



# Why Build a Temple? The Materialization of New Community Ideals in the Demilitarized Islands between China and Taiwan

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taiwan**

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## ABSTRACT

Since the early twentieth century religion has been seen by the Chinese state and intellectuals as an obstacle to modernization and has thus been devalued. This article points out how this pejorative view of religion has latently persisted in contemporary Taiwan in the formulation of an important policy of community development. The author draws on ethnography from the Mazu Islands, a former frontier military base, to investigate the predicaments and breakthroughs of community projects carried out there, and to show that a sense of community began to emerge only when the local elites recognized the importance of religion and began to participate in building the village temple. By allowing different generations of Mazu people to negotiate their ideas of community, the process of temple construction has transformed their often adversarial social relations. This paper demonstrates that religion, and in particular the process of its materialization, can serve as a basis for the formation of a new community in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** materialization, Chinese religion, community, China, Taiwan, Mazu Islands.

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It was in 2007 that I first visited Ox Horn Village in the Mazu Islands, a community building project site (*shequ yingzao dian*) that was extensively reported on in the Taiwan press. Living in the village for a few days, I soon noticed that the posters on the development project bulletin on the old street were in disarray, swaying limply in the wind. Fisherman's Hut Café, the major site created by the prior community building project looked deserted, and hotels renovated by the project were mostly not in business. Moreover, two local restaurants with similar menus and names, "Granny's Bistro" and "Granny's Old Bistro," had opened up and were competing fiercely for any bit of business. In stark contrast to all this was the activity in a grand temple under construction, painted bright red and frequented by people busily coming and going.

This scene from an island village between China and Taiwan provides an opportunity to reflect on the often ignored role of religion in Chinese society. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, popular religion has been seen as an obstacle to the modernization of China, and thus suppressed by the state and discounted by intellectuals (Duara 1991; Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Nedostup 2009; Yang 1961; M. Yang 2008).<sup>1</sup> This pejorative view of religion has persisted not only in China, but also to some extent in contemporary Taiwan, being latent particularly among intellectuals. The Community Building Project mentioned above is a case in point.

The project has gained popularity throughout Taiwan since the Council for Cultural Affairs (CCA) began to promote it in 1994. The main project coordinator at the time was the vice-chairman of the CCA, a cultural anthropologist, Chen Chi-Nan. He observed that after Taiwan had freed itself from the authoritarian regime of the Nationalist Party in 1987 and experienced economic growth, what was needed most was the rebuilding of communities within the society (1996a, 109). He also suggested that Taiwan society embraced a strong sense of "familism" (1992, 7), "traditional localism," and "feudal ethnic consciousness" (1996b, 26), and that the religion of the Han people always belonged to the "private" and "mental" domains, and was never directly involved in the public sphere (1990, 78). Therefore, it was necessary to build a new sense of community through community development projects. Only by doing so could Taiwan be led towards modernization and democratization (Chen 1996b, 26; Chen and Chen 1998, 31).

What, then, were the actual steps needed to achieve this? Since the purpose was to create a new community consciousness, set of values, and identity, Chen figured that culture served as the most fitting starting point. By organizing various cultural activities and encouraging community members to participate, a sense of group identity can be fostered (1996a, 111). Therefore, the activities promoted by the

“Community Building Project” were mostly related to art and culture, such as rebuilding the village landscape, organizing arts activities and architectural restoration, and researching local history and literature (Chen and Chen 1998, 22).

Chen’s ideas were closely connected to the shift in Taiwan’s political power in the 1990s, along with the rise of Taiwanese consciousness, and its national imaginary in the global terrain (Lu 2002). He thus received strong support from the president at the time, Lee Teng-Hui, who incorporated Chen’s ideas into many of his speeches (Lee 1995). These ideas were also disseminated through different government institutions, and various subsidies and promotional activities quickly reached towns and villages everywhere in Taiwan. In addition, the surge of interest in community landscape building drew an avid response from professionals in architectural and civil planning fields (Hsia 1995, 1999). The idea of community development soon became closely linked to village preservation and made a great impact in Taiwan.

This study takes the Mazu Islands and a community project carried out there as an example to discuss whether religious practices are necessarily an obstacle to modern thoughts as claimed or implied by policy makers and intellectuals. In the Mazu Islands, we will see that earlier efforts of community building—which included literary and historical research, art and cultural events, and activities connected to village preservation—yielded little success in terms of creating a sense of community identity and consciousness. It was not until the community-building activists became aware of the importance of religion, and began to participate in building the village temple—a structure held in great esteem by residents—that a sense of community began to emerge. In this case religion, and in particular the process of its materialization, serve as a basis for the formation of a new community, and also function as important mediators for absorbing modern concepts of cultural preservation, environmental aesthetics, and touristic developments.<sup>2</sup>

Studies of material culture in recent years have provided us with a way to reflect on the limitation of prioritizing cultural concepts. The potential to go beyond the dualisms of subject/object and person/thing has attracted great attention not only in the West (Appadurai 1986; Miller 1987; Tilley et al. 2006) but also in China and Taiwan (Huang 2004; Meng and Luo 2008). In a series of works, Miller argues that human concepts, values, or social relations did not exist prior to the physical world; objects are not merely reflections of social groups or cultural concepts. In contrast, cultural ideas and social identities are reconstituted through the interactions of humans and objects because in producing objects people continually reconstruct themselves (1987, 2007). From this perspective the material world is indispensable for understanding the mutual constitution of individuals and

society (Miller 1987, 33). In the light of these insights from material culture studies, this paper aims to show that the materialization process of the temple building is pivotal to our understanding of the formation of a new community in the Mazu Islands. The concept of materialization used here benefits from Bell and Geismar (2009), who combine Miller and many other important studies of material culture to define it as:<sup>3</sup>

an ongoing lived process whereby concepts, beliefs and desires are given *form* that are then transformed and transforming in their social deployment. (Bell and Geismar 2009, 4–6, italics in the original)

We shall see how different generations of Mazu people have negotiated their ideas of community, and how their original social relations have been transformed by the process of temple construction.

