What has Nationalism Changed?

Reflection from the Participation of Mazu Pilgrimage to the Spectacle of Nezha Troupe

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Abstract

This paper explores recent socio-political changes in Taiwan, using the modernised performance of Tecnho God Nezha (電音三太子哪吒) as a case study. Religion in Taiwan reflects Taiwan’s politics and national identities since the 1980s; a shift from Chinese identity (1949–1987), followed by two waves of Taiwanese identity (1988–2008, and then from 2008 onwards with the change of government). Sangren suggests that Taiwan’s sense of being a nation has been built up by island-wide pilgrimages relating to the goddess Mazu, which have constituted a ritual of pan-Taiwaneseness. However, in this paper, I argue that the role of Mazu has gradually been replaced by that of Nezha, in the formulation of the second wave of identity. In the case of Mazu, there were religious divisions over the use of incense and disputes over authenticity and the ancestral temple in Mei-zhou in China, all of which were considered to be irreconcilable. This has since the KMT’s Ma Ying-jeou took the presidential power further complicated by his cross-Strait policies and consequently the wider changes in socio-political and socio-economic situation in Taiwan. The unruly god Nezha has thus instead been preferred by Taiwan’s youth and has also become a new actor in the formulation of a new Taiwanese identity. The youth perform in a traditional Nezha giant body puppet but dress up in modern fashions, wearing sun glasses as they dance to techno music and in time to disco beats, and this adaptation is known as ‘the Techno Nezha the Third Prince’. Many performers of the Techno Nezha have been travelling to as many countries as they have been able to, within a body puppet weighing fourteen kilograms and bedecked with ROC national flags at the back decorated with LED lights. Acting in this way they are seeking via the performance of Nezha to connect Taiwan with the rest of the world, and thus create publicity and visibility for Taiwan in the international world. In conclusion, I claim that the second wave of Taiwanese identity
has been formulated through symbolic struggle: the performance of the unruly god Nezha has been identified with unruly Taiwan, and Nezha’s attempt to establish his autonomy from his father is an analogy with Taiwan’s struggle to build its own subjectivity.

About the Author

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Introduction
This paper examines both the relationship of nationalism and religion in general and the vehicle of Chinese religion in the construction and reconstruction of Taiwanese nationalism on the other. Interestingly, modernity and modern-states in Europe have often either supplemented or replaced a religious identity with civic identity based on citizenship (van der Veer, ‘Nationalism and Religion’, pp. 656–657). However, the paradigm of the decline of religion in the face of modernization and nationalism does not fit Taiwan’s case (see also Katz, ‘Religion and the State’; Shih, ‘From Regulation to Rationalization’).

Taiwan’s nationalism emerged in the late 1980s, and has been understood and categorized as a type of anti-colonial nationalism against the KMT’s rule, which was regarded no less ‘foreign’ than previous Japanese colonial rule (Shih, ‘Taiwan’s Subjectivity’). Nations are imagined and national communities are (re)-invented (Anderson, Imagined Communities). The nationalism of this type usually involves the creative transformation of the traditions of heritage and community that existed before colonial rule. The task of this typological nationalism is often to show the continuity of a particular people with a distinct culture over history, known as ‘cultural nationalism’ (see Hutchinson, ‘Cultural Nationalism’). Cultural nationalism always aims to build national communities. In Taiwan, religion has been brought in to construct or reconstruct imagined national communities, and many popular elements of Chinese religion have become the sources of imaginings used in Taiwanese nationalist narrations.

In this paper, I argue that religion in Taiwan reflects Taiwan’s politics of identity and nationalist narrations since the 1980s: a shift from the authoritarian rule of the Kuomintang (the KMT, or Chinese Nationalist Party) from 1947 to the 1980s and its Chinese nationalism, which intensified with the Chinese Cultural Renaissance Movement between 1966 and the 1980s, followed by the democratic administration by the Democratic Progressive Party (DDP) from 2000 to 2008 and two waves of Taiwanese nationalism. These changes of political government have reflected and also parallel the shift in the popularity of two religious icons and symbols: from goddess Mazu and her pilgrimage (during the 1980s and the 2000s) to god Nezha and his troupe performance (from 2008 onwards with the change of government from the DPP to the KMT). As such, I further demonstrate that the two waves of Taiwanese nationalism and religion have echoed what van der Veer describes as ‘modern transformations of pre-modern traditions and identities’ (van der Veer, ‘Nationalism and Religion’, p. 657), and
that they do not form a monolithic cultural entity, but rather a discourse in which different voices engage in dialogue on the social construction and reconstruction of national identities. I therefore apply Foucauldian discourse analysis to illustrate the shift of two Taiwanese nationalist narrations and to elaborate the meaning of these changes, subject to analyzing the conversations and languages and competing their interpretations with a focus on the social relations between different agencies of power and the ways of characterizing their presence, contextualizing within a specific historical period and identifying paths beyond it (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, *Foucauldian Discourse Analysis*).

