

Local History through Popular Religion: Place, People and Their Narratives in Taiwan

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Abstract

This paper explores how popular religion can offer a different interpretation of history than the macro politico-economic perspective. It draws on ethnography from rural Taiwan to discuss how the local people have their own ways of understanding history. The author examines religious narratives, the revelations of spirit mediums, and changes in the governance of temples to show how the social histories of the region and the wider society are reconstituted locally. These religious narrations and practices, grounded in ideas of place and in the social relations between deities and their adherents, are important means of constructing local identity and conveying people's agency.

Introduction

This article discusses how anthropology can inform local history. I draw on my ethnographical fieldwork in a village of southwestern Taiwan to address this issue. This village is famous for its temple which has been rebuilt several times over the years. There are many popular stories about the temple and its deities that can help us to shine a new light on local history and how it is constructed. In the paragraphs that follow, I review important anthropological and historical literature on Chinese

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popular religion, particularly those related to the relationship between the state and local people, to show how an anthropological perspective on religion can provide an alternative perspective on local society and history.

Most scholars study Chinese religion in terms of political, economic or social processes, but hardly the other way around. Skinner, for example, gives analytical precedence to market structure and regards religious organization and festivals as conforming to this model (1964, 1978). Anthropologists such as Wolf see religion as the worshippers' conception of their social world (1974: 131). In a similar vein, the historian Duara shows how religion provided a way to integrate the local and imperial polities, and how the village elites identified themselves with the values of the state through local cults (1988: 132-48). Hansen, in her discussion of the transformation of gods in the Sung dynasty, also bases her explanations of religious changes on economic and political factors (1990).

In his influential article on the cult of T'ien Hou, James Watson combines historical and anthropological approaches to explicate how the state promoted a standardized T'ien Hou cult which was most useful as a means of legitimating itself. People in different positions of the social hierarchy, in his analysis, could affiliate themselves with temples according to their own particular interests (Watson 1985: 294). For example, the lineage leaders, by constructing T'ien Hou temples, placed themselves in the mainstream of "civilized" society (1985: 309), while the oppressed minorities, such as boat people, could gloss over their marginal status by reinterpreting the T'ien Hou myth (*ibid.*: 319). Watson's article raised many important issues of Chinese religion, and has been continually reexamined in many subsequent articles (e.g., Sutton ed. 2007; Szonyi 1997). Although partly addressed by them, two aspects of this T'ien Hou study are particularly related to my concerns in this article and worth more detailed consideration.

The first question is whether the religious standardization was so successful that the local cults became only interpretations of the state-sanctioned one. Szonyi directly addresses this issue in his article on the Five Emperor cult in Fuzhou, which points out that the standardization was manufactured by officials who concealed vibrant local cultures (1997: 127). The heterodox cult of the Five Emperors still flourished, although in the guise of orthodoxy. It thus becomes important to explore the local appropriations and modifications of official religion (*ibid.*: 129).

Several other researchers also question whether political control through popular religion has ever succeeded and indicate widespread variations in cultural practices. The ghost cult in Taiwan is a case in point (Weller 1985). Wang, using materials from Ming Dynasty Quanzhou in Fujian, shows how territorial cults created a strong sense of local place and identity which could resist the central administration (1995). Feuchtwang discusses how spirit mediums can be another local source of religious authority (1993). Hymes' discussion of "byways" in Sung-dynasty Fu-chou (2002) and my own research on god statues (Lin 2008) both reveal that local religious practices are not just reinterpretations of the standardized official version, but have their own defining characteristics.

The second aspect of the T'ien Hou article that I will discuss concerns local people's agency. With the state so dominant, local society appears compliant and weak, with little agency. As Sutton points out, although local participation is noted in Watson's later work (1993: 82), the standardization is directed from the top, serving the interest of the state (Sutton 2007: 5). In later research, Siu's discussion of the Chrysanthemum ritual in Xiaolan shows how the festival was a means for the local population to incorporate themselves actively into the larger Chinese polity (1990). In addition, the local inhabitants of the Pearl River Delta used different symbolic means to participate in the "civilizing process" and make themselves part of Chinese culture (Faure and Siu 1995: 15, 17). Whether or not these arguments have a strong implication of cultural integration and homogenization (Dean 2003: 45-6), we can see the more active role taken by local people.

In this article, I will discuss how popular religion can offer a very different interpretation of history from the macro politico-economic versions we have surveyed, and thus show how local society has its own way of looking at history. Narratives, particularly religious narratives, will be one of the main foci of my analysis. De Certeau has pointed out how narrated history can form a fictional space and move away from the "real" (1984: 79). In China, the famous narrative practice, *suku* (speaking bitterness), has been shown to provide a means of creating subaltern subjects (Rofel 1999: 138) and reworking their experiences and memory (Anagnost 1997: 32). Furthermore, Mueggler's recent research into how the Chinese state is imagined by people in the periphery of southwestern China indicates how their narratives can present an "alternative mode of history":

[Narratives] produced an oppositional practice of time and alternative mode of history. This was a critical history, a calculated mistranslation of the constitutive questions about the social world that the state was heard to pose and answer. It was a history of an alternative kind of doing. (Meuggler 2001: 9)

In Taiwan, Allio (1988) has similarly discussed how the territory inspection ritual can render a non-national and non-linear history. Elsewhere I have shown that these religious narrative forms and practices are based on ideas of place and social relations between deities and their adherents (Lin 2004). In this article, I shall draw not only on religious narratives, but also on the revelations of spirit mediums and the changes in the governance of temples to show how the social histories of the region and the wider society are phrased and reworked locally, as a history of the diplomatic relations, the extraordinary achievements, and the magical power of its deities. In this way, an alternative mode of local history is formed and the agency of local people is conveyed.

