



The Malevolent Icon Lantern Incident

Early Twenty-First-Century Transformations of the Image of the Goddess Mazu in Taiwan

During the 2017 Taipei City Lantern Festival, a twenty-foot-tall lantern of Moniang, a character from Taiwanese artist Wei Tsung-cheng's manga series *Apocalypse of Darkness Warfare*, was inaugurated and put on parade. Moniang represents a new image of the goddess Mazu, incarnated as a cute-sexy high school student. This article examines how this display allowed a new image of Mazu to move from the subculture of "male-oriented" manga creators and fans into a broader public sphere. Debates over the lantern reveal a gap in both generational and political leanings in terms of ideas about the relationship between deities and worshippers. The display of Moniang has opened up the possibility for the younger generation's reconceptualization of divinity to challenge some of the traditional images and rituals at the core of Chinese folk religion.

Keywords: Taiwan—Chinese folk religion—Mazu—manga—Wei Tsung-Cheng

As James Robson notes, “a tension between hiding and revealing thoroughly permeates the different realms of Chinese philosophy, art, literature, and religion” (2016, 180). In the field of Taiwanese folk religion (*minjian zongjiao*), this tension is spatialized, both literally and metaphorically. There is what we might call a sacred core that is characterized by hiddenness. Objects with the most *ling* (efficacious power) are usually at least partially hidden, such as the objects that are sealed into statues for worship (*shenxiang*) to give them life and bring the god into them; the *shenxiang* of the most powerful gods installed in the center of the most interior altar inside temples, farthest away from the worshippers; and the *shenxiang* that ride in covered palanquins during processions around their territory (*raojing*). And then there is a periphery characterized by display, a penumbra where religion bleeds into other social fields. In this sphere of “diffused religion” (Shahar and Weller 1996, 1) or “ambient faith” (Engelke 2012), religious practices, discourses, and especially imagery are not confined to ritual spaces and times but permeate daily life. Thus, in Taiwan, aside from the *shenxiang* on altars in temples and homes, a wide variety of less efficacious images of Daoist and Buddhist deities are seen everywhere—in the art on the facades of temples; on New Year posters; in government-sponsored public art; on signs warning pedestrians not to litter; in movies, television serials, and video games; in shop window displays; on taxicab dashboards; on t-shirts, wallets, stationery goods, credit cards, and on and on.

In this penumbra, where the boundaries between religion and other social fields are permeable, the visual culture of Taiwanese folk religion is constantly changing as it absorbs influences not only from other religions and the fine arts but from commercial culture, democratic politics, and public life generally. While the images from the penumbra very rarely penetrate into the core of hidden power, many scholars have noted the important role that popular culture, including literature, drama, cinema, television, and comic books, plays in giving Taiwanese people their images of gods, and in spreading the worship of particular gods (Shahar and Weller 1996; Shahar 1998; Duara 1988).

Because commercial popular culture plays such an important role in disseminating religious imagery, dramatic and lasting changes in how gods are represented usually take place first through the unnoticed accumulation of individual acts of consumption. It is only in public displays that the emergence of a new type of religious image is made visible to the broader public, acknowledged, and often contested.

Such displays might be seen as bids for legitimacy by one sphere within another, for instance a claim that popular culture has a role to play in religious practice, or that, where government is a secular institution, theological discourse may still inform political debate.

Aside from changes that have been ongoing since the late twentieth century, such as the deterritorialization of deity cults, the corporatization of temple organizations, and the personalization of religious belief (Nadeau and Chang 2003), anthropologists have observed a few new trends in the twenty-first century. First, Taiwanese folk religion has taken an “affective turn” in which hierarchical relationships between deities and worshippers have been reimagined as more egalitarian and based on an intimate, emotional, “heart-to-heart” connection (Lin 2015, 16–18). Second, aesthetics have become more important to worshippers. Young worshippers tend to read temples’ public displays, such as their choices of performance troupes to make up their processions, in terms of style, reading these choices as expressions of something like a brand identity, and they form communities of taste based on these expressed identities (Chi 2018a). Third, younger Taiwanese are more likely than older people to acknowledge that gods are dependent on humans to bring them into presence, and that people interact with deities only as they can imagine their appearances and personalities (Silvio 2019, 116–20).

The new images of Daoist and Buddhist deities embody and transmit these ideas. When new types of representations of gods are removed from their original, more private contexts and put on public display, they introduce broader audiences to these emerging concepts of divinity and its relation to humanity (see the articles by Kari Telle, Janet Alison Hoskins, and Heonik Kwon and Jun Hwan Park in this issue for more on the relationships between public forms of display and emerging concepts of divinity). Changes that take place in the penumbra of displayed religious images can always be read as attempts to transform the occulted core—and defended against or supported as such.

The goddess Mazu is one of the most widely worshipped Daoist deities in Taiwan’s folk religious pantheon. Legend has it that in the Song dynasty a young woman named Lin Moniang, who lived in Meizhou on the coast of Fujian Province, performed miracles to rescue sailors from drowning, and after she died she was deified as Mazu, goddess of the ocean and protector of seafarers. She is worshipped, like other Taiwanese deities, through carved wooden statues called *shenxiang*. Mazu’s *shenxiang* traditionally represent her as a middle-aged woman, with a round face and benevolent expression. She is easily recognizable by her crown with a beaded veil, which often hides her eyes (figure 1).

In the twenty-first century, new styles of representing Mazu have emerged, inspired by Japanese popular culture. In this article, I want to focus on how one particular new image of the goddess Mazu emerged from the subculture of “male-oriented” manga, and then to trace how this image moved into a wider public sphere, into the penumbral space where religion meets national identity politics and commerce, through displays within contexts where these fields intersect.¹ In 2010, the first issue of the manga series *The Apocalypse of Darkness Warfare* (*Ming Zhan Lu*) by Taiwanese artist Wei Tsung-cheng was published.² In the manga, Mazu is incarnated



Figure 1. Traditional *shenxiang* of Mazu on a temple altar. Photograph by Charles (Chiao-He) Lee.

in the form of a sixteen-year-old girl named Lin Moniang. In terms of both her visual representation and her characterization, Moniang is a typical *meng shaonü* (*moe shōjo* in Japanese).³ *Meng shaonü* characters are both innocent and eroticized and are a common selling point in manga created mostly by and for male manga/anime fans (*zhainan* in Mandarin, *otaku* in Japanese) (see figure 2).

