The Geopolitics of Religious Performance in Twenty-First Century Taiwan

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Taiwan’s status began to evolve from merely a geographical area into a geopolitical entity in the seventeenth century, when the island came under Dutch colonial control and was thus incorporated into regional and global geopolitics. However, Taiwan's position has always been marginal: on the periphery of the Chinese and then the Japanese empires, and now on the edges of the USA's current sphere of influence. This chapter examines the issues around how marginal Taiwan has been represented culturally and symbolically in the twenty-first century’s new geopolitical climate. It explores the twin themes of ‘religion and politics; religion and nationalism’ in the Taiwanisation movement, focusing on how the god Nazha represents the struggle of Taiwanese identity in an attempt to open new political spaces for itself in the international world.

Taiwan’s Liminality: Neither a State nor a Nation-State

This geopolitical marginality has intensified in recent years, with the rise of China as a global superpower. ‘Marginality’ has a negative connotation, and Corcuff has suggested a more positive and creative perspective by using the term ‘liminality’. [1] The concept of ‘liminality’ was first articulated by a French anthropologist, Arnold Van Gennep, who defined rituals as ‘rites of passage’ made up of three stages—separation, liminality and incorporation—with liminality referring to ‘an in-between period during which an individual is in transition between a state of life that (s)he has not yet fully left, and a new stage into which (s)he has not fully entered’. [2] Corcuff’s application of the concept of liminality to the sociological study of Taiwan’s geopolitics and international relations requires analytical attention be directed to Taiwan’s temporal isolation in a Cold War bubble and also the spatial connectivities at play in a given time frame.

Taiwan is indeed in a state of liminality, being neither a state nor a non-state. Between 1947 and 1949, the then-ruling government in China—the Kuomingtang (KMT, Chinese Nationalist Party)—retreated to Taiwan following the defeat of its forces on Mainland China at the end of the civil war with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The decision to give Taiwan to the KMT had been made by the Allies at the Cairo Conference of 1943, on the condition that the three nations (the Republic of China, the US and the UK) would fight alongside one another until Japan’s surrender. However, although the Treaty of San Francisco, which Japan signed in 1951, stated that Japan renounced all right, title and claim to Formosa and the Pescadores, it did not specify what Taiwan’s legal status actually was. Taiwan’s status remained liminal: for the CCP’s newly founded People’s Republic of China, Taiwan was a place still to be brought under its control, while the KMT continued to assert its Republic of China was the sole legitimate government of all China. The KMT regarded itself as in temporary exile on Taiwan, and the island was imagined as a mere province of an imagined territory of China that was even larger than that of the PRC; it even included Outer Mongolia, which the PRC had recognised as independent in 1949. [3]

The KMT at first enjoyed international recognition but, with the Sino-Soviet split in the late 1960s, ideological opposition to communism in the West lost ground to pragmatic political calculation. The US, along with many other Western countries, used relations with China strategically against the Soviet Union. The CCP’s PRC began to replace the KMT’s ROC as the internationally recognised government of China. In 1971, the ROC lost its seat...
in the General Assembly of the Security Council of the United Nations, and this was followed by the loss of diplomatic recognition by the UK in 1972 and by the USA in 1979. [4] The ROC/Taiwan has since become even more politically isolated, with the PRC undergoing a process of neo-liberal capitalist transition from the 1980s and increasing its interaction with the rest of the world from the 1990s. It is indeed from such a socio-economic perspective, as Sung-sheng Chang points out, that ‘greater penetration of global capitalism in the post-Cold War era has hiked the stakes of symbolic wars … these factors have come increasingly to determine the condition of possibility for cultura...
countries. Unfortunately, after a week, Taiwan’s national flag was removed at the PRC’s insistence and replaced by the Chinese Taipei Olympic flag.[9] However, together with campaigners, Wu’s performance of the unruly Nazha brought Taiwan’s national flag back to Regent Street, albeit in a temporary action.

