the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.*<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers*, 10.

<sup>270</sup> Shih, "Re-Writing Religion: Questions of Translation, Context, and Location in the Writing of Religion in Taiwan," 16.

In recent decades, an array of publications has traced issues with the academic understanding of Chinese religion back to early European missionaries' constructions of Chinese religion. Some have argued that European influence is not solely responsible for the misunderstanding of 'religion' in East Asia, for example, citing political influence as another major cause.<sup>271</sup> Yet, many have argued that early European constructions of religion resulted in the widespread misunderstanding of Chinese religion. A detailed discussion of this history is beyond the scope of this study. Still, for the present discussion, what we need to know is that missionaries viewed Chinese religion through the lens of their own cultural perspective and – in some cases intentionally and some not – mapped their own (European, Christian) values onto it. This then informed early academic understanding of Chinese religion, which primarily drew upon texts authored by missionaries. The combination is thought to have “led to an incorrect understanding of a quarter of humanity’s religion for four centuries.”<sup>272</sup> Paper suggests this contributes to an ongoing misunderstanding of Chinese religion. Much as people view the world framed by their own cultural perspectives and values, Paper argues, the study of non-Western religions remains anchored in “a normative European Christian viewpoint.” That viewpoint, Paper points out, assumes monotheism as a value and prioritises sacred texts; it focusses on faith and presumes that religions have founders; it considers the goal of religion to be transcendence, and assumes a separation between religious institutions and the state. For Paper, “these values are responsible for the continued misunderstanding of Chinese religion.”<sup>273</sup>

The Mandarin term *zongjiao* 宗教 comes from the Japanese *shukyo* 宗教, having been conceived in the late nineteenth century to correspond to 'religion' in English.<sup>274</sup> 'Shu 宗' was chosen to refer to practice and 'kyo 教' to doctrine, which Shih points out “were assumed to be the two fundamental elements of religion.”<sup>275</sup> Following, it made its way

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<sup>271</sup> Dubois, “Hegemony, Imperialism, and the Construction of Religion in East and Southeast Asia”; Barrett, “Coming to Terms with Religion in East Asia.”

<sup>272</sup> Paper, *The Spirits Are Drunk*, 5.

<sup>273</sup> Paper, 5.

<sup>274</sup> Dong, *Yuanshi zongjiao* 原始宗教; Shih, “Re-Writing Religion: Questions of Translation, Context, and Location in the Writing of Religion in Taiwan.”

<sup>275</sup> Shih, “Re-Writing Religion: Questions of Translation, Context, and Location in the Writing of Religion in Taiwan,” 16.

to China in the early twentieth century.<sup>276</sup> However, this meaning shifts slightly when transposed to Chinese. *Zong* 宗 originally denoted a house enshrining ancestral tablets, and further referred to “an ultimate place where everyone aims to reach,” and *jiao* 教 denotes ‘teachings’.<sup>277</sup> Thus, Shih offers ‘guiding teachings’ as a general translation of *zongjiao* 宗教.<sup>278</sup>

Despite its widespread usage, Paper suggests “the Chinese tend to consider ‘religion’ (as *zongjiao*) to be an alien phenomenon.”<sup>279</sup> Similarly, Shih explains that, although Chinese and Taiwanese people use the term ‘*zongjiao* 宗教’, they do not think about it in the way implied by the English ‘religion’. Hence, while it may serve as a useful translation linguistically, “a translation of culture is also necessary if *zongjiao* is to be more properly understood by non-Chinese.”<sup>280</sup> Thus, Shih argues, this translation issue and the consequent conceptions are ‘fundamental’ for scholars to understand Chinese or Taiwanese religion.

Scholar of Taiwan’s religion, Li Yih-Yuen, also suggests a major difference lies in the way questions about religion are framed, explaining:

When some foreigners ask us, ‘What is your religion?’ We often feel difficult to answer. It doesn’t seem right if we answer ‘Taoism’ or ‘Buddhism,’ because we don’t actually believe in it or belong to it ... The fact that we simply can’t tell what our religion is has reflected the core of the problem, which is that the question is asked wrongly. Westerners tend to ask what religion the others believe in because they think supernatural belief must exist in a form of religion. If they can understand that the beliefs of the others may not be a ‘religion,’ and change the question to ‘How is your religious belief?’ We would then be able to give you an answer easily.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Paper, *The Spirits Are Drunk*, 2.

<sup>277</sup> See Paper, 2–3. for discussion of historical usage of ‘*jiao* 教’.

<sup>278</sup> Shih, “Re-Writing Religion: Questions of Translation, Context, and Location in the Writing of Religion in Taiwan.” Paper also proposes several Chinese alternatives that could have served better than 宗教 *zongjiao*: Paper, *The Spirits Are Drunk*, 3.

<sup>279</sup> Paper, *The Spirits Are Drunk*, 3.

<sup>280</sup> Shih, “Re-Writing Religion: Questions of Translation, Context, and Location in the Writing of Religion in Taiwan,” 16–17.

<sup>281</sup> Li, *Zongjiao Yu Shenhua Lunji* 宗教與神話論集, 168–69; English translation from Wong, “Defining Chinese Folk Religion,” 161.

Similarly, Paper states that, when queried on religion in China, Chinese people will often respond that Chinese don't have a religion. In contrast, Paper argues, few Western scholars ask the Chinese equivalent, "to whom (or what) do you offer sacrifice," which has the ability to elicit detailed responses on religious behaviour from those who would state that there is no religion in China.<sup>282</sup>

Among this study's participants in contemporary Taipei, though, neither religion nor *zongjiao* were treated as "an alien phenomenon." I asked participants first whether they are religious, then what the term religion or *zongjiao* meant to them. All participants had clear answers to the question of their religiosity. Sean, Rosely, Luke, Willie, and MJ stated that they were not religious, Chuang said she wasn't religious but leaned more towards Buddhism, and Freddie explained that he expected to be religious, probably Buddhist, someday. All participants would be regarded as popular religious from an academic standpoint. But some self-identified with a particular religion based on more frequent engagement or feeling more connected to one religion over others: Buddhism, for Doris and Feng-jiao, and Taoism for Da-jing. Most offered definitions for religion or *zongjiao* that emphasised either sincere belief or group structures.

Chia Yin was the only participant to self-identify as popular religious. The discourses she draws on to talk about religion are those of consolation or comfort:

*Are you yourself religious?*

I believe in Taiwan's popular religion.

*Has that always been the case?*

Yes.

*Then, what is religion?*

Umm—

Despite confidently identifying as religious, Chia Yin initially struggles to find the right words to explain how people seek "comfort" from religion:

Religion is mankind showing [respect to] a— perhaps a deceased person. Mankind hopes from his body to ... free themselves of worldly worries or seek consolation, like this. Then, because there is power from deities, and the power of peers who believe in this deity the same as you ... maybe you

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<sup>282</sup> Paper, *The Spirits Are Drunk*, 3.

feel your mind is more steady. You also get— to some extent you seek, and then hope to be able to ... obtain comfort, obtain growth among this religion, like this.

In this explanation of religion, Chia Yin hints at both individual and collective religion as the mechanisms by which comfort can be attained. The social power of a group sharing belief allows for greater mental benefits for the individual.

When Da-jing states that he has religious belief, his sister, Chris, immediately asks him whether it was Buddhism or Taoism. This prompts a discussion of the differences between the two, Da-jing's reasoning for identifying with Taoism over Buddhism, and Taiwan's religious landscape more broadly. Chris was the only participant to identify as religious but not a specific religion. This marks an interesting contrast to Paper's point that the term '*zongjiao* 宗教' evolved from its initial usage primarily in reference to Christianity to other imported religions – including Buddhism and Islam. And “now, particularly in Taiwan, the term is used for any religion which is to some degree institutionalized.”<sup>283</sup> There could be a number of reasons for this: perhaps a language shift has occurred in the years since Paper's statement was published, possibly due to living in an increasingly globalised world where Taiwan's culture does not exist in isolation from others, Eastern and Western; it could also be a personal shift that has occurred for Chris as a result of her own cultural experiences. In any case, the below offers a detailed sense of religious life in contemporary Taipei through the eyes of two locals.

*Are you yourselves religious?*

DA-JING: Yes, I have religious belief, yes. *Baibai* is a type of religious belief, right.

CHRIS: But how about Buddhism and Taoism?

DA-JING: ... Buddhism and Taoism in Taiwan—

CHRIS: They're inseparable, right?

DA-JING: They're inseparable.

CHRIS: It's very difficult.

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<sup>283</sup> Paper, 2.

DA-JING: It's very difficult ... Nowadays, the Three Doctrines [Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism] have already merged into one.