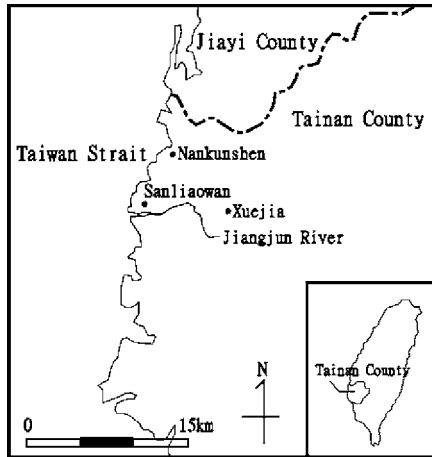
The Ethnographical Context

Sanliaowan is located in Beimen, Tainan County, on the southwestern coast of Taiwan, a region known as the “salt zone” (*M. yenfen didai*). The topography of this area has undergone drastic changes since the 17th century, when the current location of Sanliaowan was still under an inland sea, with long offshore sandbanks stretching from the north to the south. Since the late 18th century, the coastline has been advancing westward toward the Taiwan Strait because of river diversions and accumulation of alluvial sediment. Sanliaowan was formed by the silting of the sea and the Jiangjun River (Fig. 1).

As a result, the soil in Sanliaowan has a high concentration of salt, which makes it difficult to grow rice or corn. Only saline-resistant crops such as spring onions and garlic can survive here. Even now, the west side of Sanliaowan is occupied by lagoons and swamps and is constantly influenced by tides. The names of these peripheral areas, such as “Daxianhu” (Great fairy lake) and “Baishuihu” (White water lake), give away the topographic history of this landscape. Today, much of the land is used for aquatic farms (Cheng 2002).

Historical records of Sanliaowan are scant. Only one book compiled in the mid- 19th century, *The Brief Account of Taiwanfu Maps [Taiwanfu Yutu Zuanyao]* (Anonymous 1983), briefly referred to it as Shaliaowan.

Figure 1. The geographical location of Sanliaowan



In *Taiwan Maps [Taiwan Baotu]*, compiled in the early Japanese colonial period (The Provisional Land Investigation Bureau of the Colonial Government in Taiwan 1996 [1905]), the village of Sanliaowan already appeared in a form very similar to its current one. During my fieldwork, however, villagers provided more information: when their ancestors first came to Sanliaowan (lit. “three thatched houses at the river bend”), they built three thatched houses near the river bend; hence the name. Some people explained further that the three houses were built by the earliest cultivators, the Zeng, Hou and Xu families. Later, people of other surnames moved into the area. Sanliaowan today is composed of seven surname groups who form their own distinct neighborhoods.

The focus of this article, the village temple, Donglonggong, is situated at the center of the village and was constructed by all surname groups. Li Wangye, Wen Wangye, Wu Wangye, Dadaogong and Chi Wangye are the five main deities in order of hierarchical status. Li Wangye, who is regarded as the village master (*zhuangzhu*), is addressed by the villagers as “Great Wangye” (*Da Wangye*). “Wangye” is the name for the plague deity whose origin is related to the stories of “five officials [who] drowned themselves in the well to save the lives of the people” or “three hundred and sixty officials [who] died while on duty”

(Katz 1987, 2003; Liu 1983: 227–8). In Sanliaowan, however, I rarely heard such stories. The five deities are related to the region in which Sanliaowan is located, and they came to Sanliaowan in different periods. As they did so, the titles of the deities and the temple changed correspondingly. How these changes imply different ideas of place, social interactions, and concepts of history is the major concern of this article.

The Temple of Compassion and Peace (Ci'angong): Religion in a Village of Coastal Southwestern Taiwan (before 1949)

The earliest temple of Sanliaowan was called Ci'angong (“Temple of Compassion and Peace”), in which Li Wangye, Wu Wangye and Dadaogong were the three main deities. When I asked villagers how their head deity, Li Wangye, came to Sanliaowan, the most common answer was: “our ancestors brought him here.” However, the Zengs, who are supposed to be the earliest arrivals, claim:

Tian Yuanshuai (General Tian) was the deity who arrived first. Later some villagers went to Nankunshen [a regional religious center in southwestern Taiwan], asked for incense ashes and made the statue of Li Wangye. After Li Wangye arrived, Tian Yuanshuai recognized his hierarchically superior official status and ceded the position of village master to him. In reciprocation of this gesture, Li Wangye still invites Tian Yuanshuai to sit in front of him in the village ritual of cosmic renewal (*jiao*).

Other villagers are a little skeptical about whether Tian Yuanshuai had ever been the master of Sanliaowan before Li Wangye arrived. However, let us see how Li Wangye himself explains his origin. His spirit medium interpreter recounted:

Li Wangye originally came along the Jiangjun River and was heading for Nankunshen. For some reason he delayed his departure from Sanliaowan and Wu Wangye took this chance and reached Nankunshen before him. That Li Wangye did not dispute this shows how magnanimous he is. He disliked Sanliaowan at first and did not plan to come back to stay. He found the people there disobedient and constantly feuding. Wu Wangye of Nankunshen persuaded him to stay by pointing out that the geomantic location of Sanliaowan was good. Wu Wangye also promised him that whenever there was any trouble....he would come to help. (Chu and Yang 2004: 89)

This story was usually told by Li Wangye as a reprimand when the

village elders defied his will. It offers some clues as to why Li Wangye came to reside in Sanliaowan. The story reveals that when Li Wangye, on his way to Nankunshen, passed by Sanliaowan, he hesitated there for a while and did not immediately move on. Later Wu Wangye also pointed out that the geomantic location of Sanliaowan is favorable. It could be inferred that the place of Sanliaowan is an important factor attracting Li Wangye, who finally took the decision to settle there. Another aspect of the story shows what the deity was worried about: the inhabitants were so defiant and quarrelsome that he was hesitant to stay. These stories indicate that Li Wangye took two factors into account when deciding whether to stay: the place and the relations between the deity and the local people.

These different interpretations also reveal what Sanliaowan was like in the early period of cultivation. For instance, the debate about whether Tian Yuanshuai was the village master before Li Wangye indicates that the Zengs were possibly the earliest cultivators, and that their ancestral deity was worshipped by most of the early settlers. However, it was only when Li Wangye arrived that most of the villagers in Sanliaowan accepted him as the common master. In other words, a collective identity of the village emerged only when a common deity, who could transcend the barriers of different surname groups, appeared.

