

KUO-YAN WANG

INVITATION TO A DEITY'S CELEBRATION:
HOW SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCES PARTICIPATION
IN THE ACTIVITIES OF CHINESE FOLK TEMPLES

Kuo-Yan Wang

CAIC, Dhurakij Pundit University, Bangkok, Thailand.

Email: philipwang1688@gmail.com

Abstract: Social media has been widely applied by major religions throughout the world to enhance cohesion among believers. Although a considerable amount of research has focused on the effect of social media on the beliefs of Christianity and Islam, East Asian religions have seldom been featured in current research. This study, therefore, took a representative sample of individuals participating in the celebration of the festival of the goddess Mazu and measured their attitudes towards and perceptions of social media's influence on folk religion. I also explored how social media stimulates transformation in Chinese folk religion, its influence on the preservation of cultural values, and the cross-industry alliance between folk temples and local businesses. Moreover, this study proposes suggestions for further research.

Key Words: Taoism, Folk belief, Social media, Mazu, Cross promotion.

Introduction

Mass media provides a timely platform linking religious leaders and followers. The vast bulk of research published on the topic of media and religion therefore has focused on the acceleration of understanding and recognition of religious groups achieved through their utilization of media; for example, through news communications, and missionary programs and religious-themed shows on television and radio¹. Religion has not been left untouched by the rapid and diverse changes proliferated by the growth of the internet. As Hackett² noted, current religious practices are being facilitated by “computer-mediated communication” to the point where cyberspace could be considered a significant ritual location, as well as a tool or source of inspiration for offline religious devotions. The instant availability of information and the extended possibilities for knowledge exchange offered by the internet have led to a constantly evolving relationship between religion and the media. Campbell³ indicated that a variety of functions operates through the internet to contribute to consolidating religious interaction and engagement in ritual practices; the introduction of social media has further resulted in religious participants sharing personal spiritual experiences.

Social media, accessed through blogs, live chat software, photo- and video-sharing sites, social networks, and mobile phones with web access, connects users by instantly transmitting messages between them⁴. Religious organizations were initially hesitant to use information technology as a communication channel. Many were concerned that the application of social media could have adverse effects on religious integrity⁵. However, attitudes have recently begun to shift, as the world's major religions gradually move towards greater acceptance of social media and its potential to contribute to the flourishing of religious practice. According to Armfield and Holbert⁶, church leaders have observed that as religious followers increased utilization of the internet for secular reasons, they also began to search for religious doctrines online.

Significant amounts of time, money, and thought are invested in the development of the websites that represent institutional religions. The manner in which religious groups structure their websites directly influences the type of communication and interaction that can occur⁷. Since the pervasiveness of social media makes integration between religion and social media sites to some degree inevitable, Helland⁸ urged religious leaders to use these channels to openly embrace current and potential congregation members. To keep current members engaged and attract new members to the organization, it is important to encourage conversation between the organization's leaders and its members, and to

demonstrate the desire and willingness to reach out to interested individuals. These conversations can take place offline in a traditional worship space or online at a religious organization's website.

The use of social media by the Catholic Church has been discussed within their own traditional media: in the Catholic Press Association of the United States & Canada⁹, Pope Benedictus XVI is quoted as saying that "search engines and social networks have become the starting point of communication for many people who are seeking advice, ideas, information and answers". In 2012, Pope Benedictus XVI used a variety of media platforms to launch a program underlining the importance of silence and meditation¹⁰. Subsequently, in a message issued before the announcement of the papal resignation, Pope Benedictus XVI stated that social networks serve as an effective channel to facilitate a better understanding of God and knowledge of the truth¹¹. Pope Benedictus XVI's successor, Pope Francis is recognized as the first social media-friendly pope¹² that he asked Catholics to maintain a presence on the social media networks because it provides an excellent space to share that testimony¹³, in his message, "... (Social media) helps us, in the digital environment, to grow in humanity and mutual understanding¹⁴. Despite the development of digital construction in Arab world is still on the initial stage, social media is arguably changing the nature of news and community engagement, which continues to evolve with increased convergence of social media and satellite broadcasts¹⁵. In the Islamic world, similarly, online social networking sites are also widely used by religious participants¹⁶, in addition to numerous Muslim social media offers cyber community e.g. Alwahy, Muslimsocial.com and Ummaland, Andrews and Schwartz¹⁷ reported that the Islamic State also utilized social network for strengthening its influences. Social media has also plays a significant role of Egyptian revolution and leads the emerging of "Arab Spring" movement¹⁸.