Photos of Wu’s performance dancing in a Nazha body puppet decked out with ROC national flags while on his global tour have been posted on social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube. The images show him surrounded by groups of local people of different cultural backgrounds in various foreign cities, towns and villages. According to an article posted to the website Taiwan Insights, which is run by the Press Division of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) in San Francisco, Wu explained that ‘people from many parts of the world have no idea what Taiwan is, and therefore he chose this way to present Taiwan’. He also said that ‘those local residents and international tourists in each country would never have dreamt of meeting the Third Prince god Nazha from Taiwan during their life journey’. [10] According to a comment posted under the story:

Like many in Taiwan, Wu feels frustrated with the island’s diplomatic isolation; however, his creative thinking has helped the national flag to be seen on the international arena once again. Nazha the Third Prince, a mythical teenage hero, represents a symbol of youth, bravery, agility and freedom from conventional bondage, a perfect mascot for grassroots diplomacy engaged by Wu.[11]

It is understandable that young people desire and seek global recognition for their country, Taiwan. In the age of social media, the younger generation expects equal access to communication and equal visibility. However, Taiwan’s rights to visibility and to recognition in international relations have been restricted. At the same time, young Taiwanese individually have global civic rights and exercise their freedom to travel, to demonstrate and to communicate with other global citizens, as well as use social media. The global tour of the techno Nazha performance was thus conducted in a spirit of civic freedom and mobility, elaborating and extending the capabilities of communication, visibility and connection—young actors hoped that global citizens even living at a distance could ‘see’ and ‘touch’ Taiwan as represented by the Techno Nazha and thus give recognition to the existence of Taiwan.

The development of the Nazha tour, both nationally and internationally, has created significant opportunities to mark the presence of Taiwan (as symbolised by the national flag) more prominently in the international world and thus to express Taiwan’s right to visibility; by the end of 2013 the number of countries visited by Wu was greater than the number exposed to Taiwanese diplomacy. In addition, videos of the Techno Nazha performance have attracted the attention of hundreds of thousands of internet users. Want China Times reported that Chien-Heng Wu ‘has earned himself a reputation as a cultural ambassador for Taiwan, as he always dances with the ROC flag’.[12]

Concluding Remarks: Religious Actor and International Recognition

The increasing global nature of Nazha performance tours has intensified the reach of Nazha as a new vehicle for Taiwan’s identity. If we want to understand this new form of Taiwanisation, we need to understand the desire for independence and subjectivity as manifested in the myth of Nazha and the solution of his conflict with his father. The mythology of Nazha has been an important constitutive element of the Chinese family system within which a Chinese subjectivity has traditionally been produced.[13] It has always been an issue in the Chinese family, in which fathers have strong patriarchal authority: is a Chinese son to be his own agent or subject, or the instrument or object of his father? The Nazha story embodies the struggle of a young Chinese man to produce and define his own subjectivity while facing his father’s authority.

By approaching geopolitics from a perspective of liminality, I have shown that Taiwan’s relation to China is not, or not only and not always, that of a periphery dominated by a centre, and further I have also demonstrated how Taiwan has been turned into a site invested in by human cultural and social projects via the vehicle of religion in a twenty-first century context of geopolitical flows. Via the case study of Techno Nazha performances we see that in Taiwan, identity does not mean a fixed or stable geopolitical identity but rather a plurality of identities formed through symbolic struggle. Nazha’s attempt to establish his autonomy is drawn as analogous with Taiwan’s
sovereignty in relation to China. The unruly god Nazha is thus identified as unruly Taiwan, and Nazha’s conflict with his father is an analogy of the conflict of Taiwan with its ‘fatherland’, China. The Nazha performances suggest that the Taiwanese are simply not interested in voluntary unification with China; instead they are interested in a symbolic exploration of a conflict between Taiwan and China, which they have come to see as inevitable. The performance of Nazha revives local cultural knowledge at a time when all knowledge seem inadequate in the face of complex global problems. Through a local symbol of resistance, Taiwanese people can feel themselves capable of ‘resisting’ Chinese domination: a parallel with Nazha’s resistance to his father’s authority. The problem is not conflict and resistance as such, but rather how to ensure that the energies of conflict and resistance do not spill out into actual violence but are constructively contained and directed towards the production of symbolic capital in the post-Cold War era’s culture wars.

Notes


About the author:

Fang-long Shih is a former Co-Director of Taiwan Research Programme and a Research Fellow at the London School of Economics Asia Research Programme. She has published on religion and the state in Taiwan, focusing in particular on state-led guidelines in the areas of ritual and tourism that have direct and indirect impact upon popular religious practices. She has further published on the so-called ‘Red Tide’ anti-corruption protest,
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Written by Fang-long Shih

focusing on the socio-cultural significance of the colour red. Her work considers questions of translation, context and location in the writing and re-writing of religion in Taiwan. She is currently writing a chapter on ‘Feminisms and Religions’ for the New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion, and her current research interest is on religious practice in relation to environmental discourse.