CHRIS: Real *Buddhism* [English] and *Taoism* [English] is different, but in Taiwan they're a bit blended—

DA-JING: Mixed together.

CHRIS: Right, it's like you're perhaps simultaneously both Buddhist and Taoist.

Interestingly, the narrative Chris and Da-jing agree on here is of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism having blended together in Taiwan specifically. In contrast, Paper suggests that when sixteenth-century European Christian missionaries observed religion in China, the Three Doctrines already operated simultaneously as part of a broader religious complex. However, Paper argues, the missionaries instead wrote about them as though they were clearly separate and in doing so begun a centuries-long misunderstanding of the nature of Chinese religion.<sup>284</sup> (This topic is explored in more detail later in this chapter.) Chris and Da-jing's narrative of the Three Doctrines originally being separate but having blended together in Taiwan, along with participants' focus on differentiating separate religions generally, could be an indication of the far-reaching effects of these early religious classifications. Such missionary texts are thought to have influenced academic understanding of Chinese religion and, in turn, popular understanding of Chinese religion in the West. In a globalised world, where governments and individuals are exposed to other cultural perspectives, and without a clear conception of religion natively embedded into the Chinese language or culture (as discussed above), perhaps the Western myth of the Three Doctrines as separate in China also influences cultural understandings in contemporary Taipei. In that case, Chris and Da-jing's discourse could represent a means of reconciling the religious reality they experience in daily life with the (possibly incorrect) theoretical understanding of it. Additionally, their emphasis on Taiwan as the cultural location where the Three Doctrines have blended marks a discourse of belonging and identity, whereby religion is made into something they can belong to and identify with because it is uniquely Taiwan's.

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<sup>284</sup> Paper, 10–11.



In explaining his own religious identification, Da-jing looks to the difference between “real” Buddhism and that which is blended with Taoism on the streets of Taiwan as a means of positioning himself. In Taiwan, the four most influential Buddhist organisations<sup>285</sup> are all based on mountains, and referred to as the Four Great Mountains (*Sida Mingshan* 四大名山). In contrast to the “real” Buddhist monasteries, many Buddhist deities can also be found alongside Taoist ones in the thousands of temples in the streets of Taiwan: where they may be treated in much the same way as their Taoist – or popular religious – counterparts.

DA-JING: Actually, real Buddhism ... [refers to] the ones on the mountains, you have no hair at all as a Buddhist monk, that’s Buddhism. Then, Taoism is us ordinarily on the street, we *baibai* holding incense—

Continuing on from her brother, Chris uses some of the most common *shen* in Taiwanese temples as examples to illustrate the fact that they can be found in the same temples with no obvious differentiation.

CHRIS: Like Guanyin, Guangong, those are all Taoist, Matsu is Taoism, right, then it’s like, what is it, Pusa [Bodhisattva]—

DA-JING: Pusa.

CHRIS: That one is Buddhist, that’s different, but in practice we are— because we’re not very devout, so we haven’t distinguished them very clearly, it’s just like so long as there are deities, they’re all allowed ... just like, many *shen*.

Agreeing, Da-jing suggests that when they come across statues of deities, most Taiwanese will *baibai* with little concern for learning their history or sometimes even which *shen* they are. “If there are *shen*, just *baibai*,” he says, before returning to the matter of “real” Buddhism:

DA-JING: Actually, in real Buddhism ... we talk about being vegetarian and chanting the names of Buddha, they really don’t eat meat, right, they only

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<sup>285</sup> They are: Dharma Drum Mountain (Fagu Shan 法鼓山), based in Jinshan District, New Taipei City in northern Taiwan; Fo Guang Shan (佛光山), based in Dashu District, Kaohsiung in southern Taiwan; Tzu Chi Foundation (Ciji Jijinhui 慈濟基金會) based in Hualien in Eastern Taiwan; and Chung Tai Shan (Zhongtai Shan 中台山) based in Nantou County in central Taiwan, said to represent the West.

eat vegetarian food. ... So, their real Buddhism is like this. But, if it's in Taiwan, ordinary people, if you believe in Buddhism but you also eat meat, it's quite odd.

CHRIS: Right, just like you only want to have a Buddha's blessing.

Throughout this section of the interview, Chris and Da-jing have undertaken something of a purist deliberation on religions as a means of articulating their own religious practice. Da-jing's account, in particular, emphasises a clear differentiation between Buddhism and Taoism to justify his self-identification as Taoist. In contrast, Chris engages in this deliberation but focusses more on the similarities and convergence points between Buddhism and Taoism. She continues this by returning to the tendency for Taiwanese temples to house both Buddhist and Taoist *shen*.

The naming of temples in Taiwan can offer some hints as to the deities enshrined within them. The different possibilities and their meanings are complicated, and the following is only a very basic explanation: Most temples have three Chinese characters for their name. Theoretically, the final character gives some indication of the types of deities the temple is dedicated to, with some suggesting a link to Buddhism, and others to Taoism. As for some of the most common variations in Taiwan, those temples ending in *si* 寺 (known as a *simiao* 寺廟, *si* temples) are considered Buddhist, but often also have Taoist deities. Conversely, temples whose names end in *gong* 宮 (known as *gongmiao* 宮廟, *gong* temples) or *miao* 廟 (temples) are more likely to have primarily Taoist deities, but often also have Buddhist deities. Chris uses these different types of temples to further illustrate the melding of Buddhism and Taoism in the everyday lives of many Taiwanese:

CHRIS: So, we have religion, but I don't think I [would] distinguish clearly between Buddhism and Taoism. Because I just *bai shen*, but I am not sure whether they belong to Buddhism or Taoism ... because they seem to separate *si* temples, *si* and *gong*, then *miao* ... but I'm not certain which is which ...

DA-JING: Oh, right, in Taiwan, [if] it's 'something something *si*', then it has more Buddhism. Then, 'something something *gong*', 'something something *miao*', those are Taoist, right.

CHRIS: Right, it is differentiated, but I haven't distinguished [between them] very clearly, because I go to both ...

DA-JING: But I have religious belief, right, my religious belief is the Taoist part, which is holding incense to *baibai*. I am less the type that eats vegetarian ...

CHRIS: But they also hold incense.

As Da-jing responds to his sister's prompt, the discourse reveals a resistance to instruction and an apparent desire to have his own voice and articulate his own circumstances. In this moment, the difference between Buddhism and Taoism comes down to personal agency. Da-jing pointedly discounts the Buddhism that would have him told what to do. Instead, he emphasises his role as an individual in his own religious practice:

DA-JING: You're right, they also hold incense, but Buddhism is, in that case it will have a teacher at the front speaking to you, then they will say to you 'come, you must be very obedient, you are not allowed to do bad things,' and so on and so on. There will be Buddhist monks at the front speaking with you like this. But what I believe isn't this one. The one I believe in is me individually connecting with deities. I myself speak with the deities, right, not with someone at the front speaking with me, wanting me to be very obedient, demanding I don't do bad things, wanting me not to be allowed to eat meat. I don't believe in this kind. Right, my religious belief is, what I believe is: I go inside a temple, I tell the deities my own problems, then ... I feel the deities have helped me, then like this it's already possible, yeah.

*Then ... you have religion, is that the same as in the past? ...*

DA-JING: It's never changed. My religion from the past until now is all the same.

CHRIS: I also haven't changed. It's following your family this way, from childhood you *baibai* in temples, it's that religion.

*Then, you going with family, but yourself not wanting to go, not greatly believing and such. Does this still count as religion?*

"Actually, I'm also not certain whether this counts or not," Chris replies, reiterating that she often goes to the temple when their family are together, but she doesn't go by herself.

Discourses of family and belonging permeated not only Chris's experience of religion but also all participants', as their descriptions of religious practices largely focussed on family practice. As is seen in earlier chapters, in some cases participants described engaging in family rituals regularly, while many took part only when they return to their parent's home. In contrast, some participants did not participate at all but with the understanding that such rituals are undertaken by some family members on behalf of the entire family.

Following on from her uncertainty about whether only participating in religious activities with her family counts as being religious, Chris points out that if she finds herself wanting to talk about something, it's still valid to *baibai*. For Chris, her religiosity is linked to her habituated response of thinking of Guanyin in times of fear or trouble:

Because it's like if someone were a different religion, they'd want to seek out that deity, the partner offering help is different. But our partner is Guanyin, or Matsu, right? So, I think that's already essentially a religion, you don't believe very much, but nevertheless place them in your mind. Right, a belief, just like there's nothing to be done, because they have already been in your mind for too long.

