

Virtual Recentralization: Pilgrimage as Social Imaginary in the Demilitarized Islands between China and Taiwan

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In the summer of 2008 I accompanied the people of Ox Horn, a village of the Mazu islands, on a direct-sailing (*zhihang*) pilgrimage from Taiwan to China. It was the first pilgrimage that the villagers had ever organized. When the ferry sailed into port in China, there was a great tumult in the cabin. The pilgrims hurried to the deck with their cameras and excitedly started photographing the scenery along the shore, their expressions a mixture of curiosity and wonder at coming to a place they had only imagined before.

Pilgrimage (*jinxing*) is an important topic in the study of Chinese religion and has attracted the attention of scholars from various disciplines (Chang 2002; Dott 2004; Naquin and Yu 1992; Sangren 1987). Sangren's seminal work, *History and Magical Power in a Chinese Community* (1987), took this subject to a new level by investigating the underlying cultural logic of pilgrimage and challenging previous, structural-functionalist approaches in the study of Chinese religion. His book is rich in its discussion of yin/yang cultural ideas and how they operate in pilgrimage and other rituals. However, if we look at contemporary pilgrimages, particularly the recent popular cross-strait ones between China and Taiwan (Lin, Chang, and Tsai 2003; Stewart and Strathern 2007; 2009), we find the picture has taken on new tones and

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emphases. Cultural ideas are harder to identify since the rituals have become more eclectic, novel, and performance-oriented. They are characterized by actors participating for divergent reasons (Hatfield 2010) or by media technologies that are creating a new transnational ritual community (Yang 2004). How do we explain these modern, non-primordial aspects of pilgrimages, which are now common in both China and Taiwan?

In a general analysis of the recent transformations of Chinese religion in Taiwan, Weller points out that the emergence of novel religious phenomena is related to Taiwan's current marginal position in the world economic and political system (2000). These religious changes, he asserts, reflect the political and economic turmoil that has beset the country since the 1990s (*ibid.*: 498). Weller's observation about these new religious developments is important. By using the pilgrimages of the Mazu islanders, I will further pursue how these novel phenomena are correlated to—but, crucially, not merely the consequences of—the neoliberal economy of the China-Taiwan coastal area. These pilgrimages, more correctly, are means by which the islanders imagine and reconfigure their current political and economic situations. In what follows, then, I will examine the imaginative aspects of contemporary pilgrimages and, in doing so, show how they differ from pilgrimages we are used to seeing in Taiwan and China.

When Victor Turner brought the issue of pilgrimage into prominence in anthropology, he had already noticed pilgrimage's speculative and imagination-generating qualities. For him, it was a liminal or liminoid phenomenon (1974; Turner and Turner 1978), a stage of reflection in which ritual symbols work to challenge the relationships, persons, and environment that neophytes take for granted, and people are relieved from social constraints (1967: 105). Writing about the relationships among pilgrimage, liminality, and imagination, he stated: "Liminality is not only *transition*, but also *potentiality*, not only 'going to be,' but also 'what may be'" (Turner and Turner 1978: 3).

Studies have challenged Turner's model for being too divorced from the political and economic processes that shape pilgrimage (Eade 2000: xii; Eade and Sallnow 1991: 2). Turner's observations on pilgrimage and imagination, particularly when applied to contemporary society, influenced strongly as it is by modern tourism and globalization (Badone and Roseman 2004; Coleman and Eade 2004; Morinis 1992), look somewhat static.

More recent literature on imagination offers us fresh insights into this issue. Benedict Anderson famously argued that nations are imagined communities; with the decline of religion and monarchies, print-capitalism provided people with a new way to think about themselves and relate to others (1991 [1983]). While Anderson made the case that print-capitalism laid the base for national consciousness, it was Harvey who thoroughly delved into the development of late capitalism and linked it to the appearance of postmodern imaginations. He elucidated how the flexible accumulation of capital compressed

spatial and temporal experiences, which further mediated postmodern ways of thinking and doing (1990: 201). The cultural forms of postmodernism are the consequence of this mode of capitalism, or to follow Harvey's later usage, neoliberalism (2005). Harvey's analysis of contemporary cultural phenomena through the lens of capitalism is provocative, but his Marxist approach tends to oversimplify cultural forms and practices, and it is here that anthropologists can offer more profound observations.