In the first section, I explore how the discourses of Taiwan’s sense of being a nation were built up by island-wide pilgrimages relating to goddess Mazu during the 1980s and the 2000s. How was a religious centre formed to unify Taiwanese people of various social backgrounds? And, what types of nationalist narration were created and promoted around Mazu pilgrimage? In the second section, I illustrate that the role of Mazu has gradually been replaced by that of Nezha from 2008 onwards in the reconstruction of the second wave of Taiwanese nationalism. I analyse how god Nezha has instead become a new vehicle in the construction of a new discourse on Taiwanese nationalism with a different concern. How has Nezha been favoured by Taiwan’s youth who either perform in Nezha giant puppets or watch the spectacle of the Nezha troupe performance? And, what is this new nationalist narrative? What is its main concern which differs from the first wave? In concluding, I analyse the shift of the two religious icons and symbols: from goddess Mazu and participating in her pilgrimage to god Nezha and watching the spectacle of his troupe performance, and accordingly their implications for the two Taiwanese nationalist discourses. I further articulate the meanings of this shift and the changes in Taiwan’s sense of being a nation.

**Mazu Pilgrimages and Pan-Taiwaneseness**

The most extensive pilgrimage network in Taiwan centres around the cult of goddess Mazu. Mazu is the Chinese patron goddess who is believed to protect fishermen, sailors, and maritime merchants. Like other Chinese deities, it is said Mazu is the spiritual representation of a once meritorious lady named Lin Moniang who was born into a seafarer’s family on Meizhou island (湄洲) in Putian County in Fujian Province in 960 AD. Toward the end of her life, local people were convinced she had supernatural powers that allowed her spirit to guide seafarers safely home through storms. She died unmarried at age 27. Soon after her death, seafarers along Fujian coast began to report one after another miracle attributed to her spirit’s powers. The
local inhabitants began to address and worship her as ‘Aunt Lin’ during the Song Dynasty, and this practice soon spread widely along the coastal regions of China.

As the Mazu cult was closely connected with Chinese maritime interests, the imperial state followed and led the masses in the adoption of their goddess as a symbol of coastal pacification (Watson, ‘Standardizing the Gods’). Goddess Mazu was thus promoted by the Kangxi Emperor in 1684, who granted her the illustrious title ‘Tianhou, Empress of Heaven’, which was the highest rank of the female deities in the Chinese divine hierarchy. Interestingly, Mazu thus began as a local deity on the Fujian coast and rose to being a member of the imperial pantheon for the conveyance of civic order and loyalty to the state. Indeed, the elevation of Mazu’s official status was paralleled with the gradual assertion of state authority over China’s southern coastal region.

The Mazu cult is an excellent case in point, as Watson indicates, where ‘lies the genius of the Chinese government’s approach to cultural integration: the state imposed a structure but not the content […] the state promoted symbols and not beliefs’ (Watson, ‘Standardizing the Gods’, p. 323). Via subtle promotion by the state, the cult of Mazu incorporated people of different social backgrounds while allowing them to retain their own beliefs and visions regarding the goddess. Mazu means for the local people of Putian ‘Aunt Lin’, while for the state officials she is ‘Empress of Heaven’. It was this ambiguity of various understandings which laid a solid foundation for the formation of a ‘unified’ Chinese culture that appeared even on the surface to be integrated.