Throughout Chris's account is discourse of struggle: specifically, an on-going struggle of identity making when the language used to talk about religion fails to align with the experience of religion in everyday life. Her uncertainty over whether engaging in religious activities only with one's family is enough to be counted as religious points to a definitional opposition between individual and collective religion (in this case, family religion) and how these relate to definitions of religion more broadly. For Da-jing, who emphasised his individual practice when articulating his own religious identity, participating only in collective religion was not equal to engaging in individual religion.

When asked whether he thought this kind of practice counted a religion, he briefly hesitates, perhaps concerned about hurting his sister's feelings. Chris agrees with him that this type of belief is not very devout but appears to be helping to explain her brother's perspective rather than articulating her own. Speaking matter-of-factly, she finishes Da-jing's sentences.

*How about you? Do you think this kind counts as religion?*

DA-JING: I think this kind—

CHRIS: —isn't very devout.

DA-JING: It isn't, it isn't very devout, I think—

CHRIS: Yeah, it isn't very devout.

DA-JING: Yeah— correct.

CHRIS: Because I don't take part in activities.

DA-JING: Very many Taiwanese people are like my sister, the same just—

CHRIS: —don't join activities.

DA-JING: Don't take part in activities, then only *baibai* at Chinese New Year or when some particular family members go. Then, they are not the same as us. Really, *baibai* when we have time, when there is an activity we go. Right, I feel those of us like this are more devout.

There is a perception evident that different degrees of practice are indicative of different types of religiosity. Here we see a typology at play: a social distinction between those who primarily engage in religious activities as part of a family unit and those who are self-motivated to participate in other activities, whether individually or as part of other groups.

As might be expected, participants' definitions of religion reflected their individual reasoning for identifying as religious. Da-jing, who focussed on participation in activities earlier, placed more emphasis on social gathering. Indeed, in response to being asked what religion is, he walks us through how religion is constitutive of social gathering, pointing to rituals of social bonding.

*Then— what is religion?*

What is religion? If it's in Taiwan, I think religion is a type of thing that allows social gathering. ... In Taiwan, deities are usually real people. After that real person dies, if before they died they provided a lot of help for this society, then people *baibai* them, just like *mobai* [膜拜, kneel and bow with joined hands at forehead level] them. Then, they feel explaining that what that person did was, for us, very, just like— very helpful. Then, we *bai* them, and hope they can bless and protect us. Then afterwards, more and more people *bai* them. Then, everyone— pays some money, just like gives some *xiangyouqian* 香油錢 [temple donations, lit. incense and oil money]. Then,

their temple builds up to be bigger and bigger, and afterwards causes the entire society to gather. I think it's like this.

Chris emphasises individual belief – over time, and as constitutive of group belief.

I think religion and believing ... are the same thing. ... In your heart, you believe. ... From a long time ago, you continuously believe, even though it can't be explained by science. ... Then, a group of people believe in one thing together. I think this forms a type of religion.

In contrast, another participant, Chuang, doesn't personally identify as religious. "I probably lean more towards Buddhism," she says. But she nevertheless has a clear concept of religion:

I think religion is a group of people with an object of belief and a group. It requires an object or a group. Then a group of talented people form a religion.

Chuang also expresses a separation of belief and religion, pointing out that a lack of religion does not necessarily indicate a lack of belief:

Then, some people have belief, but ... they also won't join religion, then you also can't say they don't have belief.

*Then, were you always this way? So, not especially believing in religion?*

Until now, I've been this way, haven't especially done anything.

She also expresses clear conceptions of the religions her family members belong to. She explains that her father has more belief than her, in Buddhism and Taoism. Conversely, her sister is Christian and felt a deep commitment to attending Christian groups. "They are all deeper-going than me," Chuang explains. Nevertheless, she concludes: "Actually, I still quite believe in religion and these groups. They can provide some people in certain minds ... in times when body and mind are more frail, they have some comfort and such." As in Chia Yin's description of religion, Chuang's discourse here is that of comfort and hints at both collective and individual religion, as not only the religion itself but also "these groups" can offer comfort to those in need.

Luke, who objected to my use of the word 'worship' as a common translation of *baibai* 拜拜 (see Chapter Two), argues that the word worship denotes a very different relationship to the *baibai* that takes place in Taiwan's temples. In considering that religion meant worshipping, he points to a clear distinction between 'religion' and his

personal practice and beliefs. His response was therefore much more in line with Li Yih-Yuen's lament that Westerners mistakenly "think supernatural belief must exist in a form of religion."<sup>286</sup>

*Are you religious?*

I will say no.

*What is religion?*

Worshipping. Worshiping something is religion. Anything. It doesn't have to be God. For me, religion is, if you worshiping something, someone or some sort of mental icon, anything can be a religion ... but I don't think I'm religious because I don't worship anything. I believe, but I don't worship.

Not unlike Da-jing's resistance to instruction from Buddhist teachers, Luke's discourse suggests a resistance to the idea of a superior power. Like Da-jing, he emphasises his personal agency in his practice; he asks for help because he wants to, not because the *shen* is in charge:

*So, what's your definition of worship?*

Worship is when you're— when you think that thing is superior than you and have superior powers over you ... and then you actually admire and dedicate and put this sort of effort to it, so, you will feel you're inferior. But when I'm talking to [a] god in the temple, I'm kind of like asking an elder ... asking his permission. So, I'm kind of asking [an] elder to help me out, not asking like he is my superior, he rules over me. ... When people worship someone ... they think that they have to dedicate [themselves], they will want to give them stuff ... and they will believe in everything they said. ... So, I don't think I'm religious. As in, like, I don't worship stuff.

For Luke, his popular religious practice does not count as religion. And, although his explanations do not give much indication that he sees 'religion' as a foreign concept, they also do not indicate he sees it as integrated into daily life. In contrast, the other participants all used the terms 'religion' or '*zong jiao*' readily, applying them in different contexts in accordance with their own definitions, but not treating them as a foreign

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<sup>286</sup> Li, *Zongjiao Yu Shenhua Lunji* 宗教與神話論集, 168–69; English translation from Wong, "Defining Chinese Folk Religion," 161.

concept. Furthermore, most participants who identified as religious had definitive answers on which religion they belonged to, with Chris being the exception. Their reasoning differed, and thus, given most of the practice they refer to is without clear membership, it makes it impossible to predict their individual religious identification without asking them. Even so, the way these participants spoke indicated a familiarity with religion as a concept and little evidence that they struggled to answer the question of their own religiosity.

### *Religious Cultures*

Several scholars have argued that Chinese religion should not be viewed in terms of separate religions at all. Instead, they suggest that both the 'elite' religions and popular religion should be viewed as part of a broader religious complex. Here, I consider some of these arguments before offering a comparative analysis of the participants' own discourse on religion.

Paper argues that the sixteenth-century European view of religions as "essentially hostile to each other" meant that, to missionaries experiencing Chinese religion, "it was inconceivable that distinct religious traditions could coexist as elements of a larger religious complex."<sup>287</sup> Thus, Paper argues Matteo Ricci – who Paper deems the most important figure among the early Jesuit missionaries writing about China<sup>288</sup> – "found religious pluralism where none was present." He interpreted the *sanjiao* 三教 to mean "three sects" instead of "three doctrines." In doing so, Paper suggests Ricci knowingly neglected the Chinese understanding that the three doctrines formed part of the broader religious complex and could hence be observed simultaneously.<sup>289</sup> Ricci's is the interpretation seen in most Anglophone texts on Chinese religion into the late twentieth century, where it is usual to claim China has three religions. That view is still not uncommon today. Thus, Paper argues,

It is still difficult for most Western historians of religion to understand that religion in China is a single complex of considerable antiquity, held together by the practice of frequent ritual offerings of elaborate meals to departed members of the family and to nature spirits, and embellished by

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<sup>287</sup> Paper, *The Spirits Are Drunk*, 10–11.

<sup>288</sup> Paper, 4.

<sup>289</sup> Paper, 11.



many related subsidiary practices, including fertility rituals and rituals of social bonding.<sup>290</sup>

In discussing Chinese religion as a single complex, Paper points to a major shift in the terminology and concepts surrounding Chinese religion.