First, let me give an overview of how images of deities, and the goddess Mazu in particular, have been changing in the twenty-first century, and then introduce Wei Tsung-cheng's manga series and how it is situated within the constellation of new religious images. Then I will move on to look at how Moniang was removed from the manga and recontextualized through public display in two events: first as a giant lantern on a parade float in the 2017 Taipei Lantern Festival, and then played by an actress in a Taiwanese Opera version of *Apocalypse of Darkness Warfare* performed in 2021. Each of these events introduced Moniang to a different audience and was read as making different claims regarding the legitimacy of Japanese pop culture images within the intersecting fields of religion and identity politics.

In turning a goddess into a *meng shaonü* character, Taiwan here follows trends in Japan, where Buddhist and Shinto themes have been common in manga since the beginning of the industry (Thomas 2012), and where Buddhist temples have used manga style to brand themselves, including by representing goddesses as cute-sexy *moe shōjo*, for slightly longer than those in Taiwan (Porcu 2014). While there is significant overlap in how this new style of representing deities has been introduced in Japan and Taiwan, Taiwanese folk religion and its social context are also different from Japanese Buddhism and its context. The pressure to construct Taiwanese culture and identity in relation to China makes the question of how folk religion is presented both to Taiwanese people and to the world particularly fraught.

Background: Taiwanese religion and politics in the twenty-first century

The new images of Mazu I discuss here were created by artists born in the late 1970s and 1980s, the first generation to come of age after the end of martial law in 1987 and also to grow up surrounded by Japanese cultural imports including manga and anime. The first decade of the twenty-first century, when they were going to college or starting their careers, saw major changes in Taiwan's politics, economy, and society.

In 2000, after over fifty years of rule by the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT), Chen Shuibian became the first president elected from the opposition party, the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). One of the factors in Chen's win was his campaign's mobilization of the youth vote. Young campaign workers developed a new strategy, using the aesthetics of Japanese *kawaii* (cute) fancy goods to attract their generation, creating a logo character of the candidate with a large head, a blank face with large eyes, and a baseball cap (Chuang 2011).

During Chen's two terms, Taiwanese government bureaus and businesses began, following global trends, to adopt the discourses and policies of the creative industries and creative economy (Kong et al. 2006). The growth of the creative industries, it was hoped, would both provide a new labor sector to employ youth as Taiwanese manufacturers moved their factories overseas, and give Taiwan a national brand, creating positive images of Taiwanese culture for both international and domestic consumption. It was not only bureaucrats and CEOs who were invested in branding Taiwan. Many young creative workers were also self-motivated to create a new and uniquely Taiwanese visual culture. These "grassroots" nation branders were dedicated to creating works with an authentic Taiwanese feel (Zemanek 2018). For



Figure 2. The cover of volume 6 of Wei Tsung-cheng's manga series *The Apocalypse of Darkness Warfare* (*Ming Zhan Lu*). Reproduced with permission from Wei Tsung-cheng.

the international market, a main goal was to distinguish Taiwan from the People's Republic of China. For the domestic market, creating new images of Taiwan was more of a strategy to compete with Japanese popular culture, often by taking Japanese genres and aesthetics and localizing them. For both purposes, folk religion—largely gone from the mainland since the Cultural Revolution and distinct from Japanese Buddhism—was one easily available sign of Taiwanese difference (along with Taiwan's Indigenous peoples, night market snacks, and bubble milk tea).⁴

Ironically, at the same time that folk religion was becoming a prominent signifier in the construction of Taiwanese identity, temple officials perceived folk religion to be in crisis, as young people moved to the cities for higher education

and middle-class jobs, abandoning traditional religious practices. Temple committees started looking to the creative industries to attract urban youth as well as income from tourism.

The first wave: Cutification

The emergence of images of Mazu as sexy-cute was preceded by a wave of images of deities that were purely cute. In the mid-2000s, the Family Mart convenience store chain, which had 2,500 stores around the island, regularly gave away small toys in exchange for proof-of-purchase stickers. Until 2007, these toys had all been figurines of American or Japanese cartoon characters, and the CEO wanted to produce a new line of original toys with local flavor. So that year he hired a Taipei design firm, and the designer created a series of small figurines of the most widely worshipped Daoist and Buddhist deities.

These “Good God Toys” (*hao shen gongzai*) had two of the important characteristics associated with the *kawaii* (cute) style of Japanese logo and mascot characters (called *kyara*) such as Hello Kitty—neoteny (oversized heads in proportion to the body) and a lack of texture and features (they had no noses or mouths). They were also made of vinyl, used in many Japanese toys (figure 3). The Good God Toys were a huge hit. Other designers recognized the trend as a business opportunity, and more and more such goods featuring cute, cartoonish images of deities were produced. Similar cute figurines of deities made of plaster had been produced by a couple of souvenir companies for several years, but they were few and sold mostly at tourist markets near temples. It was not until Family Mart’s Good God Toys became a common sight in offices, homes, and shop windows that the media began to report on the “craze” for such images.

As this new type of religious image began to spread through Taiwan’s markets, temples began to commission their own versions of the Good God Toys, to sell as souvenirs or give away to worshippers at special events. These toys kept the overall cute aesthetic, while some added more traditional features, for instance, having them made of ceramic, produced by the same artisans who restored the temple facades, or attaching protective charms to them and encouraging people to pass them over the incense burners in front of the *shenxiang* in the temple, just as bags of incense ash often are to give them power.

There was some resistance to the incorporation of the cute toys from older worshippers. They objected to producing images of the gods that would be treated roughly and then thrown away (or left in bathrooms or other unclean places), and some were also made uncomfortable by the incompleteness of the cute toys’ faces. But this type of image proved to be so popular with most worshippers, and successful in drawing casual visitors to temples, that these objections were eventually overridden (Chang 2017; Silvio 2019).