### The Mazu Islands and Ox Horn Village

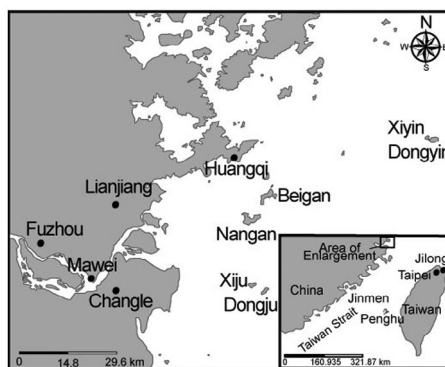
The Mazu Islands comprise an archipelago along the northeast coast of Fujian province, China, consisting of Nangan, Beigan, Dongju, Xiju, Dongyin, Xiyin and other minor islands. It is said that the name came from the goddess Mazu. The islands are about sixteen nautical miles away from Fuzhou city (Figure 1). In the early days these islands served as a resting stop for fishermen from Lianjiang and Changle counties during the fishing season. Due to its geographical proximity to China, Mazu retained close economic ties with the mainland. As a large percentage of Mazu's population depended on fishing as a main source of income, the fishermen used to bring their stocks to Fuzhou or Lianjiang to be sold and traded for daily goods. As such, the Mazu Islands and the eastern Fujian region were integrated as a whole, both ecologically and economically.

The arrival of Chiang Kai-Shek's troops in 1949 drastically changed the fate of the Mazu Islands. Because of the rivalry between Taiwan and China, Jinmen and Mazu came to be used as frontline military bases for Taiwan's resistance against China (Szonyi 2008). The original fluidity of social lives was interrupted and the mutually dependent economic ties between Mazu and China were severed. But Mazu is 114 nautical miles away from Taiwan, and the roughness of the conditions in the Taiwan Strait severely obstructed travel between Taiwan and Mazu, making the islands even more isolated.

At the same time, the people of Mazu lost most of their freedoms under the control of the army, while fishing in the sea was also restricted. By around 1970, a large percentage of fishermen were heavily in debt, as reported in Mazu Daily Post (*Mazu Ribao*). In the 1970s the Taiwan government relaxed its immigration restrictions on Mazu Islanders moving Taiwan; this was also a time when the country was about to embark upon its early phase of industrialization and was in need of a massive

**FIG 1**

Mazu, China, and Taiwan, drawn by Peng Jia-Hong.



supply of labor. Thus, a large number of Mazu people began moving to Taiwan to work in factories. The focus of this study, Ox Horn Village, being at the time the biggest fishing village on the island of Nangan, also saw a significant portion of its population emigrate to Taiwan. By the 1990s, when the War Zone Administration Committee was abolished, the village's population had already diminished severely, and abandoned and dilapidated buildings were everywhere.

### **The Beginning of Community Building Projects in the Mazu Islands**

Although the abolishment of the military government in Mazu allowed the people to regain their freedom, it also gave rise to new problems. With its marginalized geographical location, the decline of its fishing industry, the outflow of its population, and the loss of its military importance, how should the Mazu Islanders redefine themselves? What role should it play in the new cross-strait relations? These were the biggest challenges faced by local leaders. As an Ox Horn county representative, Cao Yi-Xiong, was contemplating these challenges, he chanced upon a series of books titled "*Changzhu Taiwan*" (Taiwan for the Long Term) at a bookstore in Taipei, written by Hsia Chu-Joe and some civil planning scholars (Wu 1995). Cao, a cultured man of wide reading, was deeply inspired by the ideas about the value of local traditions presented in the series, and subsequently invited Professor Hsia to Mazu to give talks on "local development and community building." Hsia introduced the ideas of the civil planning scholars and those of Chen Chi-Nan to people in Mazu. Later Cao had the opportunity to visit Tsuma go yuku in Nagano, Japan, a place known for its successful preservation of historical streets and buildings. After the visit he began to promote the community building project "*Changzhu Mazu*" (Mazu for the Long Term) in his hometown, Ox Horn Village.