The progression of such changes is detailed in Bell's 1989 review paper, which addresses the changes in terminology applied to Chinese popular religion. In doing so, Bell demonstrates the progression in scholarly understandings of Chinese religion more broadly, from the bifurcated folk/elite view, to 'popular religion' as a source of cultural unity to 'religious cultures'. For Bell, religious cultures "can be said to reject both a priori bifurcations as well as synthetic entities that mediate them (i.e., the reification of popular religion in a set of institutions, practices, or values)":

Culture is presumed to involve the internal generation of both distinctions and unities, and its holism is described as a function of either underlying structures of some sort or the imposed limits of geography as they moderate the degrees of similarity and difference. From this perspective, culture comes to be described as the relationship of the parts to the whole, the "production" of meanings, or the "construction" of history and community.<sup>291</sup>

Bell expands to explain that, in religious cultures, "unity and diversity become intrinsic to the dynamics of cultural holism." Under such approaches, religion or religious institutions are not directly taken as the data of analysis. "Rather, they focus on symbols and rituals in which they see the dynamics of culture played out" and imply "a distinct theory of religion as a fully embedded cultural system."<sup>292</sup>

Bell refers to work of social and cultural historian Davis, who defines 'religious cultures' as "interconnected beliefs and practises,"<sup>293</sup> explaining that they "are not merely inherited or imposed; they are also made and remade by the people who live them."<sup>294</sup> Under this view, Bell explains, religious practice is defined as "those symbolic activities

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<sup>290</sup> Paper, 11–12.

<sup>291</sup> Bell, "Religion and Chinese Culture," 42–43.

<sup>292</sup> Bell, 42–43.

<sup>293</sup> Davis, "From 'Popular Religion' to Religious Cultures," 322.

<sup>294</sup> Davis, 331.

by which people made and remade the sociocultural world in which they lived,” meaning religion is seen to engender cultural categories and social organisation.<sup>295</sup>

Offering a further definition, ter Haar describes religious culture as “a specific dimension of a culture, rather than something that can stand alone.”<sup>296</sup> Similarly, Paper asserts that Chinese religion is differentiated from universal religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, in that it is an ethnic religion. “In ethnic religions,” Paper argues, “... religion can only be meaningfully separated from culture for the purpose of comparison with universal religions. Within the relevant cultures, the separation is so artificial and dependant on Christian expectations, it has little if any analytical validity.”<sup>297</sup>

For Sun, there is a need for the development of new theoretical tools to combat the “difficulty in analysing the logic of practice in a predominately polytheistic religious life” caused by “deep-seated monotheistic assumptions.”<sup>298</sup> To combat this, Sun advocates applying Swidler’s ‘cultural toolkit’ in the study of Chinese religion. Swidler views culture as comprising “such symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories, and rituals of daily life.” Swidler argues that “culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire or ‘tool kit’ of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct ‘strategies of action.’”<sup>299</sup>

The cultural toolkit concept, Sun argues, is “important to the understanding of Chinese religions” for two main reasons. It emphasises the diversity of religious traditions people may have available to them, which Sun likens to “the way very different tools are ready for use in a large tool bag.” And it highlights the freedom and creativity people may employ in their own religious actions. Thus, for Sun, it “explains the seemingly perplexing phenomenon that many Chinese appear to practise ‘several religions’ simultaneously.” It also counteracts the most prevalent religious classification system used today, which, Sun points out, developed from a Judeo-Christian, monotheistic perspective and “is very much in conflict with the actual practice of Chinese

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<sup>295</sup> Bell, “Religion and Chinese Culture,” 39.

<sup>296</sup> ter Haar, “From Field to Text in the Study of Chinese Religion,” 104.

<sup>297</sup> Paper, *The Spirits Are Drunk*, 3–4.

<sup>298</sup> Sun, “The Study of Chinese Religions in the Social Sciences: Beyond the Monotheistic Assumption,” 71.

<sup>299</sup> Swidler, “Culture in Action,” 273.

religious life.” Such a classification system sees religions as separate and people as belonging to one of them; they are Buddhist or Daoist or Christian, and so on. In contrast:

One may see the Chinese religious tool kit as something readily available to people, for the various tools are transmitted through familial and communal life. In this model, the focus is not on the distinction between different religious traditions or doctrines but rather on the shared rituals, beliefs and other symbolic practices, which may be claimed by various religious institutions and organizations. As a result, people may draw upon the assorted resources from their religious tool kit for different purposes and actions.<sup>300</sup>

The ‘religious cultures’ and ‘religious tool kit’ perspectives, which posit an overarching religious system as inseparable from culture, may well be the most appropriate models for understanding how Chinese or Taiwanese religion operates. But, for the most part, they do not align with how the participants in this study understood their religious landscape. As described by Bell and Sun, these perspectives leave little room for the argument of whether popular religion is itself a religion, as such beliefs and customs would simply be viewed as part of the religious toolkit or religious culture. Yet, while participants’ engagement with religion may match the religious cultures or religious tool kit perspectives, the way they talk about it does not. Whereas Bell suggests the religious cultures approaches “do not isolate religious institutions—or religion per se,”<sup>301</sup> participants spoke in terms of individual religions. All participants spoke in terms of religion or *zongjiao*, whether or not they considered popular religion to be one. This could be a result of the language used to talk about religion failing to align with the experience of religion in everyday life. In the absence of a clear conception of religion natively embedded into the Chinese language or culture, the adoption of the words ‘religion’ and ‘*zongjiao*’ in Taiwan provided them the opportunity to become the dominant terminology. If not only the words themselves but also the associated cultural implications are adopted (such as that religions operate individually, or that people belong to only one religion), there is a disconnect between the language available to talk about religious matters and the reality of religious life. This was most evident in Chris’s

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<sup>300</sup> Sun, “The Study of Chinese Religions in the Social Sciences: Beyond the Monotheistic Assumption,” 66–67.

<sup>301</sup> Bell, “Religion and Chinese Culture,” 42–43.

account, where the disconnect between language and everyday life resulted in a discourse of ongoing struggle of identity making.

### *The 'Left-Over' Religion*

In contrast to the religious cultures model, Wong's 2011 paper argues that Chinese popular religion – which Wong terms 'Chinese folk religion' – can and should be considered a complete religion. Wong points to the possibility that Chinese scholars and Western scholars studying Chinese popular religion, in their application of Western models to the study of Chinese religions, have actually been studying two different things.<sup>302</sup> Wong argues this is owing to the tendency of Western (and some Chinese) scholars to think of popular religion as the 'left-over' of the major religions (Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism): similar to the relationship between folk Christianity and Christianity. This understanding led scholars to focus instead on the three great traditions, treating popular religion as simply the lay form of the 'elite' religions. On the contrary, Wong argues, "Chinese folk religion is not only a complete religious tradition, but also the most influential and important religious tradition in China."<sup>303</sup> Wong contends, therefore, that it is a mistake to place popular religion in an inferior position or treat it as the folk version of the three major religions.

Whether or not popular religion is a religion depends of course on how religion is defined. If religion is understood as "a tradition that consists of certain authoritative doctrines, leaders, institutional systems, and behavioural guidelines," popular religion clearly does not qualify.<sup>304</sup> However, Wong argues that Chinese popular religion should be considered a religion despite its lack of any authoritative doctrine, organisation, or scripture, pointing to Yang's definition of religion:

The system of belief, ritualistic practices, and organisational relationships designed to deal with ultimate matters of human life such as the tragedy of death, unjustifiable sufferings, unaccountable frustrations, uncontrollable hostilities that threaten to shatter human social ties, and the vindication of dogmas against contradictory evidences from realistic experience. Such

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<sup>302</sup> Liu, "'Minjian' hezai? —Cong Fulideman tandao Zhongguo zongjiao yanjiu de yi ge fangfalun wenti '民間'何在? ——從弗里德曼談到中國宗教研究的一個方法論問題."

<sup>303</sup> Wong, "Defining Chinese Folk Religion," 154.

<sup>304</sup> Wong, 154.

matters transcend the conditional, finite world of empirical, rational knowledge, and to cope with them as an inherent part of life man is impelled to seek strength from faith in such nonempirical realms as spiritual power inspired by man's conceptions of the supernatural.<sup>305</sup>

Within this definition, Chinese popular religion can be considered a complete religion. Similarly, the participants' varying personal definitions of religion meant they had varying views on whether Taiwan's popular religion is a religion.

For Luke, whose definition of religion was centred around worship in contrast to *baibai*, popular religion is entirely different to religion. He likens the structure of the spirit world to that of a government:

It's like, okay, so, if you want to visualise, or like think of the concept like *minjian xinyang* 民間信仰 [popular religion]: you gotta change [your way of thinking because] it's not really like religion, like as in Christianity. It's like ... the same thing like in normal life. They have the government ... and then you will have your ancestor ... [who is] the citizen. But it's in a different world, that's the easiest way.