Remarkably, goddess Mazu also retains her symbol of integration and unity in her cult in Taiwan. The popularity of Mazu cult has been attributed to the historically complex composition of the Chinese immigrants who settled all over Taiwan before 1947. Temples dedicated to Mazu were among the first constructed in the then-established west-coast ports. It has long been in dispute between Zhaotian Temple in Beigang and Fengtian Temple in Xingang as to which is the oldest Mazu temple in Taiwan originally established in a historical port city Bengang. It is the religious tradition in Taiwan that temple statues of goddess Mazu and her incense-fire (xiang-huo) both trace their origins to an ancestral temple (zu-miao) in Meizhou in China or to either Zhaotian Temple or Fengtian Temple in Taiwan. Taiwan’s cult of Mazu has thus formed an institutional hierarchy. A statue that is installed in a later established branch temple is known as fen-shen, namely ‘a branch goddess statue’, while the incense-fire is known as fen-xiang, namely ‘divided incense-fire’. Groups of pilgrims visit the ancestral temples in
order to rejuvenate the power of the spirits *(ling)* of their branch statues by passing them over the main giant censer of the ancestral temple and through the smoke of the incense-fire *(guo-huo)* (Suzuki, *Taiwanese Customs*).

Mazu’s pilgrimage is held annually several weeks before her birthday on 23rd day of the third lunar month. Groups from every part of Taiwan converge on the streets leading to the ancestral temple, competing with each other in performance in honour of the goddess. The majority of the pilgrims arrive in groups *(jin-xiang-tuan)*, which are formed as a household, or organized by branch temple committees or by religious associations in villages, towns, townships, or urban neighbourhoods. As described in Steven Sangren’s *History and Magical Power in a Chinese Community*:

As spectators fill the streets, each pilgrimage troupe proudly parades its image, ensconced in an elaborate sedan chair and accompanied by entranced shamans, colourful dance groups, bands of musicians, and the continuous cacophony of firecrackers, omnipresent signifiers of the sacred in Chinese ritual. (Sangren, *History and Magical Power*, p. 88)

It is important to note that Mazu can be approached not only by groups but also by the most humble followers. The ideology of Mazu pilgrimage indeed emphasizes an unmediated and direct relationship between the goddess and individuals, households, and communities. Nevertheless, her concern for individuals does not contradict her significant role in social integration and solidarity in Taiwan’s society (see Shih, ‘Generating Power’), but forms a necessary and complementary part of the ambiguity of Mazu cult and its symbolism.

As Turner indicates, pilgrimages are the embodiments of the *communitas* spirit that ‘presses always to universality and ever greater unity’ (Turner, *Dramas*, p. 179). As observed by Sangren, Mazu pilgrimages have played an important role in socializing individual pilgrims and participants; in other words, all individuals in the participating process acquire socio-cultural identities. This has been attributed to Mazu’s *ling* (efficacy), which is a key factor in promoting social and cultural integration among different ethnic groups and locales that may otherwise lack a focus for common identity. Thus, Mazu pilgrimages are a particularly situated arena for (re)-producing a family centre, community centre, and territorial consolidation, and hence for addressing the issues of national identity (Sangren, *History and Magical Power*, p.189). As Mazu pilgrimages tend to produce more inclusive, disinterested subjects/citizens, since the 1980s they have been used in an attempt to construct a pan-Taiwanese identity based
on the shared history of Chinese immigrants to Taiwan before 1947, known as benshengren (provincial natives’ or ‘Taiwanese’), and their common socio-political experience with belief in the patron goddess Mazu of Taiwan.

However, this was not the case for those more recent immigrants who followed Chiang Kai-shek and his KMT to Taiwan after their defeat in the civil war to the Chinese Communists. Most of what had been known as waishengren (‘provincial outsiders’ or ‘mainlanders’) who came from localities other than Quan-zhou, Zhang-zhou, and Hakka, did not share the same devotion to goddess Mazu. The potential of Mazu pilgrimage to constitute a Taiwanese identity that excluded mainlanders has been a cause of considerable disturbance from the KMT government’s view. High KMT officials therefore visited well-known Mazu temples with increasing frequency from the 1980s. The government also granted the Mazu cult official recognition, and made gifts of honorific plaques to temples. Despite the KMT governmental efforts to inject their national interpretation into the Mazu cult, for most participants Mazu pilgrimages remain essentially a theme of Taiwanese ethnic, not Chinese national, identity (Sangren, History and Magical Power, p. 91–92).