There is little doubt that the convergence of new information and communication technologies are beginning to transform contemporary life and learning, and have the potential to transform faith formation. Just as an earlier era adopted the technology of schooling and the printing press to produce religious instructional models based on catechisms and textbooks, the 21st century brings us new digital technologies, approaches, and content that can transform faith formation in a parish. Religious networks provide a rich set of connections that help people develop spiritually and grow in their faiths. It would seem obvious that new tools and technologies (video chat and conferencing, blogs, Facebook, Twitter and Wikipedia), which are dedicated to the growth of community and knowledge exchange, would also provide useful avenues for the evolution of religions. Indeed, this trend prompted Saffo and Brake¹⁹ to ask what specific factors related to social media have garnered it so much attention from the world's major religions. They found that while social

media performs the functions of communication, collaboration, education, and entertainment, it also allows the informational asymmetry of traditional media to be mitigated by the receiver. In addition, social media users can adjust privacy settings to either reveal information publicly or only within certain circles (e.g. family, friends, classmates, or colleagues).

Using social media as a tool for communication is not new for most organizations, including not-for-profit organizations and religious institutes. Seltzer and Mitrook²⁰ found that not-for-profit institutions that used blogs as an outlet to communicate with their stakeholders had more technologically sophisticated websites. Currently, religious leaders are taking proactive steps to interact with their followers, using social media to share information, link to related websites and provide multimedia content for readers. Thus, the compatibility of religion and social media has been discussed in numerous articles²¹, yet the existing research seldom deals with the interaction between social media and classical Oriental religions. To fill the gap, this study investigates the influences of social media through the observation of religious activities organized by the folk temples of Mazu—a distinctive religious sub-culture that has attracted millions of followers for thousands of years. We also observed other folk temples that follow the Chinese folklore belief system. Of particular interest were the demographics of participants, the proportion of social media users among participants, the perception of loyalty to the folklore deity, and the intentions of participants to revisit the temple. Furthermore, we derived from the results numerous interesting implications about how social media stimulates transfer of discursive power in communities and temple sites, its effects on the preservation of cultural heritage, and the strategic alliance between temples and local businesses.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. In the next section, this article reviews literature of the relationship between religion and cyber world, relevant to Chinese folklore beliefs, and the notable significance of Mazu. The following section details the economic reasons that many folk temples adopt the use of social media. Sampling procedure and a preliminary analysis are explored in section of methodology, and describes the results, while proposes several interesting implications derived from these results. Conclusions are drawn in the last section.

Religion and Cyberspace

Bayly²² purports that religions began spreading through mass media in the nineteenth century. At this time, the world's major religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam) experienced a renaissance, shifting from regional communities into “empires of religion” through imperialist expansion and advances in communication technology, which resulted in the rapid transmission of ideological thought.

In this century, the internet may perform a similar function, coming as it has at a time when the West is demonstrating a spiritual hunger²³. Accordance with Casey²⁴ indicated, in a study of religion and the internet of the United Methodist Church, nearly 80% of the respondents said media played a role in their spiritual lives. A large portion of the respondents reported using social media to perform spiritual functions three times a week. Of the 600 people surveyed, 53% said they solicit prayers through e-mail²⁵. The Pew Internet and American Life Project discovered that people increasingly utilize the internet for religious purposes than for secular reasons²⁶. Numerous religious believers search the religious or spiritual material on the internet, and religious institutions are integrating the internet into their everyday practices. Cyberspace is becoming the new sacred space.

Cyberspace provides a platform for churches, mosques, temples, synagogues, and other religious institutions to share their beliefs and practices with any interested party, from public figures to the ordinary citizen. To maintain a vibrant body of members, temples must be prepared to take full advantage of interactive resources online social networks bring to an organization. The appearance of the term "networked religion" demonstrates the proliferation of a new perspective. According to Campbell²⁷, a networked religion has the following characteristics: a networked community, shifting authority, and convergent practice. The function and audience of wide-ranging missionary programs have gradually declined due to current trends, especially among Generation Z (those born after the 1990s), of connecting and sharing information principally through social media.