Similar comparisons have been made in scholarship. In early literature on Taiwan's popular religion, both Jordan and Ahern liken the "celestial government" of *shen* to the governments of the living.<sup>306</sup> Within that system, Luke continues, individual spirits' personalities also influence how they act and how they are treated by the living. This occurs as individuals offer sacrifices to them and as temples choose how to invest money to maintain and adorn the temple. Luke uses the example of Yuelao 月老, the *shen* responsible for matchmaking:

For example, Yuelao, people say Yuelao likes chocolate, so, if you bring chocolate ... and then you have the *zhijiao* 擲筊 [moon blocks for divination] ... to ask if you like [it] or not. And, of course, using the same logic ... that's why temple have to be pretty: so the god will want to come here. ... Like if the temple put now a lot of money to maintain the Yuelao status, then maybe [how Yuelao responds to requests] is not always

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<sup>305</sup> Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, 1.

<sup>306</sup> Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*; Ahern, *Chinese Ritual and Politics*.

positive, but maybe it's more reliable. But, also, it's reliable because people say 'oh, that is better, that's better,' the thing is, [it's] ... sort of like marketing. So, it's kind of like business, but, yeah.

Luke again stresses the differences between popular religion and religion at the end of the interview in response to being asked if there was anything he wished to add on any topics. "I feel that *minjian xinyang* 民間信仰 [popular religion] is a really different from religion. As in, like, is it believed that there is a world after life, but how you believe it is different," he says.

Popular religion is also different to religion for Chuang. Rather, it is much more localised: a form of local culture rather than religion.

*Could you please explain a little what popular religion is?*

It is a type of local culture. If I explain, [there will be] this local area and [if] they think the first and fifteen days of the lunar month, the second and sixteen days of the lunar month they must go *bai* 土地公 Tudi Gong [The Earth God], then when they get to this day, they will remember to *baibai* Tudi Gong and so on.

*Then, when you offer sacrifices to ancestors, does that count as this type of popular religion? Or religion? Or—?*

Offering sacrifices to ancestors is more considered closer to popular religion.

*It's still different?*

It's also not entirely [popular religion], it's also considered a type of local culture, to commemorate ancestors like this.

Chia Yin, the only participant to self-identify as believing in popular religion, saw popular religion as growing from parts of Buddhism and Taoism over time to become synonymous with 'religion' in Taiwan.

I think it counts as religion. Because, Taiwan's popular religion, there is a part that came from Chinese Taoism, then a part came from Buddhism. But then, after it went through tens of years, a hundred years, in Taiwan, it will have its own culture. Then, it became Taiwanese popular religion.

*Then, popular religion, is this religion the same as Buddhism or Christianity?  
Are they all the same kinds of religion?*

I think it counts as the same religion, only it's, relatively speaking, it's just a bit more extensive. ... Taiwanese popular religion is so many *shen*, all of which you're able to *bai* [*chuckling*]. ... Considering, according to Christianity, Catholicism, and, you know, Islam there is only one sole true God. Then, if it's Buddhism and Taoism here, if we compare, there are all sorts of deities. So, I'm saying Taiwan's popular religion is from among this overall network. ... So, I think in this part, it's probably very *open* [English, *chuckling*] ...

*So, now you believe in popular religion and are religious, was it always like this?*

Because as a child I would go with my mum and dad to *baibai* together, then— as a result I got this kind of belief, but I'm also not saying— umm— actually I don't know how to explain.

Indeed, Chia Yin frequently opts for comparison and analogy as forms of explanation to overcome the disconnect between the language used to talk about religion and the reality of religion in daily life, but often still struggles in her bids to explain. "I should say this kind of belief is," she continues, "you must be very devout or a certain way and only then is it called belief, because really I also wouldn't count, then—"

This point leads Chia Yin to compare her religious practice with that of Christianity. Pointing out that she'd heard Christians are more likely to go to church weekly, she explains that her religious practice does not require her to piously report in at the temple every week. Indeed, her sense of belonging to popular religion is tied to her relationship with its deities:

I think this is placed in one's heart. I respect these Taiwanese deities, then I also have a connection with, have ties with, these Taiwanese deities. So, I think I am someone who believes in Taiwanese popular religion.

When asked to define popular religion, Chia Yin concisely reiterates the lack of separation between popular religion and religion in Taiwan: "Popular religion, I think it's the same as Taiwan's, as religion, yeah," she says. Her conflation of popular religion with Taiwan's

religion reveals a discourse of belonging and identity, insofar as it infers that, for Chia Yin, popular religion is about collective identity as much as personal practice.

In contrast to Chia Yin explaining that popular religion developed from Buddhism and Taoism, Chris and Da-jing explain that popular religion developed to become Taoism, and is therefore no longer very present in Taiwan. Initially, however, Da-jing appears uncertain of what the term refers to and the question prompts him and Chris to chat back and forwards amongst themselves to devise their own meaning:

*Are you popular religious?*

DA-JING: Popular religion? Is popular religion things people pass on through word of mouth?

CHRIS: Yeah, those folk stories we saw on TV, that type. ... But, are popular religion's *shen* the same as the *shen* we were just talking about?

DA-JING: Almost all of these *shen* come from popular religion.

CHRIS: Right.

DA-JING: Really, popular religion is our general *shen*, really it's popular religion, because— now there is less. Like, if it were in the past, only then you might have it really. ... Popular religion is everyone spreading things through word of mouth, then, believing in this or not. ... Now there is a lot less popular religion, I think, because now in Taiwan, popular religion is us going to temples to *baibai*. Right, there will be a lot less of that type: 'Ah, I'll tell you, oh, that type of something something,' then they go and tell other people, then everyone all goes and believes in this thing.

Seeking clarification, I ask: *So, that type is popular religion, but going to temples to baibai isn't?* In response, Chris attempts to articulate the delicate – in some ways perhaps even imperceptible – difference in positioning between popular religion and the Taoism she and Da-jing know in their daily lives:

I think inside temples is the people. The former popular religion has changed into the present's religion. ... Because Taoism is popular religion a little bit. Popular religion got to the end, then became a— something everyone believed in. Then they built a temple, then everyone together believed in a deity like this. Then, this deity was originally from among the



people. They are a person. They are a person that really existed. Like, we *bai* Guangong. Guangong is Guan Yu from the Three Kingdoms period [220-280]. So, he is actually a historical person.

Here Chris focusses on social power and the collective process. When popular religion became something everyone believed in, it ceased to be popular religion and instead became present-day religion, even if “Taoism is popular religion a little bit.” She emphasises that even the deities belong to the society that now *bai* them. “Right,” Da-jing agrees, before Chris continues, hinting at an understanding of popular religion as less legitimate than religion as she makes clear that the process by which popular religion became religion was the legitimating effects of social power:

Yeah, then afterwards because we thought highly of his character, after that people believed in some of his accomplishments, so we made offerings to him as a *shen*. In that case, he had become a deity. Then, later generations continuously went to offer sacrifices to him, and then this kind of behaviour continued afterwards. From popular religion, he came to appear like a very official type of, very like religion and such. As for Matsu’s origins, the reason is also, she is Lin Moniang 林默娘. To simply explain, she was keeping watch of the coast for some people who had gone out to catch fish, right, then ultimately her assistance led to the fishermen returning more easily. Right, so afterwards she became a deity for protecting everyone. She was a belief among the people, and then transformed into one type of modern-day religion. But, because I can’t explain the real origin, because I haven’t really very thoroughly researched the differences between religion and popular religion, right. But my view from my life, my own understanding is like this.

“But my view from my life, my own understanding is like this.” This final line explicitly points to the significance of lived experience in Chris’s interpretation of religion and the world. For Chris, that’s the lived experience of a 29-year-old working professional woman who has grown up in the Beitou district in northern Taipei, and gained most of her understanding of religion from her family members, in turn marked by their own lived experience. Her brother, 21, continues: “I also think nowadays there isn’t this so-called popular religion.”

DA-JING: Because modern popular religion is our going to the temple to *baibai*, right, because our religion is the religion passed down by people from the past, yeah.

CHRIS: Only on television, like we watch television and they will say popular religion. ... Because in the past it was popular religion, yes.

DA-JING: Correct, so previously it was popular religion, but now what us Taiwanese people believe in is this religion, right we say it's religious belief, yeah.

Despite Chris initially stating that "the former popular religion has changed into the present's religion," she goes on to question whether current usage of the term popular religion could in fact be an alternative to identifying with the established religions.

CHRIS: Or, I think it's even because we don't have a way to define our religion, so we call it popular religion, what do you think? Just like, do you want to say, you have religion? Yes ... these things of yours are all your beliefs, the beliefs of the folk, just the people, those things like some *baibai* that ordinary people are doing. But you're asked to say whether you have religion or not, you are unable to say a reason why. In that case, you won't say very definitively 'oh, yes, I am Buddhist, yes, I am Taoist.' But I have belief, because that line is a bit fuzzy, I think.