However, a comprehensive acceptance of Li Wangye's status in Sanliaowan was not attained in the initial stage. How it came about can be discerned from an event still recounted by the villagers. It was said that Sanliaowan was once in such a state of disorder (*bu ping'an*) that the villagers went to Nankunshen and brought back the statue of Wu Wangye for consultation. Hearing about it, a person from a neighboring village came to observe the boisterous ritual, during which he was suddenly possessed by Wu Wangye. He snatched up the sword of the Big Dipper (*qixingjian*) and beheaded almost all the private deity statues which were widely worshipped in Sanliaowan at that time, and which were seen as the cause of unrest in the village. After this incident, the agitation in Sanliaowan was pacified and, with his competitor deities gone, Li Wangye was confirmed as the head deity in the village. Since Wu Wangye was an important support to Li Wangye, the villagers made a branch statue of him so that he could reside in Sanliaowan. Thus, Wu Wangye became the second deity of Sanliaowan.

The third deity, Dadaogong, came from the town of Xuejia in which Sanliaowan was once administratively included during the early colonial

period of Japan, and to which Sanliaowan has been economically connected until the present day.¹ In addition, Sanliaowan also belongs to the “thirteen villages of Xuejia” (*Xuejia shisan zhuang*), the Xuejia-centered religious organization. We can say that Xuejia is the market town in this region (Skinner 1964). Thus, right from the beginning, the head deity of Xuejia, Dadaogong, was frequently invited to Sanliaowan for worship, inspecting the village and executing important functions such as dredging its watercourse system.² Finally a branch statue of him was erected in Sanliaowan to secure his continued protection.

During the late Japanese period, the government exerted strict control on local religion. In 1939, on the pretext of building a road, the Japanese demanded that Ci’angong be demolished. Villagers had no choice but to move the temple to a nearby location, and later had it reinstalled at its original site just before Japan’s defeat in World War II. According to an elder’s account, part of the construction fund and the wood were contributed by some Sanliaowan villagers living in Kaohsiung, the largest city in southern Taiwan. This shows that already in this early period, there were migrants capable of making donations to their hometown, limited though these were in comparison to later periods.

When asked how the deities interacted with the villagers’ daily life during this period, the people I interviewed could only offer limited answers. This vagueness of memory is probably caused partly by remoteness in time; however, it also coincides with the period of the early settlement of Sanliaowan, when Li Wangye had only just been accepted as the common deity, and there had not yet been time for a more elaborate history of the deities’ presence among the villagers to be built up.

Thus, the narrations of the deities’ advent and the rituals performed reveal the local features of the place and the varied origins of its people. These stories provide a different perspective on local history during this period. It is a perspective based on the local religious narratives, explicating the village’s formation and hierarchical connections with the regional centers. In this way, the social history of this region, based on market structure (Skinner 1964), political administration, and “religious sphere theory” (M. Lin 1986), is recast in these narratives as a history of diplomatic relations between the deities. This style of narration, moreover, starts from the inside (i.e., the local place and people) and extends outwards.

The Temple of Eastern Prosperity (Donglonggong): The Establishment of the Village as a Unique Place (1949–1970)

In this period, it is said that a new deity, Wen Wangye of Donglonggong in Pingdong county, came to assist Li Wangye in cultivating Sanliaowan. When Ci'angong became dilapidated, the local people built a new temple and named it also as Donglonggong (the temple of Eastern Prosperity), in order to commemorate Wen Wangye's accomplishments in Sanliaowan.

The Arrival of a New Deity

As to how Wen Wangye came to Sanliaowan, the villagers and some historical records offer similar explanations. It is said that during the late Japanese period, cholera and malaria were widespread in the village. When the villagers asked Li Wangye for help, he suggested they set up a new branch statue of himself. However, on the day when it was time for "opening the vision" (*kaiguan*) of the statue, its spirit, possessing a spirit medium, claimed that he was not Li Wangye at all, but Wen Wangye from Donglonggong in Pingdong, and that he had come to help in building a new temple.

How did Li Wangye react to the sudden appearance of Wen Wangye? As a spirit medium interpreter explained:

Li Wangye asked who he was. Wen Wangye said, "I'm not here to make trouble for you: we are brothers by blood." Of course Li Wangye asked for proof, so Wen Wangye told everyone present about their original home in mainland China, their family condition, and even about the position of the flag pole in front of their house that had been knocked over in a typhoon. Every detail he mentioned was correct. Everyone at the scene was dumbfounded. However, the question remained unresolved. Then one day when Li Wangye was about to make some public announcements, he mentioned in passing that he would not recognize Wen Wangye as his brother, owing to the different surnames. He even filed a lawsuit against Wen Wangye in Dongyuedian, a famous temple of the master of the Underworld in Tainan, to investigate him. However, the denouement was a little surprising, because it turned out that Li Wangye and Wen Wangye were indeed blood brothers. They had been separated because of a flood when they were still infants. During the deluge, Li Wangye was carried by his mother on her back, whereas Wen Wangye was placed in a basket, which was washed away by the flood. The baby was saved by the Wen family, so naturally he was adopted as their son. (Chu and Yang 2004:96)