Compared to religious broadcasting and television series, social media provides a mechanism for immediate feedback from followers as well as greater opportunities for enhancing cohesion. The internet makes people, organizations, and resources from all over the world available, to help us answer questions, connect to relevant content and to share experiences. In addition, as observed by Campbell²⁸, social media has also led to the creation of new religious authority figures who challenge the current hierarchy. Herrings²⁹ also pointed out this phenomenon, offering the example of bloggers or moderators of online community groups who are identified and treated as spiritual figures. Such 'transform the power of discourse' have formed the focus of fierce debate³⁰. Cheung et al.³¹ investigated how Buddhist leaders in Singapore were expanding their communicative competencies to deal with the impact of social media. These religious leaders believed that social networking has changed expectations of freedom of expression and association to the degree that individual and collective capacities to communicate, mobilize, and gain technical knowledge are expected to lead to even greater religious influence in society and participation in religion over the coming decades. In view of the influence of the phenomenon of shifting discourse power,

this article makes an in-depth exploration into the impact of social media on Chinese folklore beliefs.

Mazu belief in Chinese Religious Practices

Chinese folklore is a mixture of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism in a pantheistic structure³², and has been advocated and practiced in all walks of life in Chinese society for over two thousand years. Chinese folklore belief teachings concern fulfilling obligations according to individual's social position, and are deeply embedded in Chinese culture. A graphic representation of the structure of Chinese religious practices is given in Fig. 1, including the representative deities of the Jade Emperor (Tian, in Taoism, is granted legitimacy by the Mandate of Heaven), Buddha, and multiple supernatural beings. Confucian thought and the fundamental philosophies of the dynasties in Chinese history also feature strongly. Due to its endogenous development and millennia-long history, the ideological origins of Chinese folklore have become a melting pot of religious ideas. All folk deities have their own responsibilities and functions, similar to the Hindu deities, e.g. achieving family harmony, opportunities for marriage, medical treatment, and punishment for wrongdoing. Those who subscribe to Chinese folklore tend to put more store in the judgments of deities than they do in mortals. This extends to evaluations of trustworthiness.

In folklore belief, Mazu the Sea Goddess is, alongside Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, the most important motherhood goddess³³. In a classic example of a mortal becoming immortal, Mazu was a Taoist priestess, born on Meizhou Island, Fujian province in the coastal area of Southeast China, who helped people deal with numerous problems with her omniscience and special powers. Over a thousand years, the image and identity of Mazu have changed to become a specific guardian of fisherman and overseas wanderers³⁴. Today, Mazu belief and customs have been inscribed in the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). According to UNESCO, Mazu belief and customs were elected to form part of this heritage list because they "have been recognized by the communities concerned as a symbol of their identity and continuity and passed down for centuries from generation to generation"³⁵. On the 23rd day of the third lunar month, the festival day of Mazu gathers a significant number of followers to celebrate and praise Mazu's divinity. Mazu temples face intense competition among themselves due to a high degree of similarity in celebration, procession, and ritual practices; thus, distinguishing cultural features and marketing issues are of the highest priority.

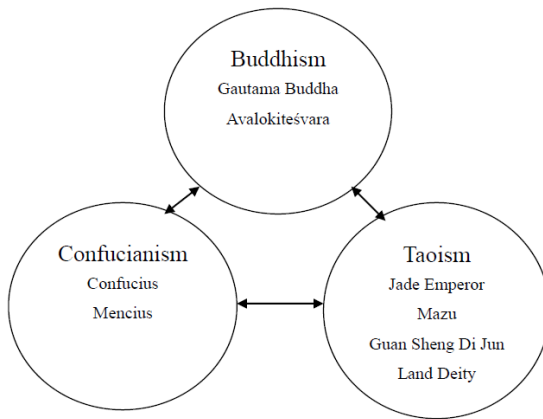


Figure 1. *Elements of Chinese folklore and representative deities*

Strengthening deity identity through social media

Folk temples are committed to increasing visibility in order to overcome a significant reduction in believers due to low fertility rates, urbanization, and generation gaps. To expand their base of followers, numerous folk temples have recently begun to attempt to attract the attention and participation of the younger generation. In this endeavor, online marketing and networking provide promising opportunities. Folk temples have begun to offer opportunities to discuss religious doctrine, become involved in their organization, and purchase religious books on their websites. As Hadden and Cowan³⁶; and Dawson and Cowan³⁷ pointed out, the purpose of these efforts is to invite individuals to participate in the religious dimension of life via the internet. This participation in online folk belief includes reinterpretation of traditional ritual, meditation and homiletics.