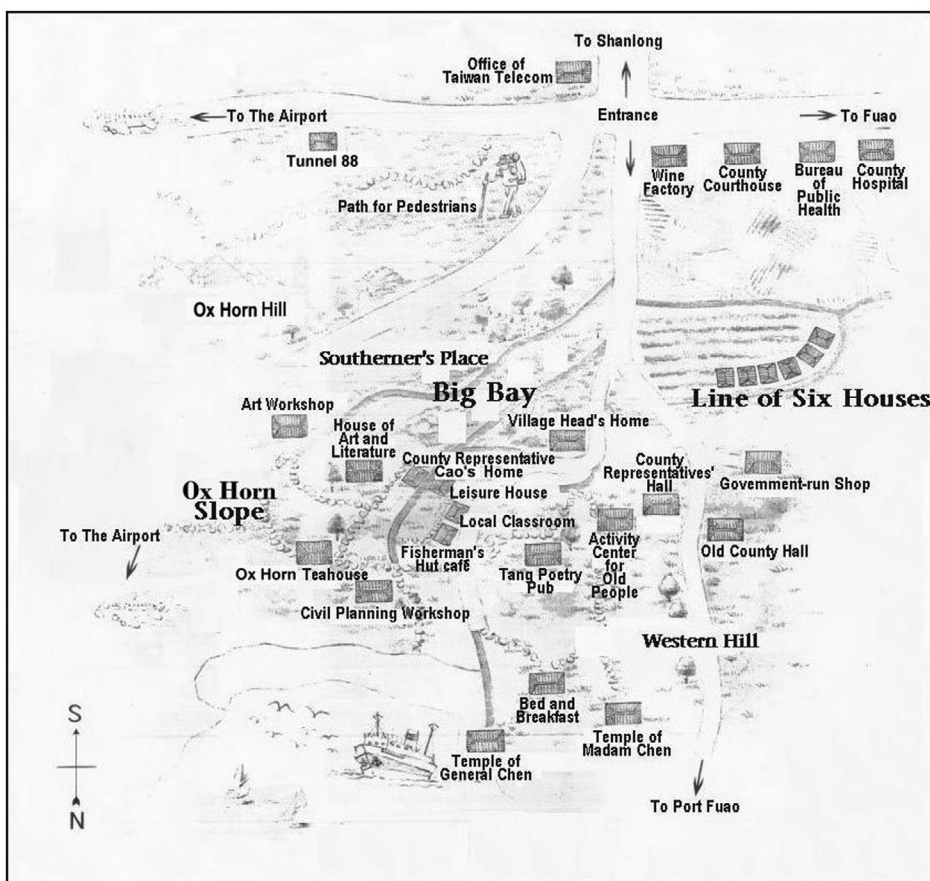
With village preservation as its core objective, *Changzhu Mazu* began by reorganizing and restoring the eastern Fujian-style stone houses in Ox Horn. Responding to the county

representative's appeal, a group of Mazu elites participated; they were not limited to Ox Horn Village, but included literary and historical researchers, poets, artists from different villages, and many young architects who were doing their military service in Mazu. The group held a variety of cultural and artistic events, and invited renowned music, art, and dance groups to perform in Mazu. In 1999, a government organization called the Civil Planning Workshop was set up in Ox Horn. It drew up a number of village preservation plans. Figure 2 shows the outlook of Ox Horn Village according to the plans of these community development activists.

Figure 2 shows the initial concepts of the community development activists. They invented new names for places to convey a strong local flavor or to make reference to local history, such as the Fishing Hut Café, Ox Horn Teahouse, and Local Classroom. Although the actual implementation process did not always follow the original plan set out in this figure, it did not stray too far from it. After successful execution of the project, Ox Horn attracted much attention in the media, thanks in part to its county representative's networking ability. The results of the development project also garnered numerous national awards.

Nevertheless, the media reports and national awards were recognitions gained outside the village. For the development of a community, it is essential that community activities can elicit the participation and interest of local residents. And the fact was that local villagers, especially the elderly residents (who were the most influential), played a very passive role in most of the activities.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps it was their background as fishermen that made them feel awkward about being involved in these elitist projects; in any case, they were uninterested in taking part. Thus, restoring the old houses was at one point even referred to as "doing dead things" (*zuo si shi*), or in other words, pointless and meaningless for the local residents. Therefore, the old houses were still demolished one after another and rebuilt in cement. The vast horizon of the Ox Horn Village became gradually blocked by tall and modern buildings. Moreover, under the influence of new community concepts such as "sustainable management" and "cultural industrialization," the community development elites raised funds to open businesses in the restored historical buildings. However, owing to conflicts that arose from property rights and account discrepancies, these stores vied fiercely against one another for business. The community ideals were inevitably corroded by the ensuing competition for market share (Huang 2006). In addition, as with other places in Taiwan (Chuang 2005), the community development implementation process also created new groups working in parallel to the village's administrative system, resulting in friction and conflicts. In the end, many activists withdrew from the project and some of them formed other associations.





**FIG 2**  
 The Spatial Design of Ox Horn Community Development. Source: Report on the Community Development of Ox Horn Village, Lianjiang County. Map drawn by Wang Hua-Di.

On the other hand, at about the same time that the community development was being carried out, a temple committee was formed by the local people with the goal of building a temple in Ox Horn. As there are strong correlations between the temple building and the second phase of community development in Ox Horn Village, I will discuss the religion of the village in the next section.

### The Deities in Ox Horn

The villagers of Ox Horn worship many different deities, and they can be divided into four main categories. The first consists of deities of a higher status who were brought over from mainland China, such as Wuling Gong or Wuxian Gong, whose origins can be traced to the Five Emperors from Fuzhou (Szonyi 1997, 114). Second are the deities who possess special powers, such as the Lady of Linshui who is venerated for her powers relating to

childbirth (Baptandier 2008). In Ox Horn, villagers set up a shrine for her after some local women experienced difficult labor. The third category comprises gods who came to be deified because their corpses or statues floated to the shores of the village and over time the villagers associated certain miraculous events with them. After having found the bodies or statues, the villagers buried them or built simple huts to shelter them from the rain, and as some wishes were answered, particularly for big harvests of fish, they started to be revered and worshipped. General Chen (Chen Jiangjun) and Madam Chen (Chen Furen) are two examples. In the last category are the territorial deities who ensure the wellbeing of the place, such as the Lord of the White Horse (Baima Zunwang) and the Earth God.

Many of the deities mentioned above have strong eastern Fujian origins, such as Wuling Gong, the Lady of Linshui, and the Lord of the White Horse, but religion in Ox Horn is also inseparable from a particular physical characteristic of the islands: the sea, which keeps bringing things to their shores. Hence, the religion of Ox Horn, or of the Mazu Islands in general, is a unique combination of eastern Fujian culture with the oceanfront geography inherent to Mazu.