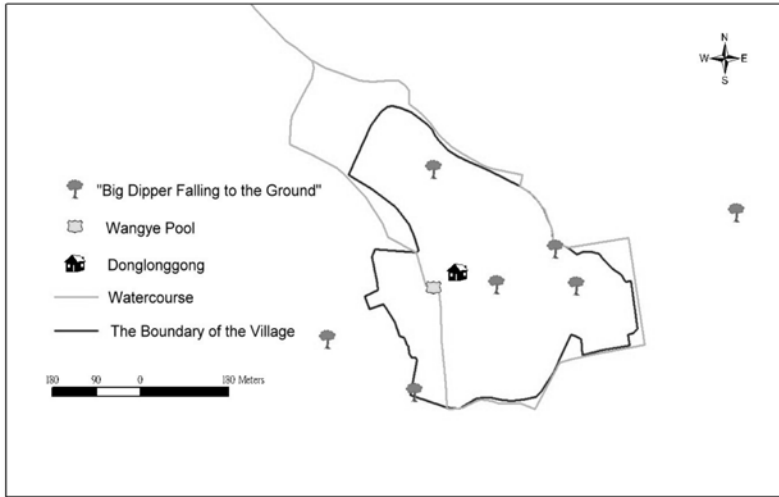
This story explains the brotherhood between Li Wangye and Wen Wangye. Although Wen Wangye was not an entirely unknown deity, his appearance was, after all, rather abrupt. In fact, villagers were of the opinion that since Wen Wangye had come from afar, he needed to prove himself by some achievements (*shiji*), so that people would believe he was doing good deeds. The most commonly-mentioned accomplishment of Wen Wangye is his geomantic reshaping of Sanliaowan.

The Geomantic Reformations of the Local Place

Upon his arrival, Wen Wangye immediately regulated Sanliaowan's watercourse, and drove its diverse flows into smooth convergence. A watercourse (*shuilu*) is a drainage system designed for all kinds of buildings and physical environments. Not only does it have a hygienic function, it also has pervasive connotations of *fengshui*.³ A sedately flowing watercourse that encircles the village is regarded as being able to bring prosperity to the inhabitants, and thus the well-being of the entire village depends on it. However, the consistent orientation of Sanliaowan's water flows was devastated during land reallocation in the 1970s, in which new drainage systems were separately constructed in each area; these disrupted the original watercourse. This was a worry for the villagers. Later on, again with Wen Wangye's assistance, the new watercourse was reconstructed and re-regulated. Now its branches converge at the north-western water gate of the village before flowing into the sea, as fig. 2 shows. In fact, the watercourse construction and regulation by the deities were seen as achievements so important that they were recorded in detail in the locally compiled Donglonggong Memorabilia (Liu 2002).

In addition to improving the watercourse, the other deed of Wen Wangye that is often mentioned is his setting up of seven mounds in the village, referred to as "Big Dipper falling to the ground" (*qixing zhuidi*). On the top of each mound are banyan trees, at the roots of which are buried "Big Dipper vessels" and other talismans. The Big Dipper constellation is believed to have the power to ward off evil spirits, so the mounds are usually located at the conjunction of village paths or around the village boundary to safeguard it (fig. 2). In addition, they are thought to ensure the well-being of the village. In 1982, Wen Wangye instructed the villagers to revamp the mound at the eastern entrance to the village, and renamed it as "Mt. Longevity" (*shoushan*), representing support for the lives of all the village's inhabitants.

Figure 2. Sanliaowan after the Wangyes' geomantic reformations



Thus we see how Wen Wangye manifested his magic power (*ling*) throughout the locality of Sanliaowan.⁴ As a result of his regulation of the watercourse and the erection of Big Dipper mounds, Sanliaowan was transformed, and emerged as a place with its own specific and unique geomantic power.

Apart from these geomantic reformations, Wen Wangye was also important as a protector of social order. Almost every villager narrated to me with great vividness about Wen Wangye's expertise in apprehending criminals:

He was skillful at catching thieves. Holding the sword of Big Dipper in his hand and walking back and forth, [the spirit medium] suddenly impaled a hen during a village ritual, roaring: "How dare you make a sacrifice with a stolen offering!" The thief's face immediately turned scarlet with shame! At that time, when cholera and malaria were rife, we were very poor. If somebody stole crops from our farmland or hens from our yard, Wen Wangye would catch the thief, manifesting his power.

These narratives perhaps are somewhat exaggerated and mixed with the narrators' imaginations. However, they reveal that the inhabitants of Sanliaowan in this period could not make ends meet, owing to the infertile and saline soil of the village. Not only were they relatively destitute,

but also the social fabric was fragile, and theft of food supplies and live-stock was a frequent occurrence. Thus, the arrival of Wen Wangye was seen by the villagers as important to restoring order and stabilizing village life.

Deities' Participation in the Social Life of Sanliaowan

Under Wen Wangye's tutelage, Sanliaowan experienced a great improvement in its environment and social order, so villagers were able to amass capital and construct a temple to show their gratitude to the deities. The new temple, Donglonggong, completed in 1949, adopted the title of Wen Wangye's original temple in Pingdong to honor his assistance to the village. In the new temple, Wen Wangye, who arrived later but contributed greatly to the local reformation, outranked Wu Wangye of Nankunshen and Dadaogong of Xuejia and became Sanliaowan's second-ranked deity, next in prominence only to Li Wangye. Accordingly, Li Wangye, Wen Wangye, Wu Wangye and Dadaogong came to be the four deities worshipped at the temple. Although Li Wangye is regarded in this hierarchy as the primary deity and Wen Wangye the auxiliary, their power is not clearly distinguished by the local people. They usually work together and often even employ the same spirit medium.

The fact that Wen Wangye outranks the two regional deities, Wu Wangye and Dadaogong, is worth examining further, particularly in relation to the development of local society in this period. Shi, a historical geographer, points out that Taiwanese local societies with definite territorial identities came into being since the mid-Japanese period through a series of colonial policies, such as setting up local administrative divisions, police stations, and self-defense militias (*baojia*) for the purpose of efficient administration (Shi 2001). Sanliaowan as an administrative unit was stabilized around 1920, and a police station was established nearby to maintain security and to coordinate the local self-governing units. We can say that these political institutions gradually reinforced the territorial identity of Sanliaowan, and also made it comparatively different from its earlier stage when its identity had a strong regional imprint.