When I interviewed collectors of cute deity toys, I encountered a few people (all middle-class men) who saw deity toys as “just toys,” and a few others (all women) who believed that they could be treated as similar to *shenxiang*. Most worshippers, however, treated them as something in between, objects that offered blessing and



Figure 3. Mazu toy from the Family Mart's first Good God Figurine series. Photograph by Charles (Chiao-He) Lee.

healing but did not actually contain the deity's spirit. By the end of the 2010s, it had become taken for granted that such cute images of the gods were nearly universally acceptable (making such goods ideal gifts), and that they successfully served to create a sense of "intimacy" (*qinqie gan*) between urban youth alienated from traditional temple culture and the gods (Silvio 2019, chap. 3).

The acceptance of the gods' cutification, the crossover of the Japanese *kawaii* aesthetic in representations of the gods from the market to the temple, was marked through display. Aside from simply displaying the toys and other goods with cute deity images in their souvenir shops, many temples also began to place large balloons or cardboard cutouts of such images at the entrances to temples on holidays (Silvio 2019). Spirit

mediums and worshippers began using cute emojis of gods in their communications on Facebook and Line (Lin 2018b; Chi 2018b).

Cute images of Mazu moved into the political arena as the movement to legalize same-sex marriage, and the backlash against it, intensified between 2013 and 2019, when the Marriage Equality Act was finally passed into law. As the strongest opposition to marriage equality was led by Christian groups (with some conservative Buddhist and Daoist associations joining in), the LGBT proponents of the act began to connect gay men and lesbians' right to legally marry to the constitutional right to religious freedom. They argued that Christianity, followed by less than 4 percent of the population, and in particular an evangelical movement funded by North American organizations, should not be dictating the laws in a country where an estimated 70–90 percent of the population identify as followers of Buddhism, Daoism, or folk religion. These religions have no set tenets regarding sexual object choice or behavior. Thus, activists presented Chinese folk religion as both more authentically Taiwanese and more tolerant than Christianity. For instance, in a 2013 public hearing where citizens presented arguments for and against marriage equality legislation, Cheng Chi-wei, the director of Tongzhi Hotline, Taiwan's largest LGBTQ NGO, framed part of his statement like this:

I am a citizen. I believe in Matsu [Mazu], Buddha, and Pusa [Guanyin], I come from a traditional religious background. My mom always taught us that Matsu and Pusa teach us something—and that is not to do bad things and not to hurt others. They never said you can't be gay. Taiwan is supposed to be a multi-religious environment, not just Catholic or Christian. Please respect other religions. (Cited in Quinn 2015, 108)

By 2014, stickers and posters featuring images of the goddess Mazu with slogans such as “Mazu does not differentiate between straight and gay” (*Mazu bu fen yi tong*) appeared in the annual Pride Parade and other rallies in support of marriage equality (figure 4). That these images of Mazu as an avatar of Taiwanese democratic inclusivity should appear as adorable cartoon characters was overdetermined. These posters and stickers followed what was then already common sense. For people who wished their own image of what Taiwanese identity meant to reach both Taiwanese youth and foreigners, cute was the obvious way to go.

The second wave: Meng Shaonü Mazu

While the first wave of new images of Mazu in the twenty-first century was influenced by the aesthetics and marketing strategies of Japanese *kyara* goods, the second wave came from the more subcultural field of Japanese manga, more specifically the subculture of male-oriented manga and their *otaku* fans. The emergence of this new type of deity image from the subculture of manga into the public nexus of religion, tourism, government, and business was facilitated by movements both within and without the *zhainan* subculture.

Unlike professional product designers, who had produced the majority of cute *kyara*-type images of Buddhist and Daoist deities, full-time professional manga artists are rare in Taiwan. The manga market is dominated by Chinese translations of original Japanese manga, which make up over 90 percent of what is on sale in stores. The vast majority of comics created by local artists in Taiwan use the visual styles, genres, and character types of Japanese manga. Local original comics usually begin as side projects by illustrators, designers, or manga fans and are posted on personal blogs or amateur manga websites. Only those that receive the most positive feedback have a chance at being published professionally.



Figure 4. Sticker handed out by activists at the 2016 Taipei Pride Parade. Design by equalloveofmazu (*Mazu de ai li bu fen yi tong*), reproduced with their permission. Photograph by Huang Yubo.

Within this online subculture of professional and amateur artists sharing their manga, images of Daoist deities as character types from male-oriented manga began to appear around the same time that the popularity of the Good God Toys and other cute deity images passed its peak. One popular series was Salah D's *Hades Items: Apocalypse* (*Yinjian Tiaolie*), first published in 2010, in which General Seven and General Eight (gods in charge of bringing the souls of the dead for judgment) are portrayed as impish youths who dress in fascist-style uniforms and engage in light sado-masochistic play. Their commander, the City God, represented in *shenxiang* as a bearded man, is represented as a mature, sexy woman. This manga is often credited with starting a trend among Taiwanese artists for representing male deities as female. Mazu, though, when she appeared on amateur comics sites, was usually portrayed as a *meng shaonü*.

Throughout the 2010s, the government began offering some forms of direct support for the local comics industry and encouraged the production of manga inspired by local culture. Forms of support included not only grants but the annual Golden Comics Award contest (established in 2010), the funding of an anthology series of comics by local artists about local history and culture (the Creative Comic Collection, begun in 2009), and the establishment of a bookstore/gallery and artist-in-residence program for Taiwanese manga artists housed in a building near the Taipei train station (Taiwan Comic Base, opened in 2019).

It was in this context of increased interest in comics with local content, including religious content, from manga artists, their fans, and the government, that Wei Tsung-cheng's *Moniang* made her debut and moved into the public sphere.

Wei Tsung-cheng's *Moniang*

The character *Moniang* first appeared in Wei Tsung-cheng's manga *The Apocalypse of Darkness Warfare* (hereafter *Apocalypse*). The first volume of *Apocalypse* was published in July 2010, and the most recent, volume 13, in July 2022, with earlier volumes being reprinted. When *Apocalypse* began publishing, Wei was already fairly well known among Taiwanese manga artists and fans. He had started a website for amateur manga artists in 2000 and had moved from briefly selling *tongrenzhi* (amateur comics featuring characters from media franchises, in Japanese, *dojinshi*) to publishing original manga with Future Digi, a company that primarily produces translations of Japanese video games. His previous comics included parodies of political figures and Japanese porn videos, and he had won a couple of awards for them.

