Paying homage to the ‘Heavenly Mother’: Cultural-geopolitics of the Mazu pilgrimage and its implications on rapprochement between China and Taiwan

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1. Introduction: paying homage to the ‘Heavenly Mother’

The ambiguous political status of Taiwan and its equivocal relationship with China has sustained scholarly inquiries since 1949. However, research on China-Taiwan relations has often focused on macro-political or state-level analyses (see, for example, Baldacchino and Tsai, 2014 for a similar critique). In this paper, I seek to go beyond the ‘state’ in my analysis of rapprochement between China and Taiwan. Rapprochement is a process experienced at the personal level in the everyday geo-politics of cross-strait relations. Rather than state-level politics, I focus on micro-episodes of people-to-people interactions and performance of identities in pilgrimage spaces. Yet, such personal practices of identity negotiation are never totally detached from macro-political events, and the often assumed ‘distant considerations of statecraft and international diplomacy’ (Newman, 2011: 37) are very much part of the everyday. More specifically, and in contributing to the expanding debates about the role of non-state actors in political geography, I argue that religion plays a part in the rapprochement between China and Taiwan, and that such relations may be analysed not only at the level of the state, but also the temple organisations and the individual.

The cultural proximity of people from Fujian province in China and those in Taiwan (due to diasporic linkages) means that religion is a common social denominator for most. Their common belief in the cult of Mazu or Tianshang Shengmu (the Heavenly Mother) in Putian, China, has been a significant platform to further our understanding of how religion can play a part in the rapprochement between China and Taiwan. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this paper goes beyond the conventional state-level analysis to discuss interactions and encounters forged at the levels of the temple organisations and the individual. It utilises Victor Turner’s concept of ‘communitas’ to understand how spiritual spaces are being performed through the pilgrimage rather than already existing before the pilgrimage. Importantly, the Mazu pilgrimage-tour is conceptualised not as a tourism product, but as both a social activity and a socialising one, producing opportunities for different forms of interactions between the Chinese and Taiwanese devotees. These ‘interactions along the side’ as opposed to state-level diplomatic exchanges offer insights into the ‘more-than-state’ and ‘more-than-human’ relationships that bind/divide devotees on both sides of the Taiwan Strait.
and Strathern, 2009; Hatfield, 2010; Lin, 2014). These studies are generally dominated by anthropologists and although they are important contributions in their own right, pilgrimage is usually treated as a tool or means by which certain societal ideals are achieved. For example, Lin (2014) looks at how Mazu pilgrimage was being utilised by devotees on Taiwan’s Mazu Island as a social imaginary to reconfigure their economic and social conditions. She argues that recent large-scale pilgrimages performed by the islanders were aimed to realign them ‘into the southeast neoliberal zone of China’, and to pave ‘a way for them to speculate on the possibility of becoming a mediator between China and Taiwan’ (Lin, 2014, p. 134). In other words, there is an emphasis on what pilgrims do with the pilgrimage, rather than an exploration into what the pilgrimage does. Furthermore, as Holloway (2006: 182) argues, the geography of religion has hitherto focused mainly on the ‘construction and effects of religious-spiritual space’ rather than on the production of such spaces (although see Kong, 1992; Martin and Kryst, 1998; Game, 2001). In other words, it is very often assumed that spiritual spaces were there before the pilgrimage rather than being performed through the pilgrimage. Therefore, I seek to adopt a perspective that understands pilgrimage as an embodied experience and a performance (Holloway, 2006; Laliberté, 2011) of a plurality of identities, and to examine pilgrims’ behaviour and subjectivities as revealed through personal stories. I am also interested in how people’s participation in such a shared religious event influences their perceptions of cross-strait relations and their counterparts across the Strait.

For most Mazu devotees, a pilgrimage is often also a leisure activity in itself. A trip to the ancestral temple is never complete without stopovers at scenic and shopping spots. It is no wonder that studies on the Mazu cult and tourism between China and Taiwan tend to treat such religious pilgrimage as a tourist product, focusing their analyses mainly on economic aspects of supply and demand (see for example, Guo et al., 2006). By situating the Mazu pilgrimage in the cultural-geopolitical context of rapprochement tourism, the pilgrimage-tour is conceptualised not as a tourist product, but as religious life that produces platforms for interaction and possesses the power to move people (Olaveson, 2001). As a form of rapprochement tourism, the pilgrimage-tour is both a social activity and a socialising one. Hence, the Mazu cult is seen as a potential force in creating alternative forms of communities between the Chinese and the Taiwanese devotees.