Here, Chris's account is one of struggle and self-emancipation from the social expectations and linguistic limitations that threaten to discount her form of religious participation. She muses over the term "popular religion" as a way of challenging the dominant ideology or the status quo. In doing so, she also reveals a fondness in her discourse on "folk," "the people," or "ordinary people." She aligns herself with them and her words exhibit a sense of solidarity. "This is very difficult," Da-jing says in response to Chris's musing, "very difficult to really say what popular religion is, very difficult to say what religious belief is." "Maybe we need a scholar to define it," Chris replies, before they both reiterate the magnitude of the challenge:

DA-JING: This is really difficult to explain.

CHRIS: Us ordinary people can't define it this clearly.

This discourse of struggle to self-define reveals a shared humility, while Chris in particular defers to a larger authority. In doing so, they share something of the social

contracts of their religious experience. They are not required to be able to differentiate between or define concepts, nor are they routinely required to explain the reasoning behind their own religious identity. Rather, they act holistically, living their own religious experience – made up of practices or beliefs that could be labelled various different ways – without delineating or defining.

### *Concluding Remarks*

Regarding the question of whether Taiwan's popular religion fits the category of religion, participants' answers varied almost as much as their individual practice does. These responses appear to relate to their personal definitions of popular religion and religion, as well as whether they self-identify with one, both, or neither. Participants' accounts also reveal that it is not only discourses of family and comfort, but also belonging, identity, resistance, and struggle that underpin ways of thinking about, talking about, and defining religion.

This chapter illustrates how participants' individual definitions of religion were varied – although most emphasised either sincere belief or group structures. Notably, Fang-long Shih writes that “Chinese and Taiwanese people now use the term ‘宗教 [zongjiao]’, which allegedly corresponds to the Western category of religion, but they do not think in the fashion implied by the Western category.”<sup>307</sup> This study's participants answered questions about religion without indication that a disconnect between Western and Chinese understanding of religion made the questions inappropriate or difficult for them to identify their own religious position. Still, although it is clear that these participants in contemporary Taipei did not see religion as an alien phenomenon, it is much harder to accurately address whether they understand religion differently from how it is conceived in the West.

While all participants had different conceptions of religion that also ultimately influenced whether they identified as religious at all or which religion they belonged to, most readily answered questions about their personal stance on religion. They did this with reference to individual religions, even when not asked in most cases. Thus, while conceptions of Chinese religion as one overarching complex are helpful for understanding how Taiwanese people engage with their religion, they do not align with

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<sup>307</sup> Shih, “Re-Writing Religion: Questions of Translation, Context, and Location in the Writing of Religion in Taiwan,” 17.

how these participants understand or talk about it. It may well be true that, as Sun argues, "the religious classification system used today – adapted by both the Chinese state and most scholars of Chinese religion – is one that came out of the world religions legacy modelled on a Judeo-Christian, monotheistic framework, which is very much in conflict with the actual practice of Chinese religious life."<sup>308</sup> But, if that system has also been adopted by individual practitioners of Chinese or Taiwanese religion, to impose a different classification system on them repeats the mistakes of the past. Thus, while the religious cultures concept is a useful theoretical tool for understanding Chinese or Taiwanese religious life, we also need to recognise that individual practitioners may instead align themselves with the dominant religious classification system, even if it is "incapable of capturing the complexity of actions of individual Chinese religious practitioners."<sup>309</sup>

That said, participants' alignment with the 'religion' or '*zongjiao*' classification system could have resulted from a lack of popularly used alternative terminology and, in conjunction with the adoption of associated cultural implications, resulted in a disconnect between how people conceive of religion theoretically or the language available to talk about religious matters and the reality of religious life they experience in daily life. When these irreconcilable contraries are held up against each other, participants who consider themselves religious are left to align themselves with a specific religion, the justification for which correlates with their personal definition of 'religion' or '*zongjiao*'. Where individuals consider themselves religious but cannot easily align themselves with a specific religion, the discourse becomes that of struggle against the linguistic limitations and social expectations that would discount their religiosity.

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<sup>308</sup> Sun, "The Study of Chinese Religions in the Social Sciences: Beyond the Monotheistic Assumption," 66–67.

<sup>309</sup> Sun, 66–67.



*Figure 6: Moon blocks on a temple altar: October, 2017. Offerings, incense smoke, and deities can be seen in the background.*

*Photograph by Tegan J. Farrell.*

## Conclusion

Dominant histories have long been constructed from those whose voices are amplified within a society: academics, governments, media, and others with power. The personal accounts of ordinary people have been less often sought after to become part of dominant or recorded history.<sup>310</sup> But they are nevertheless vitally important – both insofar as they act as historical records in and of themselves and as crucial resources in bridging gaps in knowledge. In the context of Taiwan’s popular religion, fundamentally grounded in daily life as it is, the personal accounts of ordinary people are the only method by which some of its facets can be heard.

The life-context approach taken in this project represents a significant intervention in the study of popular religion. Recognising that most people engage with multiple elements within Taiwan’s broader popular religious belief system, this work has taken a step back from the study of specific sects or temples to instead focus on the experiences and understandings of practitioners contextualised within their life narratives. In doing so, it captures a sense of the breadth of what popular religion looks like in the everyday: what people actually do, and what roles it plays in their daily life. Moreover, anchoring popular religion within broader life allows it to also be recognised – and thus studied – as a lens through which Taiwanese society and culture are understood. As such, this study has gone beyond popular religion per se to also shed light on broader Taiwanese society, culture, and identity.

The bias in existing scholarship towards the study of individual elements of popular religion, and away from the accounts of ordinary people anchored within the rest of their lives, means this research was carried out in the relative absence of empirical precedent. It utilised oral history methodology, but it was never a historical study per se. Rather, through oral history, this study sought to allow neglected accounts of experience to be recovered,<sup>311</sup> as well as the amplification of voice.<sup>312</sup> In doing so, it focussed on accounts of present-day lived experience in Taiwan. It took the view that we can, and should, act as the “historians of the present,” as aptly put by the Popular Memory Group.<sup>313</sup> And it went beyond questions about a specific topic to also enable people to share something of

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<sup>310</sup> Popular Memory Group, “Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method.”

<sup>311</sup> Perks and Thomson, “Advocacy and Empowerment.”

<sup>312</sup> Couldry, “Alternative Media and Voice,” 46.

<sup>313</sup> Popular Memory Group, “Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method.”

their life stories more broadly. Here, oral history permits glimpses into memories of the experiences that shape people as human beings *and* their understanding and experience of Taiwan's popular religion, as well as how they experience the world as practitioners of Taiwan's popular religion.<sup>314</sup> In the process, this project has helped create a living record of the experience of popular religion in contemporary Taiwan.

That said, this project is a work whose methodological framework both draws upon, and deviates from, the scholarly traditions of oral history. On the one hand, the thesis documents and examines ordinary people's stories and discourses in order to deepen our understanding of popular religion as it is experienced in everyday life. On the other, it draws from scholarly literature to both contextualise these personal accounts and extend our scholarly understanding of those historical and cultural contexts with which these accounts are inextricably linked.

In the short term, then, the accounts contained within this thesis allow for a more nuanced understanding of the varied reality of popular religion than can be gleaned from the study of its individual components, such as specific sects, practices, or temples. They offer us a window onto how popular religion is understood and experienced by those practising it. And, when considered in the context of the existing academic literature, we are able to see the ways in which individualised experiences complement, and sometimes contradict, academic understandings of popular religion. Indeed, the very nature of popular religion means that multivalent views are inevitable. The approach taken in this thesis allows us to see some of those varying perspectives – ways of understanding both popular religion and a world in which it is considered to be a “very rational”<sup>315</sup> element.

In the longer term, this approach has the capacity to contribute to a participatory construction of history and popular memory: the otherwise private views, experiences, and discourses of those typically voiceless in the construction of histories are hereby recorded and amplified. This is, arguably, of particular importance when talking about something so fundamentally of the people. In considering these accounts and their discourses in the context of the academic literature, we are able to gain insight into the relations between such dominant discourses and the individualised understandings that are formed through lived experience. As such, the approach taken in this thesis allows for the creation of a record that constitutes a history of the present. It draws on academic

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<sup>314</sup> Hick, *The Existence of God*; Fitzgerald, “Experience.”