In *Apocalypse*, a young, evil Daoist has captured the essence of Mazu's divinity (*shenge*) and injected it into the body of a comatose young girl, Zhao Xiaoyun, producing *Moniang*, who has the memories and souls of both the historical Lin *Moniang* and Xiaoyun inside her. She also has the magical, demon-fighting powers of the goddess. *Moniang* is taken in by Chen Borong, a disobedient high school boy who is also an expert Daoist martial arts master and a member of the *Apocalypse Task Force*, a police unit that fights supernatural creatures. Together with the task force, Borong and *Moniang* work to uncover and foil the villain's plot to unleash the demon dimension into Taiwan. The action takes place in very recognizable sites in northern Taiwan,

and the supporting characters include various Daoist deities and local mythical creatures.⁵

Visually, and in many of its character types and genre conventions, *Apocalypse* falls clearly within what in Taiwan is called the “Japanese system” of manga, but it also draws elements from Hong Kong supernatural *wuxia* (swordfighters) comics. In some ways, *Apocalypse* can be easily classified as a male-oriented manga. Some of the supporting female characters have enormous, button-popping breasts, and almost all of the young female characters wear miniskirts and/or thigh-high stockings. Nevertheless, the series has, to Wei’s surprise, attracted quite a few female fans, including *fu nu* (*fujoshi* in Japanese) who “ship” Chen Borong and his cousin.⁶ In later volumes, the manga has focused more on the female characters’ psychological development.

Moniang is in many ways a typical “magical girl” character (like Sailor Moon), who transforms from a schoolgirl into a fierce warrior. The magical girl is often the heroine of female-oriented manga, but she is also a type of *meng shaonü*, a broad character type characterized by being both innocent and eroticized, which is the selling point for many male-oriented works. Moniang’s face looks young, with huge eyes relatively low in the face and a tiny nose and mouth, and her expression is almost always wide-eyed—happy, puzzled, or frightened. She usually wears a school uniform with a short skirt, a blouse with a floppy bow tie, and thigh high stockings. She is sometimes drawn from angles and in poses that emphasize her legs, buttocks, and breasts.

Moniang’s Mazu-ness is signified by her long white hair (in Taiwanese manga and puppetry, this often signifies that the character has extraordinary powers), and her signature hairpiece featuring two buns above her ears with decorated covers and a headband with golden spikes, which gestures toward the beaded veil and crown, often with side pieces by the ears, found on Mazu *shenxiang*. She takes on even more traditional elements of Mazu’s dress in illustrations at the front or back of some volumes, such as an embroidered shoulder covering, and in her memories as Lin Moniang, she has a silk banner that circles above her head as in many classical



Figure 5. Moniang as the ambassador of Ximen Ding. Photograph by Teri Silvio.

paintings of goddesses and bodhisattvas. When Moniang is separated into her two souls (Zhao Xiaoyun and Mazu), they look the same, distinguished only by some small change in dress.

The first volume of *Apocalypse* sold over eleven thousand copies, making a profit. Although this figure cannot compare with those for popular Japanese manga series, it can be considered quite successful for a locally produced manga. By 2017, nine volumes had been published, and they had sold over eighty thousand copies. The comics were successful enough that issues went into second printings and re-issues. Future Digi began selling tie-in products such as Moniang figurines, and Wei was able to hire several fulltime assistants. Wei was contracted by Japanese manga publisher Comic Catapult to create an international version of *Apocalypse*, and Wei created a new two-volume set that condensed the first three volumes of the original series, restructured and redrawn to make the story easier to follow. In 2017 and 2018 the Japanese version was released as well as a Chinese version published by Future Digi with funding from the Ministry of Culture.

The Malevolent Icon Incident of 2017

Wei Tsung-cheng and Future Digi did not apply for any government grants until after 2017. Nevertheless, they had already benefitted from the increased legitimacy government support granted to the local manga industry. Increasing government support, along with the increasing recognition of the appeal of comics by tourism bureaus and businesses, and the increasing flow of images between the spheres of folk religion and popular culture all made the conditions ripe, by the mid-2010s, for the movement of Moniang out of the subculture of manga/anime fans and into a wider public sphere.

In 2012, Moniang was chosen by the Ximen District Business Association to be the official “ambassador” for the Ximen Ding neighborhood of Taipei, as many key scenes in *Apocalypse* are set there. Banners featuring images of Moniang in various poses have lined the streets of the area ever since (figure 5). Ximen Ding is the site of not only one of the largest chain manga stores in Taipei and many small shops selling manga/anime tie-in products and Japanese character goods but also the historic Red House theater, several cinemas, numerous designer boutiques and cafes, several gay bars and other LGBT-owned businesses, and a weekend craft fair. It is a preferred site for promotional events targeting youth and young professionals, and a common destination for tourists. Thus, the sight of Moniang became part of the background for a wide variety of people passing through the district, although very few of them knew who the character was.

It was not until the 2017 Taipei Lantern Festival, and what became known as the “Malevolent Icon Incident” (*xie shenxiang shijian*), that Moniang was foregrounded by being put on display, and the legitimacy of the new manga-style representation of Mazu was contested. The Yuanxiao Festival or Lantern Festival is the fifteenth day of the first lunar month and marks the end of the New Year holidays. Since the 1990s, both the national and city government tourism bureaus have held large events for the Yuanxiao Festival. Taipei’s was, until 2017, held in large, open venues such as

the plazas in front of the Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial Hall. In 2017, however, the city tourism bureau decided to hold nine days of displays and activities in Ximen Ding. Co-sponsors for the festival included Taiwan Railway, Chunghwa Telecom, banks, insurance companies, hotels, and the two major temples in the district.

The theme of the festival was “Westside Story, Taipei Glory.” The organizers set up seven display areas and several performance stages along a stretch of the main road through the district, between two MRT (subway) stops. The displays included large lantern installations by local artists, a display of student lantern contest winners, and a variety of different types of light shows, including animations and historical photographs projected onto the facades of Qing-dynasty and Japanese colonial-era buildings. Opening night performances were by local children’s theater and acrobatic troupes, as well as Japan’s avant-garde dance and music troupe, World Order. As it was the Year of the Rooster/Chicken, most of the lantern displays were poultry-themed, and small rooster-shaped paper lanterns, designed by a Taiwanese artist, were given to visitors to carry.⁷

The organizers had a twenty-foot-tall lantern of Wei’s Moniang made for display in the festival and the parade on the night of the Yuanxiao Festival. The lantern does not portray Moniang in mini skirt and thigh-high stockings, as the banners do. Rather, she is shown as Mazu, or perhaps the historical Lin Moniang, standing on blue waves, facing forward, wearing a Song dynasty-style robe, and holding a feather fan in her right hand (figure 6).