The deities are indispensable to the villagers' lives as they journey through life's stages experiencing birth, old age, illness and death. The Lady of Linshui is a goddess in charge of pregnancy and taking care of children. Local weddings often include an elaborate one-day rite to show gratitude to her. When villagers encounter illness or misfortune, they seek help from Wuling Gong, Wuxian Gong, or General Chen. They are also the deities who protect fishermen at sea. The Lord of the White Horse, as a territorial deity, is in charge of death: when anyone dies, his or her family has to "report the death" (*baowan*) to him.

The Ox Horn villagers initially did not build a temple for their deities, but only set up incense burners for them and kept the burners at villagers' houses, either because of their poverty or because they saw the Mazu Islands just as a temporary home. Nevertheless, if the house in which a deity's incense burner was kept became dilapidated, the villagers would raise funds to renovate or rebuild it. Sometimes, if a family built a bigger house, the incense burner would be moved there so that the deity could have a better dwelling place. In addition, if a deity had exerted special powers to help a family, such as curing their son of a serious illness, this family would set up an incense burner particular to the deity at their house to invite the god to stay with them permanently. "Being adopted by a god" (*gei shenming zuo yizi*) is a very common custom in the Mazu Islands. These cases show how intimately villagers' lives have become intertwined with their deities.

However, the relationship between the villagers and their deities was not limited to the domestic domain. Since the

majority of the ancestors of Ox Horn residents came over in waves from mainland China, the distinct kinship ties from China and the immigrants' choices of residential location have combined with various deity attachments to make Ox Horn a settlement of diverse neighborhoods.

### **Surname Groups, Neighborhoods, and Religion in Ox Horn**

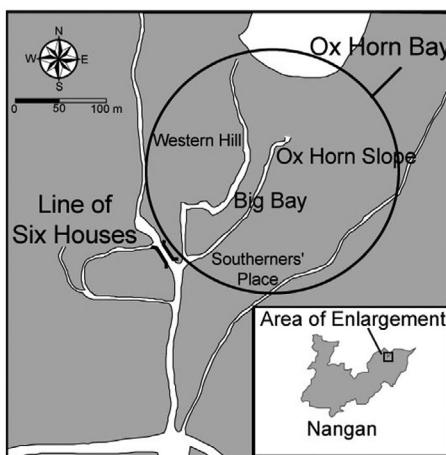
Bordered by a bridge, the Ox Horn Village is divided into Ox Horn Bay towards the north and the Line of Six Houses towards the southwest of the village (Figure 3). Ox Horn Bay is mainly populated by families with the surname Cao, though families with other surnames are also interspersed throughout this region. In the past the majority of the population made their living by fishing or running small businesses. The Line of Six Houses, on the other hand, was inhabited by a mixture of different surnames who moved into the neighborhood from various places. As revealed by the name of the neighborhood, the earliest settlers lived in a row of six houses and had the surnames of Li, You, Cao, and Zheng—thus, it was a rather heterogeneous composition. Surrounding the Line of Six Houses is a large area of farmland. The early residents made their living by farming and fishing.

In addition to the differences of geographical locales, kinship ties, and economic activities, the residents of Ox Horn Bay and Line of Six Houses worshipped different deities. The former worshipped Wuling Gong (who was brought from China by a Cao family), General Chen, the Lady of Linshui, and the local deities the Lord of the White Horse and the Earth god. As I described earlier, most of these deities originally resided in the residents' houses, but were then moved to a temple in Ox Horn Bay after it was built in the 1970s. The latter—the Line of Six Houses—also have their own deities, such as Wuxian Gong brought by a Yu family and Gaowu Ye (a minor deity). Although the inhabitants of the Line of Six Houses also worship Wuling Gong and the Lord of the White Horse, residents had their own incense burners and statues for these deities and did not mix with those in Ox Horn Bay. Every year during the Lantern Festival, the two neighborhoods held their own night-time rituals, but on different dates. Each neighborhood had its own percussion band, and if the bands crossed paths, they usually ended up in heated competition with each other.

Looking more closely, Ox Horn Bay is further divided into different territorial units: for example, the Ox Horn Slope along the mountains, Southerners' Place (populated by residents from southern Fujian), Big Bay (which includes the old market street), and Western Hill. Each unit has its own deities and festivals. Every year during the period between Chinese New Year and the Lantern Festival (the 15th day of the first month of the lunar

**FIG 3**

The neighborhoods in Ox Horn Village.  
Map drawn by Peng Jia-Hong.



calendar), the whole village celebrates eleven different festivals! This high frequency of night-time rituals became more and more difficult for most people in Ox Horn, especially as many Mazu people's lives had turned from depending on a fishing economy in which the pace of their lives was dictated by the tides and the fish, to being determined by the new county government that was set up after the military government was abolished in 1992. The new nine-to-five work routine made them feel the need to integrate the various rituals. The construction of a new temple presented a possible solution to this problem.

### **Establishing the Community Building Association in Ox Horn**

Aided by the county government, the Ox Horn Community Building Association was established in 2001, and a second phase of community development began to take shape. Since most of the non-local members of the first phase had left the group, the association was largely composed of local inhabitants. It comprised young and highly educated elites, and elders (mostly former fishermen), and was led by a medical doctor, Yang Sui-Sheng.

Yang is a typical Mazu elite who was sent to Taiwan to study medicine because of his outstanding scores in the local high school and who came home to serve his community in 1981. As a doctor he received modern medical training and was inculcated with a love of scientific ideas and values; he was the first person in Ox Horn to build a Western-style house, which he designed. At the same time, his attachment to his hometown is also strongly emotional. Motivated by the ideal of preserving and reforming his hometown, he decided to lead the association. The other young members were more or less like him: they went to Taiwan or Europe to attend university and returned home to work.