The rest of the paper is divided into six sections. The following section reviews the existing literature pertaining to tourism across (former) borders of conflict especially in its rapprochement orientation. This is followed by a discussion of methods employed, and a brief background on how the Mazu cult started, and why the various Mazu centres in Taiwan organise pilgrimages to the ancestral temple on Meizhou Island (China). The cultural-geopolitics of the Mazu pilgrimage will then be interrogated in the ensuing two sessions, before the paper concludes with some closing thoughts on its contribution to existing debates and potential for future studies.

2. Tourism across (former) borders of conflict

Tourism’s potential role as a vehicle for peace has been explored by many (see D’Amore, 1988; Jafari, 1989; Richter, 1994). In terms of re-establishing ties between partitioned states, studies have demonstrated that rapprochement tourism could well be the forerunner for peace making. For instance, in the Asian context, Butler and Mao (1996) observe that the ‘amount and type of travel’ between partitioned states can reflect and influence the development of relationships between them. Also, Kim and Crompton (1990) explore the role of tourism in reducing tension and see its potential in unifying North and South Korea, while Zhang (1993) argues that tourism exchanges between China and Taiwan ‘help promote mutual understanding, clear up misunderstandings and strengthen unity ... and may further be beneficial to peace in the Asian and Pacific region as well as world-wide’ (p. 229). In recent years, there has been an emerging interest in research regarding battlefield tourism and its promotion of peace between enemies, both past and present. For example, studies by Timothy et al. (2004), Guo et al. (2006) and Cho (2007) explore the possibilities of reconciliation between belligerents like China and Taiwan, and North and South Korea.

There are, however, sceptics about tourism’s role as a peace mediator. Empirical studies on visits made by Israeli students to Egypt (Milman et al., 1990), US students to the former Soviet Union (Pizam et al., 1991), and Greek students to Turkey (Anastasopoulous, 1992) all point to tourism’s limited capacity in improving the guests’ perceptions of the host communities. Furthermore, Kim and Prideaux (2003) acknowledge that tourism may not necessarily promote people-to-people interaction and could merely serve as a political tool of the government. They argue that ‘tourism ... is a consequence of a political process, not the genesis of the process’ (Kim and Prideaux, 2003: 683). This is echoed by Yu (1997) who argues that travel between mainland China and Taiwan is sensitive to the shifting cross-strait relations. In this sense, tourism is seen as a passive outcome of rapprochement rather than an active agent bringing about closer ties between people. In Kim and Prideaux’s example of tourism at Mt. Gumgang in North Korea, they report that South Korean tourists have practically no contact with the North Koreans as they are completely isolated by fences and armed guards. Therefore, Kim and Prideaux dispute Kim and Crompton’s (1990) theorisation that tourism is a good platform to foster people-to-people diplomacy and an eventual reunification of North and South Korea. In fact, the former are sceptical about the usage of tourism revenue by the North Koreans, fearing that ‘tourism may be the vehicle for destroying peace’ (Kim and Prideaux, 2003: 684) as monetary gains from tourism are used by the North to acquire weapons that threaten South Korea’s national security. Indeed, tourism is inherently (geo)political.

Three observations can be made at this juncture. First, studies on post-conflict tourism exchanges tend to adopt a state-centric approach and see tourism as a panacea for peace (or the lack of it), without interrogating the practices of rapprochement that constitute the tourism process. Tourists are reduced to percentages; they become pawns of politicians and are portrayed as passive ‘flows’ representing ‘peaceful relations’ rather than active agents participating in the rapprochement process. Moreover, an increase in the number of tourists travelling across the Taiwan Strait does not necessarily equate to an improvement in relationship or understanding between the Chinese and Taiwanese people (Zhang, 2013). Rather, more critical analyses are needed to understand the nuances of micro-political events and the various practices engaged by tourists and locals as they participate in the rapprochement process. The Mazu pilgrimage offers such an analytical platform.

Second, writings on rapprochement tourism often assume the ‘universal tourist’ and are more interested in tourist numbers than unravelling the critical geopolitics of tourists’ subjectivities. As such, there is a need to qualify what we mean by ‘the Chinese/Taiwanese devotees/pilgrims’. They are of course not homogeneous groups of people, but are characterised by rich cultural entanglements in, between and across two political entities. They have relatives, business partners, friends, etc. residing across the border. These various relationships add layers of complexities to the notion of ‘the pilgrim’. Instead of a ‘peace theory’, we need a more ‘grounded’ approach to pilgrimage/rapprochement tourism that moves beyond the universal pilgrim subject and experience to recognise pilgrim ‘subjectivities and performances’ (Franklin, 2007). Instead of seeing pilgrim-tourists as numbers in an arithmetic
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