The lantern was revealed for the press the day before the festival began, by Wei Tsung-cheng and representatives from the sponsoring organizations. This ritual displayed and legitimated the cooperation of the city government, folk religious institutions, local business associations, and the creative industries in making Moniang an official symbol of both the Ximen District and the city. The vice mayor of Taipei was lifted on a crane to draw white dots on the lantern’s eyes. Then the



Figure 6. The Moniang lantern for the 2017 Taipei Lantern Festival (after repainting). Photograph by Wei Tsung-cheng, reproduced with his permission.

chairman of the Tian Hou Temple (Tian Hou, or Empress of Heaven, is another name for Mazu, and this temple features prominently in *Apocalypse*) applied powder to the lantern's cheeks, and Wei applied red paint to its lips (Taipei City Government Tourism Communications Bureau 2017).

The dotting of the eyes is traditionally the final step in the ritual of "inviting the god" (*ru shen*) into a *shenxiang*, investing the statue with vitality and power, and making it a dwelling for the deity's spirit, through which worshippers can communicate with the god. Many of the ritual specialists I interviewed while doing research on the cute deity toys craze thought that dotting the eyes of any anthropomorphic figure could be dangerous, as it might invite "unclean things" to come inhabit it (Silvio 2019, 66–67). The participation of the chairman of the Tian Hou temple may have served to alleviate such fears. I think, however, that the main function of the ritual was to give the lantern a similar status to that of the first wave of new religious images. The vice mayor said in a television interview that the lantern "cartoonized" (*katonghua*) Mazu to make her more attractive to young people. Thus, the lantern was presented as similar to a deity toy, as an object that would be ambiguous in terms of its religious significance, open to interpretation, and therefore acceptable to both worshippers and secular consumers. Hence it was the secular official who performed the most "religious" action of the ritual, while the representative of the folk religious institution performed a part of the ritual with no parallels in traditional religious ceremony, an action that referenced the world of fashion and consumption.

First reactions by the public to the Moniang lantern were mixed at best, and mostly negative. Fans of *Apocalypse* felt that the face of the lantern looked nothing like the original manga character's. They disliked the nose, which was not upturned and cute like the manga version of Lin Moniang, and the "sausage lips," which they found ugly. Young Taiwanese people tend to focus on the gaze of any kind of anthropomorphic figure when making aesthetic judgments about it, and sometimes when judging the efficacy of a *shenxiang*. Fans were most upset by the lantern's eyes, which they said looked "dead." Fans called the lantern the "evil icon" (*xie shenxiang*) and posted their own drawings of the original Lin Moniang character fighting the giant lantern.

The lantern was made by a theater troupe that the city government contracted to create all of the floats for the parade, but several fans assumed that it had been made by traditional religious artisans. These fans attributed the ugliness of the lantern to "the religious world's" lack of familiarity with, or even hostility to, new styles of representing Mazu.

Many sent messages of complaint to Wei Tsung-cheng. Wei then decided to repaint the lantern's face himself. When he was lifted by crane to repaint the face the next day, it was videotaped by both fans and the media, and the "evil icon incident" was trending news on both mainstream and subcultural news networks for a time, reaching many people who did not attend the Lantern Festival in person. Wei claimed that the incident was great publicity for him, and that after it made the news, he got more offers from businesses to cooperate, including from a Japanese cellphone game company.

After this, Wei's Moniang became a reference point within ongoing debates over the legitimacy of manga-style religious images between young manga fans who

were also worshippers and older and more conservative worshippers and cultural activists. Here I want to outline the arguments and counterarguments for and against the legitimacy of the second wave of Japanese pop culture images of Mazu, based on online, press, and media sources from 2017 to 2018. These arguments reveal how manga/anime fans on the one hand and conservative activists on the other see aesthetics, religion, and identity politics as intertwined in different ways.

The Moniang debates

Discussion online quickly moved from the lantern itself to debates over the appropriateness of Moniang as a representation of Mazu. While some conservative worshippers did voice disapproval of the lantern and the manga, the most strenuous objections to the image of Mazu as a *meng shaonü* character did not come from temple committees but rather from political activists who identified with Chinese culture and opposed Taiwanese independence from China. While the critiques of Wei's character took many forms, these activists focused on three interrelated objections: 1) Moniang was too Japanese; 2) Moniang was too sexy; and 3) Wei and the Taipei government were only using Mazu for their own commercial and publicity ends.

Six months after the Lantern Festival, when the General Association of Chinese Culture (GACC) sponsored an exhibit titled "Hello, Miss Lin! Cross-border goddess digital pilgrimage" in Taipei, a group called the Chinese Language Education Foundation (hereafter CLEF) gave a press conference, and a psychology professor at National Taiwan University, Huang Kuang-Kuo, published an editorial critiquing the exhibit. Although the Hello, Miss Lin! exhibit did not include any images from Wei's manga, both brought up the Moniang lantern. Both the CLEF and the GACC, which commissioned the Hello, Miss Lin! exhibit, descend from organizations that were established during Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Cultural Renaissance in the 1960s, a government campaign that was intended to counter the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution going on across the strait by promoting traditional Chinese culture and values. As Donald J. Hatfield has noted, this movement was instrumental in redefining Taiwanese religious practices as "religion" rather than "superstition" and connecting them to Chinese national identity (2019, 265–66). The GACC is headed by the president, and Tsai Ing-wen (DPP) had recently taken over. The GACC's mission had transformed from promoting Chinese culture to promoting Taiwanese culture (Cheung 2019). The CLEF, however, had not changed its orientation. Thus, the opposition between the two organizations was already determined by their alignments with the opposing parties and the "Green" (pro [eventual] Taiwanese independence) and "Blue" (pro [eventual] reunification with China) camps.