Nevertheless, the Mazu cult has brought its complex history into Taiwan: there have been constant religious divisions over the use of the incense-fire from the ancestral temple, and disputes over the authenticity of the oldest statue and temple in Taiwan. In particular, the rivalry between Beigang’s Zhaotian Temple and Xingang’s Feng-tian temple has reached an impasse. Also, competition between the higher-rank Mazu temples has since the 1990s extended from Taiwan to China. Zhenlan Temple in Dajia (大甲) undertook its first pilgrimage to Meizhou in October 1987 before the KMT government lifted the ban on direct religious contact with China. Dajia’s Zhenlan temple has since earned a reputation of being the headquarters of the Meizhou ancestral temple in Taiwan, and has thus climbed further up on the ladder of the institutional hierarchy of the Mazu cult. This is an example of the Chinese recognition of authenticity by tracing back to an origin and therefore a root, that is, the ancestral place. It further implies that a stronger link with the ancestral temple in China would make a branch temple more authentic and thus attract more followers and donations. As such, one Mazu temple after another in Taiwan has followed Dajia Zhenlian Temple to develop a connection with Chinese ancestry.

Chinese officials have interpreted this as a journey to recognize the mainland as the ancestor and to return for unification. Mazu pilgrimages from Taiwan to China have in consequence been used for the promotion of Chinese nationalism and Mazu was officially
recognized by Fujian County government as ‘Goddess of Peace of the Taiwan Strait’ (see Chang Hsun in this book). In contrast, on the other side of the cross-Strait, many pilgrims from Taiwan to China still identify themselves as Taiwanese. They regard the journey as helping to revive the Mazu cult after it was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. They have challenged claims to authenticity of ancestral places in China, claiming that all the statues of Mazu in Meizhou were made recently and with Taiwan’s skill and financial contribution. Statues in China are indeed much younger than many statues in Taiwan. The original incense-fire taken directly from the Meizhou ancestral temple has been kept and continuing in Zhaotian Temple and in Xingang Temple in Taiwan. The authentic Mazu temple has thus been removed from China’s Meizhou to Taiwan’s Beigang or Xingang. Taiwanese people have helped build numerous branch temples of Taiwan’s Mazu incense-fire all over China.

All of these discourses and arguments were considered to be irreconcilable, as Mazu pilgrimages allow participants to develop and form their own interpretations and meanings. This has been further complicated by the political-economic situation; Ma Ying-jeou’s period in office as President (2008–2016) prioritized the establishment of closer ties with rising and powerful China, and this has worried Taiwan’s citizens – in particular, young people – about the loss of Taiwan’s autonomy and subjectivity. Over this period Taiwan was gradually elaborated a different discourse of Taiwanese nationalism, which has increasingly replaced goddess Mazu with god Nezha, expressing for a different concern. This leads to the next section: Nezha as an actor in the reconstruction of the second wave of Taiwanese nationalist discourses.

Nezha Troupe and Taiwan’s Autonomy

In contrast to Mazu pilgrimage network, god Nezha has formed the most extensive network of ‘zhen-tou’, namely ‘the front troupe of a religious procession’. Nezha is one of the most popular deities in local temples in Taiwan and also in private family shrines (si-tan). He is well-known as and identified with the divinity ‘The Third Prince’ (San-tai-zì), in reference to his status as the third son of the divine General Li Jing. Nezha has normally been depicted as a clever but playful boy, holding the Cosmic Ring (qian-kun-juan) in one hand and the Wind Fire Wheel (feng-huo-lun) under one foot. It is believed that these special objects enable Nezha to move very fast and almost fly (Lee, ‘From Nezha’, pp. 35–57). Nezha has always been considered as a patron deity for drivers, and his image are often seen in the vehicles of professional drivers of tourist coaches, trucks, taxies and buses. The drivers prefer to carry a small statue of Nezha
in their vehicles to ensure a safe and smooth journey. There is also widespread belief in Nezha’s power to protect the community and its people, in particular, children. In addition, Nezha is normally positioned at the centre of the altar, and is thus also known as ‘Marshal of the Centre of the Altar’ (Zhong-tan Yuan-shuai), commanding the five military camps (wu-ying): the camp of the North, of the South, of the East, of the West, and of the Centre (Lee, ‘The Beliefs’). This is signified by the five flags carried behind Nezha while on tour.

‘Zhentou’ has been a long-standing tradition in temple processions in Taiwan, and it can still be seen today in many occasions; deities of higher rank regularly go on ‘inspection tours’ (rao-jing) in their territories or go on visiting tours to other deities in other temples either during pilgrimages or at temple fairs, a deity’s birthday celebration, the lunar festivals and so on. The highlight of performances at these tours are normally held in the visiting temple yards in front of a temple’s morally upright and high-ranking deities, involving marching, dancing, singing, martial arts and going into trance or a state of possession by spirits. The role that Nezha often plays in these activities is to lead the way; that is, a junior deity paving the way for the more senior deities.