In the local people's depiction, we see a corresponding narration, but the emphasis is on how the deities at this stage intimately embedded themselves into the lives of the local people. Villagers describe how

each household prepared offerings for various rituals and carried them to the temple. Every family gladly paid their household member tax (*ding-kouqian*), NT\$100 per person for every dependent. It is said that people even made excess payments in view of the belief that paying more tax would induce female fertility. Li Wangye's birth anniversary was an exciting annual event, jubilantly celebrated. Four or five days before Li Wangye's birthday, the village women would go to the temple and help with kitchen chores, cleaning up tables and preparing for the ceremony. A villager recalled:

I have always considered Donglonggong to be the center of our village. When we were little, immediately after the Chinese New Year we all began to look forward to Li Wangye's birth anniversary on the fifteenth of April, and Pudu Rite on the second of July. As the birthday approached, my mother would give me an allowance of twenty cents instead of the ten cents I'd get on ordinary days. She wouldn't get angry if I asked for more on that occasion. When I was older, those of us who worked outside the village would always keenly anticipate the advent of Li Wangye's birthday, when all village natives working in different places would come back for a reunion. (Chu and Yang 2004: 106-7)

It is obvious that Li Wangye's ceremonial occasion is not only a significant childhood reminiscence for the locals, and a fond remembrance of their hometown after they left the village, but also a festival for the villagers' reunion as well.

In addition to holding religious activities, Donglonggong also provides scholarships for the local elementary and junior high schools, and subsidizes classroom construction and pupils' lunches in schools. The temple considers these acts a responsibility rather than charity, because the school "is where our children study."

Li Wangye and Wen Wangye also participate intimately in every villager's crucial moments of life. Villagers say that they consult their deities to choose an auspicious time for marriages; on the occasion of household feasts, their god icons must also be invited home. New members of the community, such as daughters-in-law or infants, are required to go to worship at the temple and show themselves to the Wangyes. They also vividly talk about how their deities perform magic to cure their illnesses. One feels a deep intertwining between religion and their lives at these crucial times.

In short, we can say that the religious narratives of this period

focused on how the village became a place with its own unique power under the deities' guardianship, and on how the deities embedded themselves into the social life of the village and maintained order. We can say this is the result of the colonial state implementing a series of policies and creating institutions, as most historical research argues. It is, however, formulated by the local narratives as being due to the deities' extraordinary achievements. The narrative form puts more emphasis on the primacy of ideas of place and the relationship between the deity and the local people than in the previous stage. The focus, moreover, has switched from the larger region to the village itself and its people.

The Rise of a Translocal Deity: Placing the Village within Taiwan and Beyond (1970–)

With the gradual transformation of Taiwan into an industrialized society in the 1970s, a large number of Sanliaowan villagers emigrated to seek employment in cities like Kaohsiung or Taipei. But childhood memories and personal spiritual experiences ensured that the beneficence of Li Wangye and Wen Wangye was not forgotten by most of the villagers who left their hometown. These migrants not only continued to come back and identify themselves with Donglonggong, but also took active roles in the further development of the temple. The migrants' influence on Donglonggong and its ensuing changes thus receive special attention in this period.

The Renovation of the Temple Led by the Migrants

As I mentioned in the first section, during the period of Japanese colonization, some Sanliaowan villagers had moved to cities like Kaohsiung to make a living, but the number was insignificant. Among them, Hou Wanchan was a successful case.⁵

His son recounted that Hou suffered much hardship in his youth in Sanliaowan. An uncle of his who worked for a Japanese construction factory in Kaohsiung then got him a part-time job there. Hou's outstanding performance soon earned him full-time employment. After World War II, he set up his own construction factory, undertaking military and local construction jobs, and his business started to prosper. It was said that because of his poverty in his youth, he made a pledge while leaving his hometown: "when I can eat three meals a day, I'll

return to repay Li Wangye.” Either because of this oath, or because of the sincere affection he felt toward his hometown, Hou came back to engage in temple affairs after he became wealthy.

In 1965, the spirit medium of Li Wangye announced that the old and dilapidated temple urgently needed renovation.⁶ For this project, the former Donglonggong board, composed of elders from seven surname groups, was reorganized into a new directorate. The major difference between the newly-established executive board and the previous body was the membership: the migrants assumed the leading role in the new board, of which Hou Wanchan, the most successful businessman among them, became chairman.

Apart from the chairman, another migrant, Liu Sanduan, living in a nearby town, Jiali, was also designated by the deity to hold the vice-chairmanship of the board. During the Japanese period, he had served the secretary (*shuji*) of the colonial government. Acquainted with Japanese handicraft masters from whom he had acquired the skill of making Japanese *tatami* (traditional straw mattresses), he moved to Jiali to start his own business. After 1947, he started working for the Chinese Daily News, and was responsible for gathering news from six towns in Tainan county (Liu 2002: 55). Revered by hometown villagers, familiar with bureaucratic formality, and well-connected with the government, he was chosen to execute the temple renovation. On his untimely death shortly after the completion of the project, Liu’s son, Yutang, succeeded his position as a journalist and as vice-president of the temple board. Like his father before him, Yutang possessed considerable managerial skills. His taking on responsibility for Donglonggong’s affairs — such as modernizing the temple, compiling its history, and launching commercial strategies — has exerted a tremendous influence on the development of the temple.

To understand why the leading roles in the board were taken by successful migrant entrepreneurs and well-connected literati, we have to consider how Taiwan gradually changed in this period. Urbanization and industrialization since the 1960s has moved a large number of villagers to the cities. As a result, Donglonggong was in want of public figures with sufficient communication and managerial skills to lead the temple. Hence, the main positions had to be filled by prominent migrants.

However, the local villagers still had their role in the early stage of this period. Fundraising for the temple renovation in 1965 is a case in point. It was led by Liu Sanduan to solicit contributions from successful

migrant entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, each household in the village was levied on the basis of the number of members and the amount of farmland they held. Even so, the total collection was not high. Things changed significantly during the reconstruction of Donglonggong in 1970, which took place only five years after the renovation.