Love or hatred of Japanese manga is one stereotyped marker of leanings toward the Green or Blue camps. This dates back to the transition of Taiwan from the "model colony" of the Japanese empire to the Republic of China under Chiang Kai-shek in 1945. The Chiang regime believed that Taiwanese had internalized Japanese colonial ideology and instituted many cultural programs aimed to re-Sinify the population, including making Mandarin the national language and banning (not very effectively) the import of cultural products from Japan, including manga, throughout the period

of martial law (1947–89). The association of manga fandom with a pro-Taiwan/anti-China stance is evident in the title that the CLEF gave to their press conference, “When Cultural Taiwan Independence Meets Cultural China, Chinese Gods Battle Japanese Ghosts” (Anonymous 2017).

The association of Japanese manga, especially male-oriented manga, with pornography is common, not only in the media outside of Japan but within Japan as well. The CLEF claimed that the lantern “dressed Mazu up as a porn star” and “destroyed the sacredness of religious culture.” Huang Kuang-kuo pointed to the fact that *Apocalypse*’s tie-in products included pillows. “In Taiwanese folk religious belief, an icon absolutely cannot be placed in the bedroom,” he wrote. “Using the belief of the masses in Mazu to design this kind of ‘Lin Moniang hanging cloth’ and ‘hugging pillow,’ if this isn’t a desecration of the goddess, then what is?” (Hwang 2017). Finally, these critics argued that Wei and the Taipei government were only using Mazu for their own commercial and publicity ends. Sincere worship, they argued, is not “ordinary creative culture industry consumer behavior.”

Fans of *Apocalypse* countered the objection that the lantern was obscene by pointing out that the lantern’s body was fully covered and that the perception of obscenity and anti-Japanese sentiment were linked. One wrote, “Hwang Kuang-kuo just hates Japan, ok? It doesn’t matter whether it’s manga/anime or porn, both were developed in Japan, so of course someone with a Great China ideology would oppose it.” One fan in a discussion group asked, “Isn’t Hwang a Christian?,” harking back to the discourse of the Marriage Equality movement that such strict sexual moralism is actually antithetical to the spirit of Taiwanese folk religion. Fans also defended the original Moniang character design, arguing that when the historical Lin Moniang died and was deified, she was a young woman, so portraying her as such is actually more suitable than the traditional images of Mazu as motherly.

Wei also countered accusations of blasphemy by saying that he threw divination blocks at a Mazu temple every time he drew a new manga in the series, and that the answer had always come back indicating Mazu’s approval. Fans told a story that had circulated in their chat groups for a while, that a fan had drawn a pornographic *tongrenzhi* (fan manga) featuring Moniang. This fan had gotten into a traffic accident as he was taking it to the printers—just as he passed a Mazu temple. As YouTuber and novelist WalkTone put it in a YouTube video that was viewed over ninety thousand times, “It’s the Empress of Heaven who holds the exclusive copyright here . . . the Empress of Heaven manages her own personal image for herself, ok!” (WalkTone 2017).

In the same video, WalkTone also argued against the idea that participation in the capitalist creative industries and sincere faith are necessarily exclusive. At the end of the same video, titled “My Moniang Was Never That Meng?: Resolving 3 Big Doubts about the Moniang Lantern,” his tone turns from satirical to a demonstration of sincerity. As we see videos of Wei Tsung-cheng filming a video and mugging for the camera, screenshots of Wei’s manga platform, and newspaper articles on Wei and WalkTone, WalkTone says in the speeded-up voice he uses throughout the video:

Some Big Brothers might say, “Hah, caught you! The artist who draws Lin Moniang, isn’t he a pervert?” Correct, teacher Tsung-cheng is a pervert. Not only that, he’s a really dedicated pervert! Every time I see this pervert, I can’t help but think of how, a long time ago, there was an 18-year-old who created the first platform in Taiwan for original comics, which launched countless young manga artists. He used every kind of perverse and satirical manga to corrupt the children of the time. Now seventeen years have passed, and one of those little kids who was poisoned by him grew up, and became a little YouTuber called “Fat Otaku Qingliu” [a nickname for WalkTone]. This YouTuber absorbed all kinds of perverse thoughts.

At this point, the tone changes. WalkTone continues, at a slower pace:

And he continued to promote reading and the spirit of creativity in Taiwan, even making this video, just to tell the world: cultural creativity is not a [tourist] market, it is countless nights, infinite persistence watered with sweat. Respect for the gods does not lie in mere words, it lies in working hard and in persisting, with every stroke of the brush, with every drawing, to make her name radiate over the whole world.

During this speech, we see a series of drone shots of the Moniang float in the Lantern Festival parade. Then there are a series of photographs of Wei worshipping Mazu in a temple and accepting awards, the Lin Moniang banners hanging in Ximen and a monumental bronze Mazu statue, and finally transitioning to a video of boats adorned with both national and temple flags, carrying *shenxiang* of Mazu on pilgrimage across the Taiwan Strait, interspersed with clips of temple festival activities—people lighting incense, dragon dancers, etc. This is followed by a montage of Mazu *shenxiang* and people worshipping (including one white foreigner). Finally, the video ends with two screens with parallel composition: the image of a traditional Mazu *shenxiang* flanked by her demons-turned-assistants, Qian Li Yan and Shun Feng Er, and then Wei’s Moniang with his cute versions of the two helpers. The background music here, which grows increasingly loud, is the theme song from the 2016 Disney animated film *Moana*, “How Far I’ll Go,” played on the violin, drawing a parallel between Lin Moniang/Mazu and a Disney princess from a Pacific island, known for her connection to the divine and her desire to go out into the world.

Many fans were very moved by this part of the video; in fact, the majority of comments on the video claimed that the viewer was moved to tears. Many also echoed WalkTone’s characterization of creative labor as a kind of sacrifice, and his desire to globalize knowledge about and belief in Mazu.

While the conservative critics saw a contradiction between the commercialism of the creative industries and religion, for Wei, WalkTone, and their fans, the creative industries belong in the sphere of religion because of the similarities between creative labor and worship—or more precisely, because they see worship as a creative act. As one comment below WalkTone’s video put it, “Actually, Mazu’s form is created by the mass of worshippers. The times are changing. To let more people know our traditional culture, first change her outward appearance into a style that it’s easy for the young generation to accept. Isn’t this a way of passing on the culture?”

Conclusion: Moniang moves toward the core?