Besides providing a place for prayer, folk temples also host the following events: rituals for averting disaster and misfortune, and carnival celebrations which raise funds through donations³⁸. In addition to purchasing advertising time on TV networks and radio, and space on large billboards, temples have also followed the latest trends in information communications technology (ICT). Dramatic change is taking place within the user ranking of social media applications such as Facebook, Google+, Twitter, and Weibo³⁹, and temples have responded to this by not only constructing their own official websites, but also creating their own social media accounts. Figure 2 presents the fan page of a famous historical Mazu temple — Chaotian temple. The temple custodians and the temple visitors are able to interact with each other through posting and sharing real-time messages and information on these social networking sites.



Figure 2. Chaotian Mazu Temple fan page on the Facebook

Folk temples use social media as a promotional tool on the grounds of gathering donations and reinforcing deity identity. Despite Taoism and folklore belief is a huge hierarchy structure⁴⁰, however, there has also a significant place for Mazu due to millions followers in Chinese community of the world. Prayer, celebration date, and rituals have a high degree of niche overlap within the Mazu-dedicated folk temple, molding a new identity of Mazu, and the organization of worship itself and attracting potential believer or visitors psychological belonging, have long been recognized the most primary task for the management of each Mazu temple. A recent reinterpretation of Mazu-themed celebration rituals has been to create a tripartite cooperation between the temple, local peripheral businesses, and tourism⁴¹. Social media has played a significant role in this cooperation. In addition to attracting potential followers to participate in activities held by the temple, social media has functioned to serve current followers with time constraints. Practitioners can now participate in many Taoist ritual practices online, such as praying, fortune telling, and pacifying patron saints. For the latter, followers send their prayer request to the temple, giving the service request, e.g. merit-sharing with deceased loved ones, or the ritual of salvation for tormented souls in hell. Online ritualized services echo the real-world religious participation of temple members. Social media platforms, with their built in feedback mechanisms, are well-suited to linking temples and their followers.

Methodology

Sampling

An empirical survey was conducted during April, 2013 in Taiwan at the time of Mazu festival day celebrations and processions. To investigate

participants' motivations and sources of information, we conducted interviews and a questionnaire. A total of 1,600 subjects were randomly recruited from three historical Mazu temples that make extensive use of social media (e.g. blogs, bulletin board systems, e-mail newsletters, Facebook, theme-based sites, Twitter, and Weibo). After excluding invalid questionnaires with 1.4% sample errors into a 95% confidence interval (≤ 0.05), 1,152 questionnaires remained (approximately 72%).

Analysis of respondents

Demographics of the respondents were as follows. Females accounted for 48% and males 52%. The age distribution went against the general impression that the elderly participate more in religious activity: 45% participants were under the age of forty. 80% of the respondents attended the Mazu celebration ceremony with companions; the average of ceremony attendance was more than two times (55%); and the amount of financial donation was mainly distributed in the range of USD 20 to 39.

Results

The questionnaire was designed with three aims: to establish the information sources of the participants on the Mazu temple's annual festival event, and to determine their degree of admiration for Mazu as well as intention to revisit. Table 1 illustrates the significant role social media played in increasing attendance of the event. The majority of participants received the event information through the temple's blog, e-mail newsletter, Facebook, Twitter, Weibo or other online information source. It seems the long-standing tradition of transmitting Mazu belief through local intergenerational means has gradually been replaced by virtual networks, and that this shift has resulted in an expansion of the base of event attendees.

The second aim was to determine whether the use of social media influences the core elements of believers' faith. Our results reveal the maintenance of the integrity of the traditional characteristics of Mazu belief. During the strongly religious event, which included a carnival atmosphere, attendees maintained reverence for the supreme spirit which she/he came to worship.