In agricultural societies in Taiwan, religious troupes were formed by adult villagers who gathered to do rehearsals after sunset or after the harvest. However, with the industrialization in the late 1970s, troupe members dramatically declined in number and the majority of troupe members were elderly unfit men. Temples have instead tended to recruit dropouts from school to their troupes, or they have recruited from the ranks of the young unemployed. In doing so, the temples provide them with social links to their communities and with opportunities to develop discipline and skills. Nevertheless, these young performers, like other young people, often go to discotheques and nightclubs, and so they have incorporated elements from the nightclubs they love into the Nezha troupes in which they are trained to perform.

As a result, the Nezha troupe has undergone a transformation: while wearing giant Nezha body puppets in traditional costumes, and retaining certain rigid gestures and moves associated with the god Nezha during the performance, the young performers add an element of modern fashion by wearing sunglasses and dancing to techno music and disco beats. This modernized form has been known as ‘Dian-yin San-tai-zi Nezha’, namely ‘the Techno Third Prince Nezha’. I argue that although young ‘zhentou’ performers may take their performance for granted and might even be unconscious of its meaning, the performance itself is still a
vehicle for continuing cultural traditions as well as for transforming religious identities. Indeed, such activities and performances also provide resources to negotiate wider processes of socio-political change and create opportunities for socio-cultural re-invention. The creative process of re-inventing traditions, as Allio notes, 'occurs particularly when a rapid transformation of society is taking place; the real stake for social agents then becomes the formalization of the new traditions, as well as their integration and their reproduction' (Allio, “Local Traditions”, p. 486).

Remarkably, Nezha the Third Prince, a godly figure derived from local temple rituals and processions – has captured the imagination of Taiwan’s youth, and been brought out onto the national and international stage as a popular-culture icon representing the national spirit of Taiwan. No other deity has earned as much enthusiasm from the youth in Taiwan in the digital era as has Nezha the Third Prince. This is perhaps because of the unruly nature of Nezha: today many young people in Taiwan identify with him – an unruly god, in contrast to other deities who are upright but distant – especially when they feel frustrated at being treated unjustly (Sheng, ‘Different Faces’). Since 2005, various performances by Nezha troupes have been seen at events other than temple processions in Taiwan, such as at wedding celebrations, corporate banquets and political campaigns. It was reported that were over a hundred Nezha troupes of various sizes in Taiwan; among them, 20 groups were better known, such as the Jiu-tian Folk Arts group (Jiu-tian min-su ji-yi-tuan) and the Nezha Troupe Theatre in Luzhou in Taipei (Luzhou Nazha jufang) (Taiwan Insights, ‘Third Prince God’). It is interesting to note that the Luzhou Nezha Troupe Association was founded by Gao Chih-hung, as he did not want to see the folk troupe culture in which he had grown up recently being mis-presented and downgraded associated with gangster culture (Chang, ‘Douzhen’).

The turning point in Nezha’s popularity was a performance at the opening ceremony of the 2009 World Games in Kaohsiung. About 20 giant Nezha body puppets roared into the stadium on motorcycles and proceeded to dazzle the audience. Since then, Techno Nezha the Third Prince troupes with body puppets have frequently been invited to perform at various international events, such as the 2009 Deaf Olympics in Taipei, the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai and the 2010 International Flower Expo in Taipei. Moreover, in January 2010, a performance in the United States was awarded the first prize in an international competition at the Pasadena Rose Parade. In August 2010, eleven members of Taiwan’s marathon team took turns running a super marathon through the Sahara Desert dressed in Nezha body puppets. They did so in an attempt to publicize Taiwan during the week-long event. Also, in July 2012, while
attending a cross-Strait exchange programme, President of the PRC Hu Jintao accepted an invitation to join a performance and was seen dancing with Nezha body puppets (Taiwan Insights, ‘Third Prince God’).

From February 2011 to the end of 2013, Wu Chien-heng, a student in his early twenties who was studying Sports Management at the National Taipei University, performed in a giant Nezha body puppet weighing 14 kg during visits to over 60 countries, including India, Egypt, Kenya, Peru, Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil, the United States and the United Kingdom (Want China Times, ‘South America Awaits’). It is interesting to note part of his travel cost was funded by Bei-gang Zhao-tian Mazu Temple which can be read as a support in the formulation of a new Taiwanese identity with a different concern. During his performances, he played techno music and also danced to disco beats in the giant body puppet. Noteworthy to mention is that he also replaced the five flags representing the five directions with ROC national flags that were decorated with LED lights.