Debates over the legitimacy of new types of religious images involve much wider conflicts of worldview, which value different kinds of relations among religion, art, politics, and the economy. The display of the Moniang lantern, in a context in which government bureaucracy, the tourism industry, the subculture of male-oriented manga artists and fans, and folk religious leaders and worshippers all had a stake, revealed different views of the nature of Japanese manga characters, particularly *moe shōjo* (*meng shaonü*), the nature of Chinese folk deities, and the relationship between the two. These differences articulate a generation gap, which in turn articulates identity politics.

For the older critics of the lantern and Wei's manga, religion is imagined through the lens of politics. For them, the power of deities is a kind of authority, which must be respected through the maintenance of traditions and boundaries. Thus, Moniang cannot be a legitimate religious figure for them. As a character in a male-oriented manga, she is the opposite of authoritative—an object of consumption, vulnerable, passive, and arousing feelings that fall outside the boundaries of what they see as religious.

For the younger fans, religion is imagined through the lens of fandom, as a field of emotion and mood rather than power. Unlike the conservative critics, they see Moniang as a fitting incarnation of Mazu precisely because she is a *moe shōjo* character. *Moe* characters (not all of which are young women) are designed to create a “euphoric response” (Galbraith 2009; see also Azuma 2009). This euphoric response to *moe* characters may include the same feelings (affection, desire to protect, perhaps also disgust) as those elicited by *kawaii* characters, but also others, including not only the sexual but also the spiritual (Galbraith 2019, 124–25). Moniang embodies the younger generation's view of deities—a consciously created image that evokes personality through style and elicits an intimate, emotional connection (Silvio 2019, chap. 3).

To put this another way, the older generation privileges the hidden core of Chinese folk religion, that which has changed little over the centuries and which, they believe, should be protected from the fuzzy boundaries of the penumbra of folk religion, where social fields interweave and popular culture can present new images that challenge tradition. The younger generation, however, focuses on the penumbra, where the presentation of the gods is open to change. These views of Mazu are tied to identifications with China, and with Taiwan as a part of China that carries on its pre-twentieth-century traditions versus identification with Taiwan as distinct from China, and a culture that is characterized by constant absorption and localization of international popular culture. If Taiwan's distinctiveness from China lies in the flexibility of its culture and the openness of its folk religion, then how Mazu is represented not only can change, it must.

It remains to be seen whether the second wave of Japanese pop-influenced images of Mazu will be incorporated into the visual culture of Taiwanese temples themselves, as the first wave of *kawaii* images was, but there is some evidence that Moniang is moving closer to the hidden spaces of Chinese folk religion. Moniang was introduced to a new cultural sphere, that of older forms of popular culture or folk art, in January

2021, when a Taiwanese Opera version of *Apocalypse* was performed by the Ming Hwa Yuan troupe. The performance was sponsored by the National Center for the Traditional Arts as part of the Taiwan Traditional Theater Festival and had brief runs at theaters in New Taipei City and Taichung (figure 7).

Taiwanese Opera (*koa-a-hi*) has a close relationship with folk religion, as throughout its history it has been performed as an offering to the gods (and entertainment to attract crowds) at temple festivals. Stories about the origins and exploits of deities are also a common source of *koa-a-hi* narratives, and until the 1970s, many Taiwanese people's sense of what the gods and goddesses look and act like came from *koa-a-hi*.

Koa-a-hi has also become, since the late 1990s, an important symbol of Taiwanese culture. Ming Hwa Yuan is the oldest and largest *koa-a-hi* troupe in Taiwan, founded in 1926, and continuously run by the same family. The troupe frequently represents Taiwan in overseas arts festivals.

Like folk religion, *koa-a-hi* has been losing its audience in the twenty-first century and has been adopting a number of strategies to attract younger people back to the theater. Since the late 2010s, Ming Hwa Yuan has been trying to attract new audiences with crossover shows in which the troupe blends *koa-a-hi* with some other popular genre, for instance adapting a historical novel or adding song and dance numbers in

the style of Japan's Takarazuka Revue. In 2018, the troupe was looking for a work popular with young people that it could adapt to the stage, and a friend of some of the actors recommended *Apocalypse of Darkness Warfare*. Chen Chao-hsien, the producer, told me that she chose the manga because it takes place in Ximen Ding, a place local youth know intimately, and because the goddess Mazu is very important to *koa-a-hi* performers—many temples traditionally hire *koa-a-hi* troupes to perform for Mazu's birthday. Ming Hwa Yuan had in fact performed the story of Mazu's deification in 2013. That production was performed in a very traditionalist style, with full use of the traditional musical repertoire and stylized gestures, and with costumes modeled on historical images. The image of Mazu presented in this performance of *Apocalypse* provided a striking contrast.

The script was adapted from the international version of *Apocalypse*, and new music was written to add to



Figure 7. Program for the Ming Hwa Yuan performance of *Apocalypse of Darkness Warfare* (Ming Zhan Lu), 2021. Reproduced with permission from the Ming Hwa Yuan Arts and Cultural Group.

the traditional tunes. The show was performed in the *opeila* style, a bricolage style that combines pop music (or here, original music) with the traditional repertoire and features fantastical plots, special effects, and lots of comedy. This style was developed in the post-war decades and was denigrated as chaotic and overly influenced by Japanese and American pop culture by intellectuals in the 1970s–90s, but it has since been rehabilitated and reframed as reflecting Taiwan’s multiculturalism and Taiwanese culture’s ability to absorb and adapt global trends (Silvio 2009).

The troupe tried to recreate the visual feel of a manga, with a multimedia set that featured animations projected onto the backdrop and costumes inspired by manga/anime cosplayers. When I interviewed members of the troupe a few months after the Taipei shows, they thought they had been relatively successful in drawing in some manga fans without losing their traditional fans, who are mostly middle-aged women, and who lean Green politically. They looked at their Facebook page and online discussions and said that they guessed about 70 percent of the comments about the show by manga fans were positive (they could tell who the manga fans were because they used manga characters as their icons). They also heard from some *koa-a-hi* fans who did go on to read the original manga.