With regard to intentions to revisit, nearly all interviewees conveyed a willingness to return for subsequent celebrations. The vast majority indicated a belief that folk religion has been growing in popularity during the past decades, and that this trend will contribute to an internalization of the values underlying the faith and therefore promote a more harmonious development of society.

Table 1 *Information sources of the Mazu celebration and attendance motivations (n=1152)*

Survey items	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Access to source of the Mazu-themed activity</i>		
Social media (e.g. blog, e-mail, Facebook, website, etc.)	572	49.7
Annual community event	386	33.5
Family or friends	168	14.6
<i>Loyalty to Deity</i>		
I only attend Mazu's celebration at this temple	691	59.9
In addition to Mazu, I also attend the festivals of other folk deities	424	36.8
<i>Revisiting intention</i>		
I will participate in the Mazu celebration next year	1094	94.9

Implications

This section will present three observations derived from the survey results: the restructuring of discursive power within the community, cultural capital preservation, and the marketing perspective of folk temples.

Netizen versus village elite

In the past, deity-themed ceremonies were spheres of influence for local elites. These elites would take up the duties of ceremonial procedures. In the beliefs of the folklore system, their privileged positions as duty-bearers earned them blessings from the celebrated deity. This kind of hierarchy is difficult to shift as it is one developed over several hundred years in Chinese religious culture, and is interwoven with a variety of social and economic relations. Chinese folklore teachings influence a person's ethical system including his/her ethical philosophies and behavioral patterns. In this structure, harmony and loyalty are highly valued; therefore there exists a general reluctance in traditional Chinese culture to challenge authority.

However, netizen groups have begun to play a key role in events related to folklore belief. Netizen groups are a type of online community with a particular interest. They use forums to ask questions, debate and express opinion. They represent a new and widely distributed form of participation by the public. The phenomenon of 'We' media is strongly present in netizen groups. This is a new kind of media that distributes news via blogs and social networks instead of news agencies. The growth of 'We' media and netizen groups has been largely fueled by greater access to bandwidth and low-cost or free software. User-friendly social media has

enabled new kinds of collaboration unrestricted by time or geography. The result is an advance of new social patterns and means for self-expression. Social media has allowed a multitude of voices to participate in global debate while maintaining social order and providing a useful filter on discussion.

Concerned netizens can be directly involved in an event of folklore belief by, for example, gaining access to the ceremony schedule, posting messages or ideas, and delivering benedictions for the deity. The role of social media has the potential to influence the standing of followers in their offline religious communities; thus, it offers the ability to change religious power hierarchies by introducing new forms of governing authority. Online groups may initiate discussions on issues normally reserved for debate by community leaders. By opening up these topics on community forums, members are empowered in ways not possible offline. Netizens of religious groups have therefore become a new force of religious authority, as social media users take advantage of opportunities and positions inaccessible to them in the offline world.

In this study, numerous participants stated that they had responded to comments posted by bloggers, moderators, and promoters of the celebration. Undoubtedly, the virtual networking community has formed a new pattern of values in religious traditions, and thereby facilitated cohesion in the community as a whole.

New force in traditional culture

Recently, the preservation of cultural heritage has been a contentious issue, especially in industrialized, highly urbanized regions. Numerous tangible and intangible traditions are at risk of being gradually lost to posterity due to the migration of the young professional workforce from their hometowns to metropolitan areas. Preservation of traditional heritage applies to temples, archives, and historic landscapes as well as the intangible culture evident in traditional lifestyles. An urgent problem currently under focus is the cultural gap occurring when the mechanisms for passing on knowledge and practice in deity-themed rituals and ceremonies to the next generation no longer function.

This crisis of cultural loss has been positively influenced by the development of social media. People are encouraged to cherish cultural heritage through the interactive features of social media. To ensure long-term preservation, it means that heritage is a common heritage amongst all nations consisting of assets that are unique resources many of which have lasting value and significance requiring protection and preservation for future generations. By integrating cyber infrastructure into heritage management, temples and devout netizens enable flexible interaction with local and global archives, and lower the barriers to preserving and sharing endangered knowledge through social networks. At the same

time, social media is creating a collection of information related to endangered heritage on an unprecedented scale. The scope of its record-keeping would not be possible through conventional academic methods.