Given the intellectual background of its younger members, the association started, unsurprisingly, by holding art and cultural events resembling those in the first phase. In addition, they invited migrant elders back home to tell stories of the past, and executed an environmentally conscious project to prevent sea waste from flowing into their bay. Although a greater variety of events were organized than in the past, the association soon faced the same problems that had plagued community development activists of the previous phase: a lack of participation by local people.

Though frustrated, Yang noticed that the villagers showed strong enthusiasm towards temple building. Whenever the subject was brought up, they discussed the issue fervently. He gradually realized that the association's ideals of community could be accepted and implemented effectively only if they changed their view of religion as mere superstition, participated in temple building, and engaged with the residents about their conceptions of Ox Horn village. He thus reinterpreted local religion as "folklore" (*minsu*) without much religious implication, a view that was embraced by the intellectual activists on the committee, who began to actively engage with building the temple. After that, the Community Building Association worked closely with the temple committee and often held joint meetings. In order to formalize their coming together, a young member of the association proposed integrating the temple committee into the association. Although this proposal did not receive support from the elder members, it helped the young generation to realize that they had to change their ways of thinking in order to succeed in implementing their ideas of community development. Yang said,

Originally we thought of the community as a big circle, and the temple committee as a smaller circle within. But then we had to change our way of thinking ... we had to hide ourselves [the association] within the temple committee, and use their power to strengthen our own.

In this statement we sense that the community activists understood, after reflection, the importance of religion in local society and were willing to change themselves, and even to "merge the association into the temple committee." In the following section I will use the temple building as an example to show how the younger association members and the more senior ones progressed from holding conflicting ideas, to negotiating, compromising, and finally reaching a state of mutual acceptance.<sup>5</sup>

### **The New Temple as the Materialization of Community Development Ideals and Traditional Concepts**

As mentioned above, the main purpose of forming the temple committee in Ox Horn was to build a temple. While many other villages in Mazu had finished building or renovating their temples, Ox Horn, once the biggest village in Mazu, had only a small temple next to the sea. The villagers were thus especially enthusiastic about building a new temple for their deities and for themselves. It is also for this reason that the villagers initially only elected proprietors of construction businesses as the directors of the temple. However, as Ox Horn is located between two mountains, with many houses built along the slopes, it was very difficult to find an ideal site for the new temple; even though discussions had been going on for almost a decade, the five directors in the past still could not decide upon a suitable location. It was only after an Ox Horn-born legislator failed to win his bid for re-election that new light was shed on the issue.

#### ***Decision on Temple Location and Arrangement of the Sanctuaries: The Rearrangement of Local Power***

After failing to win re-election in 2000, Legislator Cao Er-Zhong decided to restart his political career by devoting himself to temple building. The first problem he encountered was finding an ideal location for the new temple, which was a challenging task because of the mountainous geography of Ox Horn mentioned above. In the beginning, a suggestion was made to build the temple around the Ox Horn Bay, by filling up part of the sea with earth from the mountain, but the committee members held differing opinions on the matter and an agreement could not be reached. Later, someone suggested the old location of the county hospital, but there were problems with the property rights and the idea had to be abandoned. Then the thought of using the site of a liquor warehouse was brought up, but the villagers were opposed to this location because it had been used earlier as an execution site and a military brothel by the army. The committee members looked everywhere for a suitable location, and after numerous thwarted efforts, the focus returned to Ox Horn Bay. After much discussion and re-examination of the location, the villagers were able to come to a final decision. This brought joy and excitement to the village, and Legislator Cao was widely recognized for his dedication to the matter. In the next election in 2004, he was able to garner 69.8% of the votes, an increase from 61.5% in 2000. His opponent's votes decreased to 26.9% from 38.5%. In the Ox Horn Village alone, Legislator Cao won nearly 300 votes over his opponent and was easily elected.

In addition, the new temple effected a successful integration of the various deities from the two neighborhoods of Ox Horn village: Ox Horn Bay and the Line of Six Houses. As described above, the two neighborhoods are peopled by residents of diverse

surnames and deities. The building of a new temple presented an opportunity for people from the two neighborhoods to sit down and discuss how to combine their respective deities and festivals. When they came to an agreement on the hierarchy of the deities and arranged them accordingly into the seven sanctuaries in the temple (Figure 4), this process also unified the people of these separate neighborhoods into one.<sup>6</sup> As an important temple committee member said, "Once the temple is built, it will unify not only the deities, but the people as well." Since that time the villagers have worshipped each other's deities and also combined the eleven separate times of worship into two. Other rituals, hitherto practiced separately by the people of Ox Horn Bay and the Line of Six Houses, have since been united.

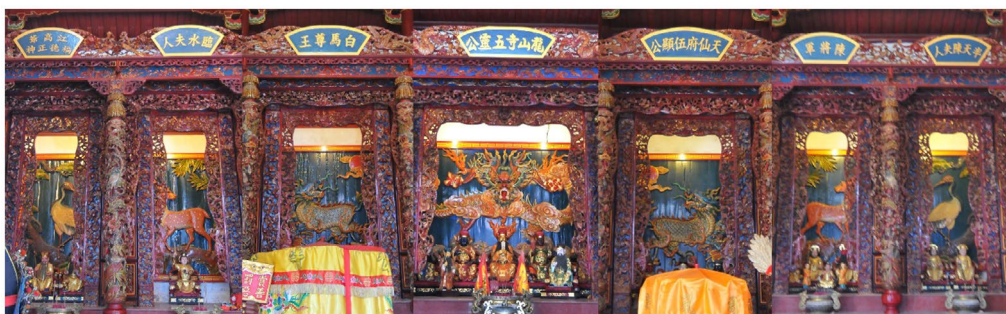
### ***The Architectural Form of the Temple: A Clash between Community Building Ideals and Traditional Concepts***