Renaming of the Temple as the Hall Representing Heaven (Daitianfu)

In 1970, to the great surprise of the villagers, Li Wangye again issued instructions that the newly-renovated Donglonggong be demolished to build a completely new temple. The villagers hesitated and two meetings were held in succession to discuss the issue, but no consensus was reached. Not until the third assembly did they arrive at a preliminary general agreement. Some villagers described how in this meeting the spirit medium was possessed and announced the measurements of the future temple. He also told the villagers to “be relieved of worries, because four million dollars are already in hand” and summoned Hou Wanchan, the wealthy chairman of the temple board, to make a large contribution. In other words, right from the initial stage, Wangye had already designated the source of the temple fund: the migrant villagers. The contributor list inscribed on the temple stele confirms that the migrants were by far the major donors. Their donation finally relieved the villagers’ monetary burden.

It is said that during the reconstruction, Li Wangye again revealed himself through his medium and asked that “Yuchi Daitianfu” (lit. a decree from the Jade Emperor to build a hall representing the Heaven) be added anterior to the original temple name, Donglonggong (see fig 3).

This renaming had several implications. The status of the deities was elevated, as an elder board member explained: “Li Wangye has now become an official itinerant inspector, and has assumed guardianship over all worldly affairs on behalf of the Jade Emperor.” The vice-president of the temple, Liu Yutang, expounded further: “After its renaming, Donglonggong is no longer a provincial, small-scale temple. Now the deities have taken full supervisory responsibilities on behalf of Heaven.” In response to my question about why Li Wangye was able to act on Heaven’s behalf, he insisted that the Wangyes in their original myths had served this role.

In other words, the Wangyes of Sanliaowan have, by renaming the

Figure 3. The new temple, with “Daitianfu” inscribed on the upper plaque, and “Donglonggong” on the lower lanterns.



temple, transcended their parochial status and become deities with translocal significance. Such a transformation, as the vice-president of the temple implied, is a reinvention of the Wangye belief since in the original myths the Wangyes were official itinerant inspectors for the Jade Emperor (Katz 1987: 201, Liu 1983: 228). Undoubtedly, this development was also closely related to the fact that a great number of Donglonggong adherents were no longer geographically limited to Sanliaowan. A temple with translocal identity is certainly more easily accepted by believers island-wide and beyond.

Let us also take a closer look at the composition of the temple board. Before the renovation, it comprised elders from the seven surname groups in Sanliaowan. When construction was completed in 1979, there was an obvious change. Of the 36 board members, 19 were local villagers and 17 were migrants. When I carried out fieldwork in 2004, the board still consisted of 22 local villagers and 14 migrants. The ratio of locals to migrants has been maintained at roughly three to two by tacit agreement. The villagers are aware that they need migrants to

contribute money, whereas local board members are necessary for carrying out the work of the temple (Chu and Yang 2004: 18).

Nevertheless, the temple board members, nominated by the Wangyes through the spirit medium, do not only discharge administrative responsibilities. Designated by the deities, they assume an important symbolic status. In the past, the members were representatives of the local surname groups, denoting that the Wangyes were place-based deities. Nowadays the members are scattered in different places in Taiwan and China, and thus represent the deities' translocalness. In addition, they are either wealthy businessmen or successful people. By recruiting them into the temple board, their success in capitalist society is tactically (cf. de Certeau 1984) transformed into the power of the divinity. In other words, the temple governance in this stage provides the local society a mechanism to incorporate wider Taiwan society.

In a nutshell, the narratives of deity upgrading and temple governance illuminate a different history of this period. From the viewpoint of political economy, this period in Taiwan saw an expansion of cities and a depletion of population in rural areas owing to industrialization and urbanization. However, the appearance of translocal deities and the new temple governance rephrases this history as an era of the rural incorporation of a wider capitalism. The narrative forms of popular religion turn the migrants' success in the new economy into the power of their divinity.

Place-based Deities or All-encompassing Gods?

From the foregoing analysis, we see how the changes of deities and the temple have connected to the local people's imagination of themselves and their relations to the outside world. These changes, however, also brought in new problems, particularly because what they are incorporating now is a capitalist society. Below I shall discuss the profit-pursuing values of capitalism embodied by the spirit medium and the entrepreneurial management of the temple.

The Controversy of the Spirit Medium

As we can see from the previous sections, the role of the spirit medium was vital in the temple's development. This influential medium Hou Mingtong had already passed away when I visited Sanliawwan. Stories

about him are constantly recited. “He came to be a spirit medium as early as nineteen....It was his profession for thirty-six years....He passed away at fifty-six.” “He stuttered slightly, but could recite poetry fluently when he was possessed.” It is also said that he was very skillful in making money for the temple; for example, when invited for consultation, he would require his clients to promise, as a token of gratitude, to make a contribution of several million once they became rich, or to subsidize ceremonial performances. The literature verifies these accounts. A merchant, who returned to finance the rite of cosmic renewal in 1990, recounted as follows:

When Li Wangye came to Taipei, he told me he hoped that I could make a contribution for building the ceremonial arches in four directions for the cosmic renewal ritual. He would help me acquire wealth so that I would be able to fund the project. (Y. Huang 1992: 74)

Hou Mingtong was also famous for his great eagerness in traveling to Kaohsiung, Taipei or even eastern Taiwan to perform rituals. His daily routine started with the consultation ritual from 9 a.m. until noon in the main hall of the temple. Important cases, like planning marriages or home-moving ceremonies, would be scheduled at dawn. In the afternoon, his chauffeur would drive him to towns or cities, and he would have lunch in the car (Chu and Yang 2004: 109). On the one hand, he propagated Li Wangye’s magic power, and on the other hand he also profited personally, since every time he visited someone, he received payment for his services.

As a result of his tireless activity, not only believers, but also deity statues multiplied. As the consultations increased, deity statues were in growing demand (since they are needed for the consultations). Therefore, the number of branch statues grew sharply in a short period. There are seventeen branch statues of Li Wangye in the temple now, of which the ninth to twelfth were added in 1991, the thirteenth to fifteenth around 1994 (Liu 2002: 113), and the sixteenth and seventeenth in 2002. The number of branch statues doubled in only 11 years.