These shifts have drawn an increasing number of people to, or expressing concerns to religion-based activities. For example, the announcement made by Xingtian Temple, a reputable religious site in Taipei city, Taiwan, on 24 August, 2014 that it would prohibit incense and food offerings to become more eco-friendly was met with mixed reactions. Supporters argue the prohibition of incense burning and food offering will contribute the environmentally friendly while saving food; on the contrary, opponents consider the temple has throw away traditional folk culture norms. It stimulated intense debate on social media, to the point where it attracted the attention of print news (Taipei Times, 2014).

Emerging social media enables communities, large and small, to create and share digital artifacts as part of their daily lives. Fortunately, this study found that many of the festival volunteers whose presence was requested by online friends worked alongside temple staff to carry out every step of the activities until the end. Their motivations, in addition to the redemption of vows to Mazu, were based on feelings of loyalty to their cultural heritage. Traditional culture, thus, has well maintained and simultaneously highly expanded social tentacles in terms of the power of interactive social media.

Word-of-mouth marketing for temple activities

From a marketing point of view, folk temples are limited by geographical variation, resident preferences, and cultural differences. Application of the concept of "marketing" to religious organizations is a recent development. Its secular origin and high financial cost made it a distasteful addition to the functioning of temples. However, as religious fervor wanes, maintenance of a strong member body has become an imperative competitive issue, and in this endeavor, most temples have embraced the advantages offered by social media. Each temple seeks to stand out from the others. As well as employing the feedback mechanisms characteristic of social media, temples are building their own official websites, networking family groups, and encouraging worshippers to communicate with one another and engage in meaningful spiritually-based conversation. Improving the format and content of religion-themed community in social media does not challenge traditional religious practices, but rather offers a chance for organizations to market themselves to a wider audience. Increasingly, individuals are attending religious services online. Such revolutionary change plays a role of strategic cross-industry alliance for broadening the potential base of followers and achieving a "win-win" effect. For instance, some temples in Taiwan have begun to "cartoonize" deities and produce deity-themed

merchandise. This step has been welcomed by consumers and seems to have been successful in expanding the visibility of traditional beliefs.

Figure 3 illustrates a case study of a medium-sized historical folklore temple cooperating with a well-known human resources (HR) service website to create a mutually beneficial system. The process of securing an appropriate career is often psychologically stressful to job-seekers. The temple therefore designed a software application for fortune-telling, a ritual traditionally offered by temples. This provides users with spiritual sustenance in a similar manner as is provided from praying in front of a deity. Since the temple and HR website co-released this service in April 2012, more than 41,000 users have clicked “like” on the Facebook group. The HR website raised awareness of their brand, and the temple also enlarged its public visibility and pool of potential believers. In a similar fashion, numerous Mazu temples have been engaging in marketing and promotional activities online to increase temple visitors and build a sustainable brand at the same time.



Figure 3. Successful example of cooperation between a temple and an HR website on Facebook (retrieved on 2013/9/17)

Conclusion

This study focused on the application of social media by Chinese folk temples in the promotion of Mazu festival day celebrations and identified participants' motivations and perceptions of religious solemnity at the Mazu celebration. Additionally, three phenomena related to the influence of social media were discovered: a transition of power from local elites or traditional leaders of opinion to popular bloggers, forum moderators, and virtual community initiators; the intergenerational preservation of local cultural heritage; and the creation of successful cooperations between local Mazu-dedicated temples, the public tourism sector and local

peripheral industries (e.g. lodging facilities, fabricators of incense and joss paper, and food stands). We found evidence of a positive aggressive effect of social media on the promotion of the doctrines and practices of Chinese folklore as well as an ability to promote a sense of intimacy for ordinary followers.

This study specifically focused on Mazu belief; future research might therefore explore the influence (or effect) of social media on other Oriental religions (e.g. Cha'n Buddhism; Hinduism; Shintō; Sikh), or compare the perceptions and motivations of attendants in Eastern (e.g. Gion Matsuri in Kyoto, Japan) and Western religious festivals (e.g. Our Lady of Fátima in Fátima, Portugal).

Notes

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