For contemporary anthropologists, cultural imaginations are not just reflections or consequences of capitalism or neoliberalism, but also people's imaginary reconfigurations of economic and social conditions. These imaginations contain people's experience and criticism of capitalism, as well as their aspirations for the future. This perspective is especially clear in recent work on southern and eastern Africa. Deploying a sharp sense of the economic changes in South Africa, Comaroff and Comaroff illustrated how people's mounting preoccupation with zombie workers cannot be separated from neoliberal capitalism, which has created new classes, translocalized the division of labor, and rendered the financial order autonomous from production (1999; 2000; 2002). Zombies are thus an imaginative play, and a criticism of the world gone awry through grotesque figures imbued with despair, destruction, and terror (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 316). Similarly, Weiss has shown that the fantasies of urban youths in Tanzania, concretized in newly appearing barbershops (*kinyozi*), must be understood from the vantage of neoliberal reform in that country. Importantly, he points out that barbershops are forms of aspiration (2009: 36) that create possibilities and hope for young men. In these shops, where tradition and modernity are conflated, Tanzanians imaginatively articulate the actual and the possible, and act on a world they remake for themselves. These studies together illustrate that cultural practices are less an expression or emulation of the global order than the local people's imaginary reconstitution of economic and social realities (see Kapferer, Eriksen, and Telle 2009).

These discussions of imagination and its various reorientations of the global economy bring us new insights into the study of pilgrimage in general, and Chinese/Taiwanese pilgrimage in particular. For my focus here on the recently demilitarized islands between China and Taiwan, Taylor's concept of the "social imaginary"—which encompasses how people imagine their social circumstances, their expectations, and the images underlying these expectations—is particularly helpful for probing relationships between imagination and social transformation. In his analysis of Western modernity, Taylor points out that its rise and development are inseparable from a certain kind of "social imaginary" which he defines as: "the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings ... and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms; it is carried in images, stories, and legends ... this social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a

widely shared sense of legitimacy. In addition, we should note that what start off as theories held by a few people may come to infiltrate the social imaginary, first that of elites, perhaps, and then of society as a whole” (2002: 106).

In other words, Taylor suggests that Western modernity is constitutive of certain social imaginaries, which originate in the way people imagine their social existence and are often found in stories or legends. Above all, Taylor emphasizes that these imaginaries are not just a set of abstract ideas, but actually enable collective practices and give them validity (2002: 91; 2004: 24).

Taylor’s concept of social imaginary can help us understand the significance of a series of direct-sailing pilgrimages between China and Taiwan launched since 2000 by people of Mazu, a group of demilitarized islands. Since military rule was abolished in 1992, Mazu has gone through important social transitions. These became more drastic after 2000 when a series of new “direct links” were promulgated connecting Taiwan and China. These changes have challenged the future role of the Mazu islands and left their inhabitants with a great sense of uncertainty. In what follows, I examine the newly invented pilgrimages under these changing social conditions.

As the people of Mazu hardly practiced large-scale pilgrimages before 2000, my analysis first focuses on the imaginative qualities of these recent rituals, qualities that I refer to collectively as “virtual recentralization.” “Recentralization” connotes the islanders’ longing to regain their important Cold War status as the focal point between China and Taiwan, even as this longing is “virtual” rather than real, since cross-strait tensions continue to lessen. These pilgrimages repositioned them into the southeast neoliberal zone of China, and opened a way for them to speculate on the possibility of becoming a mediator between China and Taiwan. I will argue that this type of pilgrimage is an imaginative work that was originally designed by the elites to attract attention from both sides of the strait. It won the support of most of the Mazu people because for them it generates hope and potentialities and points to a future; it tells us not so much what they are but rather what they want to be.

Following this, and inspired by the scholars reviewed above, I show how each of these journeys was not only a response to, but also a specific reconfiguration of the dizzying political and economic changes in the relationship between China and Taiwan during this period. This is why the forms of all of these pilgrimages appear to be improvised, contingent, and suffused with elements of fiction and fantasy. They differed from traditional pilgrimages in important ways: they were oriented toward performance and novelty, rather than transmitting permanent and solid religious values. Each pilgrimage sought a new kind of connection between the two lands, one that would be more eclectic in purpose and less sovereign.

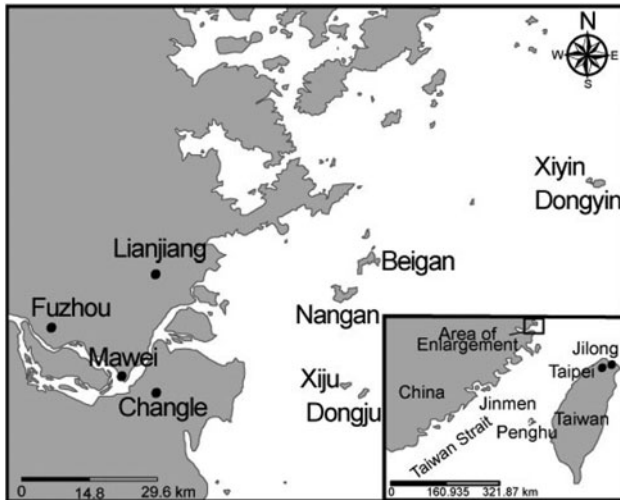
Finally, because these pilgrimages are the imaginary reconstitutions of cross-strait realities, they are inevitably susceptible to oscillations in the macro China-Taiwan relationship, as a result of which recentralization is

sometimes on the verge of vanishing. However, I suggest that it is precisely the virtual qualities of the pilgrimages that continue to create opportunities and hopes for the Mazu people to participate in the fast-changing world.