Publicity around Nezha reached its high point during the period of the London Olympic Games in the summer of 2012. Wu, wearing his giant Nezha body puppet, participated in a demonstration of 300 overseas Taiwanese (most of them studying in the United Kingdom) who carried Taiwan’s ROC flag through central London. The highlight of the event was a street-dancing activity in Regent Street, where for a few days Taiwan’s ROC flag had hung alongside the flags of the 206 other countries participating in the Olympic Games. Unfortunately, after a week Taiwan’s national flag had been removed at the PRC’s demand and replaced by the Chinese Taipei Olympic flag. Together with the campaigners, Wu, wearing his Nezha body puppet, made a very visible effort to bring Taiwan’s national flag back to Regent Street, even if only during a temporary street-dancing performance (Want China Times, ‘Taiwanese Students’).

Photos of Wu’s performances of the Nezha dance decked out with ROC national flags, taken 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 various cultural backgrounds in foreign cities or villages all over the world. According to an article posted to the website ‘Taiwan Insights’, which is run by the press division of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office 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 Nezha from Taiwan during their life journey’. Wu further encourages young people ‘to choose their own way to show their love of Taiwan’ (Taiwan Insights, ‘Third Prince God’). The final comments of the article read as follows:

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. Nezha 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. (Taiwan Insights, ‘Third Prince God’)  

Also, in an interview, Gao Chih-hung said that, after his performance of the Nezha dance, he overheard the responses from foreign audiences, expressing sentiments such as: ‘Wow, I never knew there was a place called Taiwan. This performance was fantastic and made me really want to visit that country’ (Chang, ‘Douzhen’).

It is understandable that young people like Gao Chih-hung and Wu Chien-heng desire and seek global visibility and recognition for Taiwan: in the new era of social-media technologies, the younger generation expects equal rights to visibility and hence equal access to the international world. Indeed, the right to visibility and global communication is increasingly becoming a significant issue with new meanings. However, these new notions of the capabilities for visibility and communication through travel or social media are not simply absolute, but are rather relative and contested – in particular, they are related to the emerging global new order (Urry, Mobilities, p. 209). In the case of Taiwan, due to the PRC’s intervention, the island is not recognized as a nation by the United Nations or indeed by most countries. Taiwan has thus been restricted in its ‘rights’ to visibility and to recognition in international relations. At the same time though, young Taiwanese individually have global civic rights and exercise their freedom to travel globally, to demonstrate and perform, and to communicate with other global citizens as well as to use social media. As such, the global tour of the Techno Nezha performance is conducted as an expression of the notion of what Mimi Sheller and John Urry (Mobile Technologies, p. 208) call the ‘civic freedom and mobility’ to elaborate and extend the capabilities of communication and visibility. Through this, young performers hope that global citizens living at a distance can ‘see’ and ‘touch’ Nezha, who is coming from Taiwan and represents Taiwan, and thus give recognition to the existence of Taiwan.
The Techno Nezha performance, to use an analysis borrowed from Urry, is a dynamic notion of global citizenship that values ‘freedom to’ rather than ‘freedom from’ (Urry, *Mobilities*, p. 208). The growth of the Nezha tour, both nationally and internationally, has created significant opportunities to make the presence of Taiwan (in the symbol of the national flag) recognized 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 are being reached by any Taiwan’s diplomacy. Also, videos of the Techno Nezha performance have attracted the attention of several hundreds of thousands of internet users. *Want China Times* reported that Wu Chien-heng ‘has earned himself a reputation as a cultural ambassador for Taiwan, as he always dances with the ROC flag’ (*Want China Times*, ‘South America Awaits’).

The increasing global nature of Nezha performance tours has elevated Nezha to become a new vehicle for Taiwanese identity. Accordingly, if we want to understand this new form of Taiwanese nationalism, we need to understand the desire for autonomy and subjectivity as manifested in the myth of Nezha and the solution of his conflict with his father. Nezha has long been depicted as a young god with massive energy and a rebellious personality: the basis of cultic worship of Nezha is a sixteenth-century epic entitled *Fengshen Yanyi (The Investiture of the Gods)* (Wa, Daojibo, pp. 248–251). As Sangren notes, the longstanding and widespread popularity of this epic has played a significant role in sustaining elements of Chinese mythology in the popular understanding of Nezha in contemporary Taiwan. The story has been translated and summarized by Sangren:

[Nezha] is a divinely conceived trickster who defies both his earthly father and heaven. As a seven-year old, he playfully provokes a confrontation with the dragon king of the oceans, killing one of the dragon king’s sons. To escape divine punishment for his insubordination, he returns his flesh and bones to his father, a suicidal act explicitly intended to abolish his filial obligations (Sangren 2000: 198).