The process of deciding on the architectural form of the temple demonstrates the politics of negotiation between elder villagers and young community activists. The older members of the temple building committee favored a palace-style temple of the kind recently completed in a neighboring village. They were impressed by its ornate and opulent appearance, displaying the substantial wealth of the village (left panel of Figure 5). However, the younger community activists preferred the common island-wide architecture style, called "fire-barrier gables" (*fenghuo shanqiang*) (right panel of Figure 5). They believed it would better represent the eastern Fujian heritage of Mazu culture, and they made great efforts to convince the elders of this idea.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the idea of valuing distinct local characteristics as advocated in the first phase of the community project had influenced the older committee members over time, since it did not take long for them to accept the suggestion. Subsequently, a draft of the new temple was drawn up by the same architect who had participated in the first phase of community development. Using the structure of the old temple as a basis, he expanded and modified it, and also added new elements. This draft was later made more attractive by painting it with colors, and unveiled at the banquet of the Lantern Festival celebration (Figure 6). The temple committee successfully raised almost NT\$10 million (approximately US\$320,000) on that single night!

The next debate was over the material for the temple walls. The members of the older generation leaned towards green stone (because it looks like jade), which is not only resilient to climatic changes, but also serves as a symbol of wealth and high social status. In the early days, when the people of Mazu acquired wealth through their businesses, they would go to China to buy high-quality green stone to build new houses, and for this reason the elders naturally preferred green stone for the walls of the temple. But the young activists were nurtured by





**FIG 4**  
The seven sanctuaries in the Temple.  
Source: Photo by Liu Mei-Yu.



**FIG 5**  
Temple in palace-style (left) and eastern Fujian-style with "fire-barrier" gable (right).  
Source: Photo by the author.

concepts of community building, which approaches architecture from environmental and aesthetic perspectives. The young activists favored granite because its color complemented the traditional stone houses of Mazu and the surrounding greenery of the mountains. They thought the temple would look too subdued and dull if the walls were green. The two sides held strongly to their own opinions and a consensus could not be reached for a long time. In one of the rounds of negotiation, a young member used sharp rhetoric to express his stance, which seriously offended the elders and caused them to withdraw from the meeting. Although the young members softened their attitude, efforts to establish communication between the two sides were in vain. In the end the issue had to be resolved through an open but very tense vote by show of hands, in which granite won over green stone by a single vote.

The next question was the color of the fire-barrier gable. This time it was the young activists who held diverse opinions.



**FIG 6**

Coloring the draft of the temple.  
Source: Photo by Yang Sui-Sheng.



Legislator Cao preferred the color red, which is traditionally seen as a festive and auspicious color, but a local artist who had studied in Spain proposed black. By doing so, he hoped to present a unique color aesthetic through the stark contrast between the red outer walls and the black gable. But painting the gable black was seen as subversive and was not easily accepted by other members. In the end, the members suggested the idea of dropping divination blocks to ask the deity for guidance on the final decision. Knowing that he would not be able to win the elders over, the artist did not show up for the divination, and the proposal for red was accepted.

As for the interior of the temple, the young members had always thought the village lacked a large public space that could be used for gatherings by the entire village, so their design of the temple included a substantial common area that could be used for community activities and events. For instance, their plans included a courtyard that could be used for small-scale public events. This concept had not previously been applied to any temple in Mazu. The temple as a whole was designed as a two-story building in which the ground floor is used to hold an important banquet for all the villagers after the Lantern Festival. Further, the younger members of the temple board extended the staircase leading towards the entrance of the temple for future use when a stage will be constructed to present Fuzhou operas and other entertainment programs.

***Preserving and Representing Old Memories: The Trails, the Little Bay, and the Old Temple***

The trails next to the temple used to be part of the lives of the people in Ox Horn, but the area was closed off and became a “forbidden zone” during the military period. After the abolishment of the military administration, the Community Development Association applied for government funds to clean up and restore the trails. The new trails do not necessarily preserve the old look, but instead expand towards the coast, thus becoming a representation of the villagers’ memories. The

new trails are further designed to connect with the new temple as part of the greater aim of linking the important tourist sites in the village (Figure 7).

The little bay behind the temple holds a similar meaning for the villagers. If the bay was filled up with earth, it would create a larger area for the temple. But the little bay is a shared memory of most villagers' childhoods. They recount vividly how they played in the water or were chased by coast guard soldiers. Therefore, rather than filling in the bay to create more land, the temple committee decided to keep the bay to preserve the villagers' precious memories.

The most spectacular aspect of the temple area, however, is the manner in which the new and old temples exist side by side, aligned back to front. All the other villages demolished the old temples when building new ones. The construction team of Ox Horn temple initially also sought to do the same, and the elder villagers did not show any strong opposition to the idea. But the young activists, keen on preservation, were reluctant to do this, as they considered the old temple to be a part of their history. When the committee visited the root temple in mainland China, they asked for the deities' opinion by dropping divination blocks. The deities indicated that the old temple should not be demolished as it was there that the Ox Horn deities had attained their power (*dedao*). As mentioned above, the new temple was designed according to the old temple's form, with the addition of new elements. Now the new and old temples are juxtaposed: the old one is small but exquisite and the new one modern but culturally sensitive. They look similar in form but different in detail, complementing each other and bringing out a unique aspect of Ox Horn Village.