However, following this quantitative augmentation of the temple’s wealth and worshippers, confusion gradually grew among the villagers as to whether Donglonggong should become an outward-oriented profit-making institution or a village-based temple dedicated to protecting the local inhabitants’ lives. This is manifested in the controversy of the “fate-changing” rite (*gaiyun*).

It is believed that a person's bad luck can be transferred to a vicarious scarecrow by means of this rite, after which the scarecrow is taken out of the village and burned lest the evil spirit and misfortune remain in the village. Hou often practiced this rite for the people who came to Sanliaowan to consult him. However, he simplified the ritual by having the scarecrow burnt outside the rear hall of the temple. By doing so, he could take more people (and make more money, as the villagers sarcastically observed). Unfortunately, several cases of injury and death occurred at that time. Many people considered this misfortune to have been caused by the encroaching evil spirits who had not been expelled from the village. Knowing that Hou would not agree with this interpretation, villagers invited Wu Wangye of Nankunshen to Sanliaowan to seek his advice. Through Wu Wangye's intervention, the burning of the scarecrow was resumed outside the boundary of the village. The place of Sanliaowan was thus reconfirmed by the action of the local people.

This event clearly demonstrates the increasing tension between the two possible orientations of the temple: whether it should prioritize commercial profit by opening itself to the external world, or rather should remain oriented towards the people residing in the village. The same tension reappears in other aspects of the temple's management, as I shall discuss shortly.

Hou's controversial behavior resulted in increasingly negative appraisals of his role. After his death in 2001, the temple board reached an agreement in 2004 that the board members would no longer be determined by the spirit medium, who would henceforth be excluded from board membership.⁷

The Commercial Management of the Temple Affairs

With the assistance of the spirit medium and the returning migrants, the temple developed wider connections with the outside world. Several of the local inhabitants' obligations to the deities have thus changed or been annulled. First there is the household member tax (*dingkouqian*), which was cancelled around ten years ago, because the amount raised by the tax has come to be dwarfed by the temple donations. However, paying tax to the temple, as I described previously, was not only a payment per se, but also a believer's obligatory act of devotion towards deities, and carried the implication of increasing fertility for the family. The

cancellation of this tax undoubtedly had a negative effect on the close relations between individuals, households and the deities.

The ritual of “rewarding the spirit soldiers” (*shangbing*) is another example of the change in the villagers’ obligations to the gods. This ritual rewards the Wangyees’ spirit-soldiers for protecting the village.⁸ However, as more and more Sanliaowan inhabitants have started working outside the village since Taiwan became industrialized, their geographical separation and the different tempo of working life have increasingly kept villagers from participating in this ritual, which is held monthly in the afternoon according to the lunar calendar. Since the date of this rite occurs variably each month according to the solar calendar, the villagers who work in factories outside Sanliaowan find it inconvenient to return regularly to participate in it in the middle of the work day. The temple finally altered the ritual in 1998 owing to the decline in the number of participants. Earlier, every household had to bring offerings to the temple; now, there is an evening banquet for which each participant pays NT\$300. The temple board purchases offerings, conducts the worship, and has a chef cook for the attendees. A consequence of this process is that money has gradually come to replace the tangible devotion of each household, and has become an important way for people to repay the gods for their protection.

In fact, even before this, money had become a prominent issue in the entrepreneurial approaches advocated by the migrant board members. To give the most blatant example, as the number of people coming to consult Hou in the temple increased, his earnings were required to be shared with the temple. After negotiation, for each NT\$300 that he earned as his informal fee, NT\$100 went to the temple, and NT\$50 to the spirit medium interpreter. The temple has gradually come to resemble a profit-oriented business institution.

Apart from the above, a series of regulations were further enacted to standardize rules to be followed by all adherents, whether local or external. These “rationalized” regulations are usually complicated and demanding to follow. The one concerning statue-borrowing is a good example. It alone includes nine rules; the last one, about the priority for borrowing statues, is, perplexingly, further subdivided into twenty-one items. Below I list five representative ones:

1. A person who has a particular relation with the deity statue, upon approval by Donglonggong, is granted a maximum lease of *three days*.

2. A temple having a particular association with Donglonggong which wishes to find an auspicious location for building a temple is granted a lease of *two days* (providing that an official document is attached with the application).
3. Marriage ceremony of a son (a maximum of *one day*).
4. Funeral (a maximum of *half a day*).
5. Marriage ceremony of a daughter (a maximum of *three hours*).

(Liu 2002:162–3, italics mine)

Furthermore, there are three rules of penalty to deal with delays:

1. In case of a late return, a penalty of NT\$3,000 will be charged *per hour*.
2. A late return results in a suspension of *one year*.
3. Reminder slips indicating the *borrowing time* and penalties for late return will be given out when the statue is borrowed.

(Liu 2002: 147, italics mine)

All these regulations were formulated to manage the increasing use of the deity statues by non-Sanliaowan people. However, these complex and minutely calculated rules, including the different priorities, durations of use and penalties for delayed return of the statues, served only to distance the people of Sanliaowan from their deities. As a villager wittily remarked to me:

These rules have now become laws. You cannot find fault with them. But it was another story in my childhood. When I was small, if a kid got a stomach ache, my mother would ask us to bring the deity statue from her native neighborhood for practicing “fright-removing” rites (*shoujing*). We kids were all eager to go and get the deity statue because it was a great honor! Once while bringing home the statue, I suddenly had the urge to take a leak. Holding the deity in my hand, I relieved myself on the side of the road. Can you imagine such conduct now!

What he referred to is the dizzying set of temple regulations. He thoughtfully commented: “It was natural to do all these things in the past, and deities were a part of our everyday life, but it’s all different now.” Indeed, using precise clock-times, as in capitalistic societies (Thompson 1993 [1967]: 394), to regulate the time the villagers can keep the statue, is essentially to separate religion from their daily lives.