This first episode sets up the unruly character of Nezha and further leads to numerous attempts by the father to control his unruly boy.

Desiring a new body, his spirit appears to his mother in her dreams and convinces her to defy her husband and secretly to erect a temple altar to him. Because the temple is so efficacious, never failing to respond to worshippers’ requests, it attracts increasing numbers of pilgrims. Eventually, however, [Nezha’s] father, Li Jing, discovers the temple’s existence and destroys it and its image of [Nezha] (Sangren 2000: 198).
The story here, as Sangren observes, ‘has obvious Oedipal overtones – the son’s patricidal hatred, the father’s murderous intentions towards his son, and the rivalry between them for the affection of the wife/mother’ (Sangren 1993: 25–28). Though, unlike Oedipus, Nezha doesn’t accidentally kill his father, and marries his mother.

But, because [Nezha’s] soul had received nourishment from pilgrims’ offerings and incense, his yang (material) body escapes total annihilation. With the aid of his Daoist immortal mentor, Taiyi Zhenren […], [Nezha’s] material body is restored with even more stupendous powers. In a vengeful rage, [Nezha] attempts to kill Li Jing, and subsequently must be restrained by Taiyi Zhenren. Thus tamed, [Nezha] goes on in the epic to become a supernaturally gifted hero in Jiang Ziya’s […] righteous campaign against the evil emperor Zhou […], last of the Shang (Sangren 2000: 198).

Following Sangren, I am going to apply a key aspect of Freud’s psychoanalytic theory to interpret the new discourse of Taiwanese nationalism conveyed by the Techno Third Prince Nezha. I would agree with the conventional criticism that Freudian analysis, emerging historically in the context of Western family institutions, is not easily transferable to the Chinese family system. However, many scholars have applied Freudian theories to non-Western cultures, such as to Trobriand Islanders in the Pacific studied by Bronislaw Malinowski (‘Myth’) and to Sri Lankan culture observed by Gananath Obeyesekere (Work of Culture). Like Malinowski and Obeyesekere, I have been fascinated by Freudian Oedipal theory, the importance of sexuality and dominance in human life and the whole overarching concept of unconscious motivation. However, I take Freudian approach further but modify it to apply to the Chinese family situation.

Hereafter, I attempt to make explicit that what is more general to Freudian analysis in terms of the ‘Oedipal situation’ are the processes of defining self-awareness and producing self-assertion rather than desire for sexual involvement with the parent of the opposite sex and therefore rivalry with the parent of the same sex. In Nezha’s case, his self-mutilation/suicide is carried out to save his father, whose interests and desires are clearly represented as being at odds with his own. Although it is true that Nezha goes to some effort to represent his action as a son as compatible with the norms of filial piety, the fact remains that he is led to such self-mutilation/suicide by unresolvable conflict with his father (Sangren, Chinese Sociologics, pp. 222–223). Such sentiments or resentments are, however, unconscious and substantially part and parcel of what it means to be a Chinese son or father. This has been elaborated by Sangren:
Overt expression of such sentiments, largely inexpressible in other contexts of Chinese existence, no doubt accounts in part for the popularity of the story. In other words, the story’s longstanding and widespread popularity may be attributed in part to the expression it provides for otherwise strongly repressed emotions (Sangren, ‘Gods and Familial Relations’, p. 10).

It has always been an issue in the Chinese family, in which fathers have strong patriarchal authority: is a Chinese young man to be his own agent or subject, or the instrument or object of his father? The Nezha story embodies the desire and struggle of a young Chinese man to produce and define his own subjectivity while facing his father’s authority. Interestingly, while the techno Nezha giant performance is gaining popularity, Nezha’s attempt to establish his subjectivity and recognition suggests an analogy with Taiwan’s relations to mainland China. The Techno Nezha giant has thus been identified as unruly Taiwan, and Nezha’s conflict with his father as embodying the conflict of Taiwan with mainland China. It has been widely said among young Taiwanese that the Nezha giant represents them and the techno performance stands out as a new vehicle for their expression of Taiwan’s subjectivity, and as such Taiwanese nationalism is developing into a new phase with a new discourse.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have examined and elaborated that the two popular practices of Chinese religion have been served as a vehicle in the formulation and reformulation of Taiwanese nationalism; one is connected with goddess Mazu and the participation of her pilgrimage and the other with god Nezha and the spectacle of his troupe. Both formulation and reformulation have aimed to demonstrate the continuity over the four hundred years history of a particular people (so-called Taiwanese) with a distinct language (so-called taiyu) and an unique religious culture (so-called Taiwan minjian xinyang), which could be seen as cultural nationalist movements.