<sup>315</sup> Doris and Sean. Interview with author, Taipei, October 27, 2018.

scholarship to acknowledge the past that informs it and the different ways of understanding it, in the context of ongoing and future change driven by forces such as the environment, COVID-19, and the ongoing threat to Taiwan's sovereignty – and thus religious freedom – by the Chinese government.<sup>316</sup>

In addition to change, the themes of modernity and modernisation are apparent throughout this work. The content of this thesis shows how participants frequently reflect on the dynamic between the long-standing tradition of popular religion and Taiwan as a modern society – we have seen them make sense of and address the legitimacy of their traditional practice in the context of modernity in multiple different ways. For some, this is evident in the carrying on of tradition and for others in the commercialisation of popular religion, the simplification of practices, or the integration of technology. The complex – and sometimes contradictory – relationship between tradition and modernity is an undeniable characteristic of Taiwan's popular religion and there is a distinctive Taiwanese-ness to both this condition and the ways participants reflect on it. Indeed, in becoming their own analysts and reflecting on their own subjectivity, the participants in this project have allowed the thesis to further propel an expression of Taiwanese modernity.

This thesis was designed first and foremost to amplify the voices of the people on whose stories it is based, and each chapter reflects that intent. It turned first to the people, the study's participants, with Chapter One offering insight into many different ways of understanding Taiwan's popular religion in daily life, along with a sense of the complexity and diversity of both the participants and popular religion in Taiwanese society today. Thereafter, each thematic chapter considered the lived experience of the participants within the context of related literature, recognising both the value and expertise afforded by lived experience and the rarity of ordinary people having the opportunity to engage on equal footing with the people studying this aspect of their lives.

Chapter Two proffered a critical lens onto the fundamental concepts that underpin the everyday lived experience of popular religion in contemporary Taiwan. Here, we considered theoretical understandings of the relevance and meaning of gods, ghosts, and ancestors, among other fundamental concepts, drawing from the scholarly literature as well as their practical expression in the everyday lives of the participants in this study –

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<sup>316</sup> Laliberté, "Taiwan's Covenantal Pluralism."



that is, the understandings formed through lived experience. This chapter also addressed the difficulties in identifying and naming popular religion that result from its inherently diffuse, diverse, and changing nature. Through participants' accounts, it also shows different ways of thinking about and understanding that nature. This is particularly evident as we see how change, long acknowledged in scholarship as a fundamental feature of Taiwan's popular religion, also underpins participants' ways of talking about their popular religion: for some, a changing popular religion is a sign of progress, while for others it is just the way things are, or indicative of a loss of past knowledge. In taking a broad perspective and considering the most fundamental concepts of Taiwan's popular religion in detail, this chapter went beyond highlighting the variances in definitions and understandings of almost all key concepts to offer a sense of how and why those concepts may mean different things to different people. In this way, the broad approach to popular religion taken within this study has allowed for a comparative view that enhances our understanding of Taiwan's popular religion as experienced in daily life.

Chapter Three considered the relationship between Taiwanese-ness and Chinese-ness through the lens of popular religion. Such an approach gives space for self-identity and to see the complicated reality of the various ways in which participants understood Chinese-ness in relation to both themselves and their popular religion. In doing so, it demonstrated both the need for lived experience in the discussion of matters so integrated into daily life and the separation of popular religion's Chinese-ness from questions of Taiwanese and Chinese identity more broadly. In considering the related history and literature, we also gain a sense of the enormous impact of political events on individual identities, further highlighting the value of capturing individual accounts at a key point in time. While canvassing the kaleidoscope of views on Chinese-ness as it relates to Taiwan's popular religion, this chapter shines a light onto a complex reality whereby individuals hold multiple identities for themselves and their popular religion simultaneously, as well as the discourses of identity, belonging, and unity that underpinned ways of talking about them. Perhaps more than any other, this chapter illustrated an imperative for scholarly inclusivity and amplifying the voices of those with lived experience of the topics being studied. But it also shows the value of studying society at large through the lens of popular religion – a belief system integrated into the daily lives of the majority of Taiwanese. As Wei-Ping Lin acknowledged in a study of local history through popular religion, the study of political, economic, or social processes

through the lens of popular religion is not common among scholars.<sup>317</sup> But such approaches nevertheless have the capacity to expose different interpretations of history, society, and culture. Indeed, this chapter represents a valuable example of how anchoring the study of Taiwan's popular religion in life contexts *and* of how studying wider society through the lens of popular religion both can expose complex, nuanced realities and different ways of understanding and making sense of those realities.

Chapter Four took multiple approaches to consider the 'popular' nature of Taiwan's popular religion. Firstly, it drew on past scholarship to address various academic approaches to naming popular religion before moving on to a comparison of the prevalence and perceived prevalence of popular religion based on available statistics and participants' accounts. This chapter was one of contradictions, demonstrating how factoring in lived experience offers a nuanced picture of the reality of popular religion in contemporary Taiwan. It presents a reality of popular religion that is not talked about but also relies on word of mouth; that is marked by discourses of taboo and fear but also a perceived need for social unity, deference and mundanity. In gaining a clearer sense of the multivalent understandings of popular religion, it also uncovered ways that the expertise garnered through participants' lived experience offers nuance and context to the statistics, highlighting a disconnect between the increasing numbers of people who practise popular religion and participants' accounts of popular religion's decline. Ultimately, this chapter showed how utilising a life-context approach allows space for recognising and appreciating the many contradictions of popular religion in daily life. In doing so, it offered insight into not only a breadth of experiences of popular religion's social aspects – one of the most fundamental features of Taiwan's popular religion – but also a deeper sense of *how* popular religion is integrated into daily lives. Indeed, in taking a step back to investigate a variety of different ways in which popular religion is popular or social, this chapter presented a complex and multi-faceted picture of popular religion in contemporary Taiwanese daily life.

Finally, Chapter Five tackled religiosity and considered how multiple scholarly conceptions of religion can be applicable at the same time, as individuals own understandings and conceptions vary significantly. Even so, in analysing participants' accounts, it becomes apparent that, while conceptions of Chinese religion as one

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<sup>317</sup> Lin, "Local History through Popular Religion."

overarching complex are a helpful theoretical tool for understanding how Taiwanese people engage with their religion, they do not align with how these participants understand or talk about it. This chapter also offered insight into the interrelations between personal definitions of 'popular religion' and 'religion', personal identities, and understandings of whether or not popular religion is a religion. In doing so, it highlights the primary discourses underpinning how people talk about popular religion in relation to religion as a concept. Indeed, it is not only discourses of family and comfort, but also belonging, identity, resistance, and struggle that undergird ways of thinking about, talking about, and defining religion. This chapter, too, exemplifies how the broad approach to the study of Taiwan's popular religion taken here brings into focus popular religion as experienced in the everyday. It both exposes comparative perspectives and brings into view ways of understanding wider society through the lens of a shared belief system.

That chapter also began to unravel an area I see as a significant future direction for research, that is: the relationship between belief and practice in individual understandings and identifications of religion. Whether practice or belief is of primary importance is a topic that has been repeatedly addressed in past literature on Taiwanese and Chinese popular religion, where a number of notable scholars have argued that it is grounded in practice – orthopraxy, as opposed to orthodoxy.<sup>318</sup> But, others have argued that the dismissal of belief in Chinese religion is incorrect.<sup>319</sup> This is a topic for which considering practitioners' own understandings and self-identities paints a fascinating and complicated picture. Practice is undoubtedly important, which is very apparent when considering the large number of Taiwanese people who report participating in religious practices 'just in case' and, as is clear throughout the participants' stories, belief is not required to participate in popular religious activities. Even so, belief was repeatedly emphasised as an important element, and it is perhaps a measure of their own belief that led participants to identify as religious or not. Indeed, in considering how individuals construct their own identities and definitions of religiosity, we begin to gain insight into a complicated, multi-faceted reality where people value different things for different

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<sup>318</sup> Yang and Hu, "Mapping Chinese Folk Religion in Mainland China and Taiwan"; Paper, *The Spirits Are Drunk*; Jochim, *Chinese Religions: A Cultural Perspective*.

<sup>319</sup> Von Glahn, *The Sinister Way: The Divine and the Demonic in Chinese Religious Culture*; Feuchtwang, *The Imperial Metaphor*.

reasons and, perhaps, where belief is not required to practise popular religion but is necessary to think of yourself as popular religious. If I had more resources, time, and space within my word-limit, that is the topic I would tackle next.

That said, there are various other areas of future study that this work could meaningfully impact. In some ways, this study acts as a snapshot in time, just before COVID-19 impacted the world. All interviews and fieldwork were completed from 2017 until early 2019. And I have not been able to return to Taiwan since the onset of the pandemic. A consideration of how COVID-19 has impacted behaviour and especially ways of thinking about popular religion compared to those outlined in this thesis would be pertinent for what is inherently a social – or popular – element of daily life. Indeed, despite its changing and varied nature, the social – or popular – aspect of popular religion consistently remains one of its fundamental features. How has the social nature of Taiwan’s popular religion been impacted in a world with limits on social interaction? Has the changing nature allowed it to adapt? Has there been a shift in how people choose where to *bai*; whereas they might have previously considered a busy temple a good thing, indicative of the temple’s efficacy, or chosen to attend a temple rather than *bai* at home, have priorities or ways of thinking about efficacy changed?