### ***Surrounding Landscape Design: Connecting the Temple with Tourism Development***

The design of the new building also takes into consideration the issue of how to connect the temple with the tourism industry. In the overall design, the young activists further contributed the idea of building a mezzanine between the first and second floors: a space in the shape of a half-moon. Its location is such that it allows people to see the contours of the northern island, as well as the beautiful scenery formed by the tiers of houses overlapping the slopes of Ox Horn Village. The design of the mezzanine was initially part of an effort to link the temple to the tourism industry, but interestingly, this space gradually developed a kind of religious meaning. In other villages, people say that it is the deities of Ox Horn who requested that the mezzanine be built so that the temple, situated between the mountain and the sea, would have a more solid foundation and in order that the "gods can sit firmly" (*shenming caineng zuode wen*). This example shows how the concepts of the community

**FIG 7**

The old and new Ox Horn Temples.  
Source: Photo by the author.



activists were translated into ideas with religious significance and subsequently became widely accepted by the Mazu people.

In order to attract more tourists to the temple, the committee members also designed two separate entrance and exit paths. The committee applied for funds from the Mazu National Scenic Administration to build a pavilion (which was later changed to an observatory) above the temple that would allow tourists to admire the surrounding scenery from different angles. The eaves of the temple are engraved with a “legendary bird” that was recently found to be close to extinction—the Chinese crested tern (or *Thalasseus bernsteini*)—which all the more highlights the local characteristics of the Ox Horn temple.

### **Temple, Community, and the Mazu Islands**

From the description above we see how the temple building not only provides a space for the two distinct neighborhoods to develop a unified sense of community, but is also a way for the local people to adapt to the pace, especially the nine-to-five work routine, of modern society. In other words, the temple affords an important solution to the complex worshipping schedule previously maintained by the villagers. The successful merging of the deities from different neighborhoods into one temple and the reduction in the frequency of rituals helped the people to cope with the rhythm of work in modern society.

In addition, building the temple also presented an excellent opportunity for the former activists of the community building project to carry out their own ideals. We have seen how residents from different generations negotiated with each other throughout the construction process. The activists infused the new temple with their own ideas about architectural aesthetics, local characteristics, and concepts of organic living. Elders offered their knowledge of traditional beliefs, and local residents provided the necessary funding and labor.

This process, moreover, has been enthusiastically recorded online. A person with the username “Intern” (Shixi Sheng) posted one picture each day on Mazu’s most important website, the Mazu Information Network, throughout the two-year long period of construction. “Intern” finally made a GIF animation, dedicating it to

all the villagers who contributed to the construction of the Ox Horn Temple and the villagers who moved out. Many thanks to the craftsmen from mainland China and to all the community members who worked together to support this project! (Shixi Sheng, 2007, March 18)

The above discussion shows how the temple building brought community residents and out-migrants together and helped to forge a consensus among them.

Indeed, the new temple brought forth not only a different tempo of life but also a host of new community activities. After the temple was inaugurated on January 1, 2008, Ox Horn Village launched an unprecedented pilgrimage to China in July, in which more than 300 villagers participated (Lin 2014). When a disastrous fire destroyed the business area in a neighboring village, Ox Horn temple held a fire-repelling ritual for all inhabitants to ward off the fire god. We can see that a new kind of community has taken shape.

The strength of the consensus within Ox Horn was also demonstrated in the 2009 elections for county commissioner and councilor of Mazu. The director and other leaders of the temple construction project obtained an unprecedented number of votes in Ox Horn; two of them were duly elected to these two positions. Nowadays, the temple in Ox Horn plays an even more significant role in integrating traditional culture and modern society in Mazu. In 2011, for example, the temple committee members worked with the Mazu Cultural Affairs Bureau to hold a coming-of-age activity called “Loving 16, Mazu is Great” (*qingding shiliu, Mazu haozan*), referring to the Mazu Islands (Timing, 2011, Sep 15). This activity combined the Mazu traditional ritual of *xienai*, in which teenagers turning sixteen offer thanks to the Goddess Lady Linshui, with the values of a modern high school education, or the “five qualities of life” (*wuyu*, which includes ethical, intellectual, physical, social, and aesthetic training). This ritual gives high school students in Mazu a chance to celebrate their coming of age while sustaining their traditional customs.

The close connection between temple leaders and elections, however, has cast a shadow of factionalism. Criticisms have appeared on the Mazu website, with claims like “the temple has turned into an election tool” (Shenhua 2010, June 8). Others have said that the temple committee elections are “preliminary battles for legislator seats” and that “the village leader’s faction is being oppressed by the temple board.” Voices

of dissatisfaction can also be heard in private settings. Indeed, the discord between the village leader and the community building committee that had developed in the previous phase of the community project persisted throughout the process of temple construction. It would obviously be a gross exaggeration to claim that the building of the new temple could resolve all of the longstanding disagreements about elections and disputes between political factions and disgruntled individuals. Nonetheless, we should not overlook the importance of the temple building in breaking many of the deadlocks that had formed during the community building project, or the hard work devoted by the majority of the inhabitants. This ethnography, in a very important way, provides us with a lens through which to examine how a divided community can reach a consensus in contemporary Chinese society. Yang Sui-Sheng, former chairman of the community association, later the head of the temple building committee, and now the Mazu county commissioner, gave a vivid description of this process:

The temple of Ox Horn not only integrates traditional architecture, folk beliefs, and local culture together, but also provides a space for new community activities. There have been many ups and downs in the process of building the temple. Each step along the way has been full of compromises negotiated in locally democratized ways. The result is a collective achievement of grassroots democracy. (Yang 2007, January 5)

It is worth examining the idea of “grassroots democracy” a bit more, particularly the process through which community building activists communicated and negotiated with the elders. As I mentioned earlier, during the negotiations, the so-called “democratic” method of voting was often only used as a last resort, when a consensus could not be reached after substantial communication. Usually the younger members would talk to the elders in private, and if the two sides strongly insisted upon their own views, they would decide the matter through the use of divination blocks. What is worth noting is that this method did not always yield yes or no answers; the responses sometimes fell into a grey area, which required further communication among the members.