THE MAZU ISLANDS AND THE WAR

The Mazu Islands comprise an archipelago along the northeastern coast of China's Fujian Province, and consist of Xiyin, Dongyin, Beigan, Nangan, Xiju, Dongju, and other minor islands about 16 nautical miles from the city of Fuzhou (Map 1). Tracing the historical data, most local scholars suggest that the collective name of the islands, Mazu, came from the Goddess Mazu (Li 2006; Wang 2008). In the past these islands served as a resting stop for fishermen from the counties of Lianjiang and Changle during the fishing season. Owing to its nearness to China, Mazu had close economic ties with the mainland. Since a large percentage of Mazu's population depended on fishing as their main source of income, the fishermen used to bring their stocks to Fuzhou or Lianjiang to sell and trade for daily goods. In this way, the Mazu islands and the eastern Fujian region were integrated both ecologically and economically.

Since Mazu and the Chinese mainland were not considered separate entities, Mazu residents felt no need to set up their own ancestral halls on the islands. In one case, families on the mainland stood up for their Mazu relatives who were bullied on the outer islands by "opening the ancestral hall" (*kai citang*) on the mainland and carrying sedan chairs to the offending village as



MAP 1 Taiwan, China, and the six Mazu Islands (Xiyin, Dongyin, Beigan, Nangan, Xiju, and Dongju).

a sign of protest (Liu 1996b). Not only were there no ancestral halls in Mazu, but most of the important rituals were held on the mainland. As a result, early settlers in Mazu conducted very few large-scale rituals such as pilgrimages, and house altars were simple and rather shabby. Even today, in the old houses, one can find a hole dug in a corner and ancestral tablets or photographs placed arbitrarily about, with sundry goods piled around the tablets. This is in stark contrast to Taiwanese from south Fujian, who maintain a sense of solemnity around their house altars.¹ One reason behind this is that the Mazu residents never planned to stay there long; they were ready to return to the mainland at any time. This is also reflected in the local language, a Fuzhou dialect, in which going to Mazu is described as “going out” (*gie lau*) and returning to the mainland is “coming home” (*tso lie*).

The arrival of Chiang Kai-shek’s troops in 1949 drastically changed the fate of the Mazu islands. The rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, and between China and Taiwan, turned the Jinmen and Mazu islands into frontline Cold War military bases (Szonyi 2008). The pre-1949 fluidity of social lives was interrupted and the mutually dependent economic ties between Mazu and China severed. Nor was it easy for the islanders to substitute these ties with a close connection to Taiwan: Mazu is 114 nautical miles from Taiwan, and frequently poor conditions in the Taiwan Strait greatly hamper sea travel, until 1994 the only mode of civilian transport between them. The result was that the islands became even more isolated.

At the same time, the military government deprived the people of Mazu of many civil liberties, and their major occupation, fishing, also came under stringent restrictions. By around 1970, a large percentage of fishermen were heavily in debt (Mazu Ribao She 1966–1972). In the 1970s Taiwan began to relax its immigration restrictions; this was a time when the country was about to embark upon its early phase of industrialization and needed a massive supply of labor. Thus, a large number of Mazu people began moving to Taiwan to work in factories.² The focus of the present study, Ox Horn Village, was the biggest fishing village in Mazu at that time, and saw a great portion of its population emigrate to Taiwan. By the 1990s, when the War Zone Administration Committee was abolished, the village’s population had diminished severely, and abandoned and dilapidated buildings were everywhere (Liu 1996a). Today there are around 210 households in Ox Horn, according to the bureau of household registration.

Most of the residents of Mazu had immigrated from the east coast of Fujian Province, and Mazu retains a strong eastern Fujian culture. Not only

¹ Not all families share the same habits. Many Mazu residents set up altars for deity statues or ancestral tablets. However, this is influenced by practices in Taiwan since most of the altars are purchased from there.

² The official population of the Mazu islands, according to the bureau of household registration, is a little under ten thousand, but that is a significant over-count.

is the language different from that spoken in Taiwan, but the customs and traditions also betray obvious differences. For example, the deities worshipped by Mazu residents, such as the Five Emperors (Wuling Gong), the Lady of Linshui (Linshui Furen), and the Lord of the White Horse (Baima Zunwang), all originated in the eastern Fujian area.³ The only popular deity worshipped in common with Taiwan is the Goddess Mazu.