In sum, in the process of the temple's ambitious bid to extend the deities' sovereignty into the wider society after the 1970s, the temple has also been penetrated by capitalist values. Many ritual practices and temple activities have gradually become alienated from the local social context and turned to the pursuit of profits. This is why we see another kind of local religious narrative appearing, intending to safeguard the place of Sanliaowan, and cherishing the people's affectionate relationship with the deities. The contradictions involved have not yet been resolved.

Closing Remarks

This article aims to discuss how anthropology can inform a new perspective on local history. Ethnographical fieldwork gives us an opportunity to interact with people and to probe how they understand the world. It thus offers us a chance to reflect on whether the commonly used macro political-economic framework is the only way to comprehend the past and present.

Through long-term and in-depth research in a village in Taiwan, I have shown an alternative model of local history based on popular religion. I have shown how religious narratives and the revelations of spirit mediums are employed by the local people to rework the social histories of their region and the wider society. The result is a locally appropriated and modified (Szonyi 1997: 129), or mistranslated (Mueggler 2001: 9) version of the macro or linear history. At first glance, these narratives may resemble merely idle or insubstantial stories heard on the street. However, they are in fact ways of constructing local identity and conveying people's agency (c.f. Anagnost 1997; Rofel 1999), as the narrative forms, based on ideas of place and local social relations, clearly demonstrate.

Furthermore, the religious narratives that constitute local identity do not have the connotation of "gentrification" as Siu observed in the Chrysanthemum ritual in Xiaolan (Siu 1990), or in other symbolic practices in the Pearl River Delta (Faure and Siu 1995). Instead, the narrative forms denote a strong sense of identification with the local place and its people, who do not subsume themselves into the larger Chinese polity (Faure and Siu 1995; Watson 1985). Indeed, they intend to go even further: they seek to incorporate the wider society within themselves.

My research in rural Taiwan also highlights a close connection with the study of temple restoration and construction in China. In the recent literature on Chinese religious revitalization, temple construction has been a much-discussed issue. It is thought of as recreating traditional organizations (Chau 2005; Eng and Lin 2002) and regional or translocal networks (Dean 1993; Fisher 2008), or as a contest between new agents and associations (Ashiwa and Wank 2006). Another approach sees temple reconstruction as representing the resurgence of community, local pride, and self-identity (Flower 2004; Flower and Leonard 1998; Jing 1996). In addition, construction and other temple activities are regarded as ways for local people to negotiate with the state or globalization (Yang 2000, 2004; Yang and Tamney 2005). All of the above ways of looking at temple construction in China find clear manifestation in the different historical stages of Sanliaowan. Temple construction in the earliest stage of Sanliaowan defined its network in the coastal region, established its local identity in the second stage, and was a means of negotiating with the wider industrialized Taiwan in the third. However, by analyzing the rich religious narratives, spirit mediums' revelations and temple governance of Sanliaowan, this article further reveals a hidden but distinctive local realization of historical process.

The historical development of religion in Sanliaowan, furthermore, demonstrates the need to rethink whether Wolf's hierarchical interpretation of Chinese religion (1974) might apply only to a particular stage in history. In his model, village deities are like local officials, situated at the bottom of the bureaucratic framework. The historical analysis of this article, however, shows how religion in Sanliaowan in the early cultivation period was implicated with larger regions than the village itself, but gradually came to acquire more strongly local connotations of place-centeredness since the late Japanese period. This latter quality has been contested since the 1970s by the emergence of translocal encompassing deities, the commercial management of the temple (Chang 2002; Nadeu and Chang 2003; Jordan 1994; Pas 2003; Sangren 1987; Weller 2000), and the rigorous time-space discipline enforced by Sanliaowan migrants. The tug-of-war between place-centeredness and translocalization still continues, and the attendant contradictions have not yet been resolved. The variety and complexity of the connections and contradictions between the local and the outside show the need to go beyond the old discussions about open and closed communities (Skinner 1971).

Glossary

Baishuihu	白水湖	Shuilu	水路
Baojia	保甲	Shuji	書記
Beimen	北門	Tainan	台南
Bu ping'an	不平安	Taiwan baotu	台灣堡圖
Chi Wangye	池王爺	Taiwanfu Yutu	台灣府輿圖纂要
Ci'angong	慈安宮	Zuanyao	
Da Wangye	大王爺	Tian Yuanshuai	田元帥
Dadaogong	大道公	Wangye	王爺
Daitianfu	代天府	Wen Wangye	溫王爺
Daxianhu	大仙湖	Wu Wangye	吳王爺
Dingkouqian	丁口錢	Xu	許
Donglonggong	東隆宮	Xuejia	學甲
Dongyuedian	東嶽殿	Xuejia shisan	學甲十三庄
Gaiyun	改運	zhuang	
Hou	侯	Yenfen didai	鹽份地帶
Jiali	佳里	Yuchi Daitianfu	玉敕代天府
Jiangjun	將軍	Zeng	曾
Jiao	醮	Zhuangzhu	庄主
Kaiguan	開光		
Kaohsiung	高雄		
Li Wangye	李王爺		
Ling	靈		
Nankunshen	南鯤鯓		
Pingdong	屏東		
Pudu	普渡		
Qixingjian	七星劍		
Qixing zhuidi	七星墜地		
Sanliaowan	三寮灣		
Shangbing	賞兵		
Shiji	事蹟		
Shoujing	收驚		
Shoushan	壽山		

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Notes

1. The period of Japanese colonization was from 1895–1945.
2. More discussion on how deities designed the watercourse system are in the next section.
3. For more discussion of watercourses and dwellings, see Feuchtwang (2002: 175–189).
4. On how deities demonstrate their power in the places in which they reside, see also Dell’orto (2002).
5. Some of the villagers’ names are changed to protect their privacy.
6. The role of the spirit medium will be discussed in the section on “the controversy of the spirit medium.”
7. See Jordan and Overmyer for a similar case (1986: 171). However, most temple boards in Taiwan nowadays do not use divination to choose members but elect them.
8. See Jordan (1972: 50–1) and my research (2008) for more discussion of the spirit-soldiers.

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