The divination blocks consist of two crescent-shaped blocks with a flat side and a convex side. Dropping the two blocks can yield three different combinations: a positive answer (meaning the deity gives its consent: one block is facing up, the other facing down, + -/- +), a negative answer (meaning the deity disagrees: the flat side of both blocks faced downwards, - -) and an ambiguous answer (also called a “smile,” meaning the god smiles but refuses to answer: both blocks face upwards, + +). In other words, by the laws of probability, there is a 25% chance that the deity will refuse to answer, and will throw the question back to

the worshipper. This allows the worshipper to modify his or her question before coming back to the deity for another answer, thus providing a chance for the various participants involved to renegotiate and reach a form of consensus. In addition, the followers can set up certain rules depending on how significant the questions might be. If the issue is one of little controversy, then it needs only one positive answer from the god. If it is one of great importance or could lead to severe consequences, three (or more) positive answers in a row may be required to validate the result. By this method, the local people are given more opportunities to communicate. We can say that the whole process exemplifies another kind of democratic civility (Weller 1999), final decisions on contentious or significant matters are reached not just through group discussion, but with the support of the deities.

### Concluding Remarks

While the state and many intellectuals in early twentieth-century China devalued religion and thought of it as impeding the process of modernization (Duara 1991; Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Nedostup 2009; Yang 1961; M. Yang 2008), this paper shows that their counterparts in contemporary Taiwan, and even the Mazu local elites, have similarly taken a dismissive view. Therefore, the role of religion was initially overlooked in cultural policy making (Chen 1990; Chen and Chen 1998) and in its local execution. The community projects implemented in the Mazu Islands exemplify this most clearly.

We have seen that the first phase of community building in Ox Horn focused on literary, historical, and cultural activities, like most community building efforts in Taiwan at the time. But such activities often failed to elicit the participation of local villagers. Especially since Ox Horn was a traditional village in which a large proportion of its residents made their living by fishing, most of the fishermen found it difficult to take part in those activities. They could only observe them as spectators; as a consequence, the activities were inevitably unable to cultivate a sense of community or group identity. It was not until the second phase of community building, when the young activists realized the expectations of the local residents and the important role played by religion in their daily lives, that community building experienced a breakthrough. In other words, the turning point came when the young members stopped dismissing religion as only “traditional” as they and the officials and scholars of community development had initially held.

After their ideas changed, they began to participate actively in building the temple, which in their own words was an attempt to “build from the inside” (*neizao*) rather than “build from the outside” (*waizao*)—meaning to take part in the construction of a building that occupies a significant place in the heart of the



villagers, instead of organizing activities that are only valued by the elites. They incorporated local religion into their ideas of historical preservation, environmental aesthetics, and tourism development. The concepts of the community activists were translated into ideas with religious significance and subsequently became widely accepted by the Mazu people.

By focusing on a religious construction, this paper demonstrates how a consensus among the residents was achieved and a new community formed.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, it shows how religion and, in particular, the process of materialization of the temple building, could provide an important medium for creating a new community. Taking inspiration from important works in material culture (Bell and Geismar 2009; Miller 1987, 2005; Tilley et al. 2006), we have seen how cultural concepts (of community) and social relations (of Ox Horn village) have been reconstructed by the residents and by their deep engagement with the temple. The process of temple building, and how it materialized the negotiation of conflicting ideas, thus provides us an excellent example of contemporary community formation.

In fact, not only the temple, but also myths of deities' miracles and the practice of dropping divination blocks, can create a civil space of negotiation and help to translate the ideals of community building into concepts that are accessible to the villagers. Different individuals or generations holding varying values were able to find a way to resolve their disagreements. The two neighborhoods that had long excluded each other were also able to integrate into a unified community. The community building project in Mazu demonstrates how religion and religious artifacts can serve as the basis for the emergence of a new community and as a means of absorbing modern ideas. Without them, new and external concepts often only have a short-term influence and very rarely can take root in a local society.

I am not arguing, however, that the case of Ox Horn's temple construction is merely a revitalization of traditional culture or values. Instead, I aim to show how religion, community, and space in the contemporary Mazu Islands have more complicated articulations than in the past. Religion, though it still plays the role of integrating the community (Yang 1961), has subsumed diverse elements and become more collage- or montage-like in the contemporary era. It has gone beyond the previous boundary of traditional religion, and challenges us to reconsider what contemporary religion is.

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# notes and references

<sup>1</sup> Chinese popular religion indicates religious practices combining Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism; for a general anthropological discussion of it, see Feuchtwang (2001).

<sup>2</sup> See also Lin (2008) for a discussion of the relationship between god statues and community.

<sup>3</sup> For further applications of the concept of materialization, see also my book, Lin (2015).

<sup>4</sup> Hong-Ren Yang's research in southern Taiwan describes a very similar phenomenon (Yang 2007, 268).

<sup>5</sup> This paper will not discuss the significance of temple reconstruction in China or Taiwan, which I have analyzed in an earlier paper (Lin 2009).

<sup>6</sup> The sanctuaries of the gods in the temple are too wide to be contained in a single photograph, thus I drew Figure 4 to illustrate how the deities are arranged in the new temple.

<sup>7</sup> A "fire-barrier gable" refers to a roof that is ridge shaped, like fire burning in motion along the outer walls of the Mazu temple, which can prevent fire from spreading.

<sup>8</sup> See also Jing (1996) for a discussion of the revival of the Kong village by rebuilding a Confucius temple.

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