Studies on the impacts of COVID-19 on other religions in other areas of the world have uncovered a number of findings that may point to other ways in which the pandemic might have changed Taiwan’s popular religion. For example, pandemic-related messaging was sacralised,<sup>320</sup> and religious language was used both to understand the state of the world<sup>321</sup> and as a tool to cope with social isolation.<sup>322</sup> Indigenous knowledge systems gained ground as Western medical systems struggled to address COVID and increased death rates increased the use of traditional practices, while religious organisations also found themselves struggling economically without the usual regular donations from practitioners.<sup>323</sup> The latter is potentially of particular significance in the case of Taiwan, where it has previously been noted that in some contexts money has

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<sup>320</sup> Sibanda, Muyambo, and Chitando, *Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Southern Africa*.

<sup>321</sup> Sibanda, Muyambo, and Chitando.

<sup>322</sup> Ali and David, “Covid 19 and Lockdowns - Use of the Language of Religion for Survival - Focus on Elderly Sindhis in Sindh, Pakistan.”

<sup>323</sup> Sibanda, Muyambo, and Chitando, *Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Southern Africa*.

become a replacement for other forms of devotion and an important means by which practitioners reciprocate the spirits for their protection.<sup>324</sup>

Furthermore, in the face of the pandemic, many religious practices saw adaptations that involved converting them to virtual, internet-based forms.<sup>325</sup> But, the move to online practices also resulted in laments of reduced social experience and atmosphere.<sup>326</sup> Presumably, such reductions would be of particular significance for a belief system as fundamentally grounded in social and community-based practice as Taiwan's popular religion. But, as this study's participants repeatedly addressed, technology and online popular religious practices had been gaining prevalence in Taiwan before the pandemic: Has the onset of the pandemic seen such services benefit from faster growth in popularity? How integrated into the popular religious landscape will they remain in future? The changing and varied nature of Taiwan's popular religion means it is well-suited to adapt to a challenge like the COVID-19 pandemic, but just how these changes have played out and what they mean for ordinary people requires further study.

Finally, another future direction of research building from this work would be a study of news media representations of popular religion in the context of – or perhaps in comparison to – the individualised understandings generated through lived experience. That is the work this project was originally planned to undertake. But the initial round of fieldwork quickly showed that the few academic constructions of Taiwan's popular religion available did not adequately address the reality of popular religion in daily life that would be necessary for such a study. And, thus, a more in-depth understanding of lived realities would be required to make meaningful analyses of media portrayals of popular religion. As such, the focus of this thesis became entirely about the lived experience of popular religion in daily life. But news media play important roles in both shaping how people understand the world in which they live,<sup>327</sup> and constructing dominant versions of history and popular memory.<sup>328</sup> In Taiwan, like popular religion,

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<sup>324</sup> Lin, "Local History through Popular Religion," 21.

<sup>325</sup> Sibanda, Muyambo, and Chitando, *Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Southern Africa*; Cooper, "Kaddish During COVID."

<sup>326</sup> Cooper, "Kaddish During COVID."

<sup>327</sup> Broersma, "Journalism as Performative Discourse: The Importance of Form and Style in Journalism"; Zelizer, "Journalism and the Academy."

<sup>328</sup> Popular Memory Group, "Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method."

news media have a history of government control.<sup>329</sup> Upon cursory examination, contemporary Taiwan appears to have a healthy media system. Press freedom is constitutionally guaranteed,<sup>330</sup> and Taiwan is ranked as 'free' on Freedom House's 2017 Freedom of the Press report<sup>331</sup> and was chosen for Reporters Without Borders' first Asian bureau.<sup>332</sup> Further, drawing on interviews with Taiwanese journalists, Rawnsley and Gong suggest "representing the under-privileged or marginalized social groups has become an important objective for the [Taiwanese] media. In this way, they have become a platform for expressing the interests that emerge from civil society."<sup>333</sup> Rawnsley and Gong also note that Taiwanese media scrutinise political powers, suggesting they do perform to the normative expectations of journalism in democracy outlined by McNair.<sup>334</sup> However, while Rawnsley and Gong's study suggests Taiwanese news media are fulfilling some of their expected roles, other scholarship suggests the public discourse and the way people are encouraged to make sense of their daily lives may still fail to recognise the way daily life is experienced by most Taiwanese. Hung's 2013 study suggests state interference in Taiwanese media is ongoing, although indirectly,<sup>335</sup> while the limited studies specifically addressing representations of religion in Taiwanese news media suggest small but powerful institutional religions are strongly and intentionally influencing Taiwanese news media.<sup>336</sup> Meanwhile questions about possible interference from the Communist Party of China in Taiwanese news media abound in the public sphere. In that context, a study of news representations of popular religion compared with the understandings of popular religion held by the ordinary people who practise it would be highly meaningful.

One of this study's participants, Doris, explained the intersection of popular religion and daily life as "a very natural existence": "It must already be a kind of *lifestyle* [English].

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<sup>329</sup> Yang, "Goddess across the Taiwan Strait"; Rawnsley and Gong, "The Media and the Vitality of Democratic Taiwan."

<sup>330</sup> "Justices of the Constitutional Court, Judicial Yuan-Interpretations."

<sup>331</sup> Freedom House, "Taiwan | Country Report | Freedom of the Press | 2017."

<sup>332</sup> Horton, "Reporters Without Borders Picks Taiwan for Asian Bureau."

<sup>333</sup> Rawnsley and Gong, "The Media and the Vitality of Democratic Taiwan," 113.

<sup>334</sup> McNair, "Journalism and Democracy," 240.

<sup>335</sup> Hung, "Media Control and Democratic Transition: Ongoing Threat to Press Freedom in Taiwan."

<sup>336</sup> Jiang, "Taiwan Dangdai Dazhong Meiti Baodao Zong Jiao Xinwen de Fangshi Jiqi Dui Shehui Keneng Chansheng Yingxiang de Shangque 台灣當代大眾媒體報導宗教新聞的方式及其對社會可能產生影響的商榷"; Chen, "Reporting Buddhism in Taiwan."

It cannot be separated from me," she said. Accordingly, this thesis is an investigation of the everyday. It has taken a belief system that is inextricably diffused into everyday life and both examined it in multiple ways and used it as a lens through which to view other elements of Taiwanese society. Taiwan's popular religion may be made up of many individual elements but these are combined in broader life contexts. As such, this study is based on an understanding that the everydayness and 'everyday' experience of Taiwanese popular religion and culture are just as important to understand as their more prominent symbols.

In turn, this study demonstrates the power and application of oral history, and of taking a life-context approach, in both adding to and contextualising the existing body of research on Taiwan's popular religion. This thesis is based on oral history interviews with twelve ordinary Taiwanese people in contemporary Taipei. As is evident throughout as we get to know the participants and learn about their experiences, understandings, and the discourses they use to convey them, each of the twelve individuals has a different background and lived experience. Together, they offer a nuanced understanding of one of the most fundamental elements of Taiwanese (and Chinese) culture as experienced in the everyday. By considering this alongside the context of history and academic literature, we are able to better appreciate the multivalent nature of popular religion in contemporary Taiwan. We gain a more practical understanding of not only how it works – what people are actually doing – and what it means to them, but also how wider society and culture are understood through the lens of popular religion. And, in doing so, we amplify the voices of ordinary people to enrich Taiwan's history of the present.

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## Appendix: Primary Sources

Below is a list of all oral history interviews, presently unpublished, that were conducted for this doctoral project between 2017 and 2019 and cited in this thesis:

Luke. Interview by Tegan J. Farrell in Taipei, September 22, 2017. Transcript. PhD Project "Divine Conversations: Voices on Popular Religion in Taiwan." Melbourne: Monash University.

Chris and Da-jing. Interview by Tegan J. Farrell in Taipei, July 8, 2018. Transcript. PhD Project "Divine Conversations: Voices on Popular Religion in Taiwan." Melbourne: Monash University.

Chuang. Interview by Tegan J. Farrell in Taipei, July 17, 2018. Transcript. PhD Project "Divine Conversations: Voices on Popular Religion in Taiwan." Melbourne: Monash University.

Willie. Interview by Tegan J. Farrell in Taipei, August 18, 2018. Transcript. PhD Project "Divine Conversations: Voices on Popular Religion in Taiwan." Melbourne: Monash University.

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MJ. Interview by Tegan J. Farrell in Taipei, November 18, 2018. Transcript. PhD Project "Divine Conversations: Voices on Popular Religion in Taiwan." Melbourne: Monash University.