In the first section, I have illustrated Motherly goddess Mazu and her pilgrimage have served as a place in the constitution of a pan-Taiwaneseness ritual as well as a site in an attempt to formulate a unified Taiwanese identity. We see Mazu pilgrimage has placed the values of the family, the community, and the place as a centre with an emphasis on participation and sharing.

In the second section, I demonstrate that the god Nezha has become a new actor in the formulation of a new discourse on Taiwanese nationalism with a concern of Taiwan’s
subjectivity and autonomy. I further argue that the second wave of Taiwanese nationalism has been formulated through symbolic struggle: the performance of the unruly god Nezha has been identified with unruly Taiwan, and Nezha’s attempt to establish his autonomy from his father is an analogy with Taiwan’s struggle to build its own nation.

Finally, I conclude that the god Nezha has become a new actor in the formulation of a new discourse on Taiwanese nationalism with a concern of Taiwan’s subjectivity and autonomy. I further argue that the second wave of Taiwanese nationalism has been formulated through symbolic struggle: the performance of the unruly god Nezha has been identified with unruly Taiwan, and Nezha’s attempt to establish his autonomy from his father is an analogy with Taiwan’s struggle to build its own nation.

We see these two discourses of Taiwanese nationalism having their imagination deriving from their modern transformations of the pre-modern traditions of religion and community. Also, we see these two forms of ‘religious nationalism’ have respectively demonstrated their socio-cultural mobility to certain extents. In the case of Mazu, I argue that the mobility of pilgrims and participants from one household or local temple to another all over Taiwan have connected each person to the goddess and her home temple as a whole, and therefore have to a large degree formulated the sense of belonging and produced an more inclusive, disinterested Taiwanese identity and nationalism.

Nationalism promotes symbols but not beliefs.

In the case of Nezha, I have focused on an exploration of the performance of the Techno Nezha giant on national and international tours in a digital and mobile technology era, placed in the context of nationalist discourses. The new technologies and their use as mediators have led to the development of a new phase of Taiwanese nationalism. In particular, the techno performance of the godly Nezha is promoting Taiwanese subjectivity and autonomy by supporting the creation of imagined relationships between people who have never met, mediated by new technologies and social media but using a pre-modern religious symbol as a new vehicle. Inspired by the mythic figure of Nezha, I argue that the performance in the new technology era expresses and gives form to the affective aspect of the Chinese family system and, consequently, comprises an important constitutive element within which a Chinese subjectivity is produced. I further argue that this new vehicle – the Techno Nezha giant for Taiwanese nationalism in the digital era – demonstrates the Freudian displacement by the younger generation of conflict from the political realm to that of culture. The ‘choice’ of Nezha
would have suggested that culturally Taiwanese youth are simply not concerned with voluntary unification with mainland China, but are instead interested in a symbolic exploration of a conflict that they have come to see as inevitable and unresolvable between Taiwan and China.

Nezha performers, at a national level, attempt to revive Taiwan’s cultural pride, and to inculcate habits of self-assertion. By recovering their physical strength and demonstrating their autonomy and subjectivity, they make themselves capable of resisting Chinese domination: a parallel with Nezha’s conflict with his father. According to Freud, the struggle for power and conflict with the father is not an aberration, but is rather the precondition to human being. The problem is not conflict as such, but how to ensure that the energies of conflict do not spill out into actual violence and war and are instead constructively contained and directed towards the production of symbolic capital in the 21st century’s culture wars.

Finally, if it might be entertained that I have gone too far in my reading of the Techno Nezha performance and demonstration, consider the significance of a repressed desire and an unconscious choice by young people in Taiwan to work with that the unruly god and not Mazu (signifying a unified pan-Taiwanesesness) or some other divinity. Surely, the fact that Nezha is the god they have been selected, consciously or otherwise, is of significance and points not just to religious facts or cultural facts, but to political realities as well.

Bibliography


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