Chen Chao-hsien compared Ming Hwa Yuan’s version of *Apocalypse* with the troupe’s performance of *Mazu Zhuan* in 2013. In *Mazu Zhuan*, whenever there was a disaster at sea, Mazu went to the rescue. But in *Apocalypse*, Moniang is haunted by the memory that she was not able to save her own father and brother from drowning. With *Apocalypse*, the troupe wanted “to show the humanity behind the gods.” Mazu shares Zhao Xiaoyun’s vulnerability, which is something the troupe members think the audience identified with. At the performance I saw, Sun Tsui-feng, who has been Ming Hwa Yuan’s star performer for decades and played a supporting role in *Apocalypse*, summed up what the troupe thought was the message of the story during the curtain call:

Through this work, we actually want to communicate a very simple idea: we are often like Moniang. Gods sacrifice themselves and absorb a lot of negative energy, because they want to make the world a better place. Sometimes they lock themselves up, sever all their connections, take on all the responsibility themselves. Does that make the world better? But in this play, luckily, Lin Moniang has Chen Borong, who holds out his hand to her. He gives her love, he gives her concern, he lets her know she is not alone. I hope after seeing this play, we can all go out and become Chen Borongs for other people—this is the real reason that the world can become better.

This may be a more radically egalitarian vision of the interdependence of deities and humans than that held by the fans of the manga, but the interdependence is in itself traditional, as is the idea that deities are most relatable when they are embodied by real people. As Lin Wei-ping has noted, the two main media through which people communicate with Taiwanese folk religion’s deities are *shenxiang* and human spirit mediums. She writes, “Humans are fundamentally different from statues; they are dynamic, spontaneous, and sensual. . . . They can form a much closer affective connection with the adherents than statues. However, spirit mediums are also temporary and provisional; they are not as durable and long-lasting as statues” (Lin



Figure 8. The figurine of Moniang with incense burner in Wei Tsung-cheng's studio. Photograph by Teri Silvio.

2015, 10). As goes for the core, the field of religion proper, so goes for the penumbra of popular images.

Aside from being displayed in human form within a genre associated strongly with both Taiwanese religion and national identity, Wei's Moniang was also displayed in an exhibit called "Meeting Buddha and Deities No. 9: Blessing Comic Exhibition" at the Museum of World Religions in New Taipei City in 2020. The museum was established by a Buddhist monk to provide ecumenical religious education in Taiwan. The exhibit included a collection of drawings of *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas* by Japanese manga artists, donated to aid the victims of the 2013 Fukushima tsunami and nuclear power plant disaster, supplemented in Taiwan with a collection of drawings of Buddhist, Daoist, and Christian images provided by local manga artists and illustrators.

Wei Tsung-cheng himself has adopted the character into his religious practice. In his studio, he placed a figurine of Moniang on a shelf, with a small incense burner in front of it (figure 8). He and his editor took the figurine to a local Mazu temple and consulted with the specialists there. They were told not to dot the eyes, but that they could pray to it, which he and his colleagues do. Wei does not treat the figurine exactly as he would a traditional *shenxiang*, however. He said he did not put a Moniang figurine on his home altar, as there is a *shenxiang* of Guanyin there. And when he wants to throw the divination blocks, which he does before he sends any new volume to press, he goes to a temple. Wei said:

Daoism, it's actually up to you. That is to say, it doesn't have any very strict rituals that you must do or anything. It's like we say, "If your heart is sincere, the gods will be with you (*xin cheng ze ling*)."

If you have a concrete image in front of your eyes, it will help you to imagine, but even if you don't have any image in front of you it's still okay, just so long as you are sincere in your mind. . . . I'm sincere, I believe that I'm promoting Mazu culture, so I have confidence.

Wei's discourse here echoes very precisely that of the women who believed that the Family Mart Good God Toys could serve as *shenxiang* for worship. Wei and his coworkers may be outliers here, as were the women who claimed that toys of deities could serve as objects of worship. Yet it is not unthinkable that images of Mazu as an attractive young woman would ultimately move from the sphere of public display—where religion blends with the tourism industry, the creative industries, and government—into the core of traditional aesthetics and ritual. A 2021 news report tells of a new *shenxiang* of Mazu installed in a temple in Nantou County that has a young face, wears glittery blue eyeshadow, and has dyed purple hair styled in a fashionable bob (Song and Gu 2021). The *shenxiang* was made and installed through very traditional means. It was carved and dressed according to a vision of Mazu that the traditional craftsman who made it received in a dream. Before the ritual to invite Mazu's divinity into the statue was performed, he performed a divination ritual to ask Mazu if she approved, and then the newly made *shenxiang* was passed over the incense burner of an older Mazu *shenxiang* at a famous temple in Tainan. Perhaps significantly, this “most fashionable Mazu” does not wear the beaded veil over her eyes. It may be a new imagining of not only the goddess that is moving into the inner recesses of Taiwanese folk religion but of display itself, and the openness to interpretation and emotional connection it allows.

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NOTES

1. The Japanese manga industry and manga fans divide manga into the rough categories of “male-oriented” and “female-oriented.” The term “male-oriented” when used among fans in Taiwan often refers to manga featuring sexualized female characters, but it can also refer to the range of genres primarily created by and for boys and men, e.g., adventure and sports manga. Female-

oriented manga, written primarily by and for girls and women, includes genres such as straight romance and “Boys Love.” There are genres that do not fit well into these categories, and fandom crossovers are not uncommon (e.g., when women fans of Boys Love manga read sports manga and imagine the male heroes in romantic relationships with each other).

2. The original English translation for the manga was *Ming Zhan-lu: Final Destiny of the Formosan Gods*. Starting from volume 10, the English title was changed to *The Apocalypse of Darkness Warfare*, although the Chinese title remained the same. For the sake of consistency, I use the new title throughout this article.

3. For clarity, in this article I will use “Moniang” to refer to the manga character, and “Lin Moniang” to refer to the historical figure.

4. Folk religion, especially the worship of Mazu, did experience something of a revival in southern China, especially in Fujian, the location where Lin Moniang was born and from which most of Taiwan’s early Chinese settlers migrated (Hatfield 2010; Yang 2004). It should also be noted that Taiwanese folk religion incorporates Buddhist deities in its pantheon, although they are often represented visually in different styles from those common in Japan.

5. For an analysis of the theology expressed in Wei’s *Apocalypse*, see Silvio 2018.

6. “Shipping” refers to fans’ imagining two characters as lovers who are not lovers in the canon text.

7. I did not attend the 2017 Taipei Lantern Festival in person. My description is based on news reports and blog posts by people who did attend.

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