AN EMERGING COMMUNITY AND ITS NEW PROBLEMS

With the lessening of tensions across the Taiwan Strait in recent years and the end of the “War Zone Administration” (*zhandi zhengwu*) in 1992, Mazu entered a new era. After the military government withdrew its control, the challenge confronting residents was how to rebuild their society. Under the influence of a new national cultural policy that encouraged local development, toward the end of the 1990s Mazu elites actively launched a number of community projects (Y. Cao 1998).⁴ They began with Ox Horn since it had once been the biggest village but had since lost the most people. Although the first wave of community development was unsuccessful, it gave local elites the opportunity to observe and reflect, to listen to the voices of different residents, and to realize the importance of religion in the local context (Yang 2008). Later, they worked together with the villagers to build a new temple, finished in 2008, which integrated the eight deities from all the neighborhoods. In this way, the temple unified the entire village, with Wuling Gong as the main deity.⁵ On the strength of their leadership, the main temple committee members have won several important elections in the Mazu islands since then. The pilgrimage that is the major focus of this paper was made to the ancestral temple in China after this new temple was inaugurated.

The challenges faced by Mazu in contemporary times include not only to rebuild its community, but also to negotiate the rapidly changing relations between China and Taiwan. The 1992 abolition of the War Zone Administration presented the islands with a dilemma. On one hand, it brought about many changes and new possibilities for the residents. For instance, a civilian county government was elected in 1994, and in that same year the first airport for civilians, albeit a small one, was completed, allowing people to visit Mazu freely. In 1997, a new ship, *Tai-ma lun* (Taiwan-Mazu-ship), replacing the old military personnel transport ships, began to sail between Mazu and

³ For Wuling gong (or the Five Emperors), see Szonyi 1997. For the Lady of Linshui, see Bap-tandier 2008.

⁴ The new national cultural policy, “*shequ zongti yingzao*” (literally, “construction for community integration”), has been in place in Taiwan since the mid-1990s. Lu has discussed the process and its results (2002).

⁵ The present paper does not discuss the issue of temple reconstruction and community identity, something I have focused on elsewhere (Lin 2009b). For more on the significance of constructing a new temple for people in China and Taiwan, and a review of relevant literature, see Lin (2009a: 24).

Taiwan. The “small three directs” (*xiao san tong*),⁶ which connected Taiwan to Fuzhou City in China via Mazu, were initiated in 2001. Moreover, with the widespread availability of the Internet since 2000, Mazu became linked to the entire world.

The net result is that Mazu today is open to a far wider array of forces and influences than ever before. A speech by a former mayor of Mazu expresses this clearly: “In the past, the impression people had of Mazu was that of an isolated island. Only soldiers from Taiwan came here to fulfill their military service.... Now [things have changed]; Mazu has to look beyond Taiwan. It should expand its worldview to include China and the world” (Liu 2000). He suggested that the people of Mazu should set themselves the goal of transforming the islands into “the pearl of eastern Fujian, the place of hope” (*mindong zhi zhu, xiwang zhi xiang*).

On the other hand, these forward-looking pronouncements disguise the fact that Mazu is simultaneously losing its strategic significance in cross-strait relations as a consequence of the very forces that opened it to the world. This is revealed in Mazu people’s own accounts: they used to consider themselves as “a shield protecting the Taiwan Strait” (*taihai pingzhang*) and “an anti-communist springboard” (*fangong tiaoban*), proud slogans indicating their sense of their own importance in protecting Taiwan from China. Nowadays, in sharp contrast, terms like “orphans” (*gu'er*) or “second-rate citizens” (*erdeng gongmin*) frequently appear on the community website and in the newspaper to express people’s disaffection due to what they see as neglect by the Taiwan government. In short, at the very moment it gained freedom, Mazu also lost its centrality. The situation worsened after Taiwan and China implemented the “big three directs” (*da san tong*) in 2008. As a result of that policy, flights, voyages, and postal services can bypass Mazu (and another demilitarized island, Jinmen) and flow directly between China and Taiwan. How should Mazu cope with the swift changes in cross-strait relations? By examining the pilgrimages, we will see how local people offer their thoughts on these problems.

A MEANDERING PILGRIMAGE

After the inauguration of the new temple in Ox Horn, on New Year’s Day of 2008, a five-day pilgrimage called “Mazu-Ningde First Sail: Changle Pilgrimage” took place from 5–9 July. Because the completion of the new temple had realized a long-awaited dream of many Ox Horn people, this pilgrimage won strong support from local residents and village emigrants living in Taiwan. Including pilgrims from other islands, more than three hundred people took part. In the procession one could see the temple committee members holding

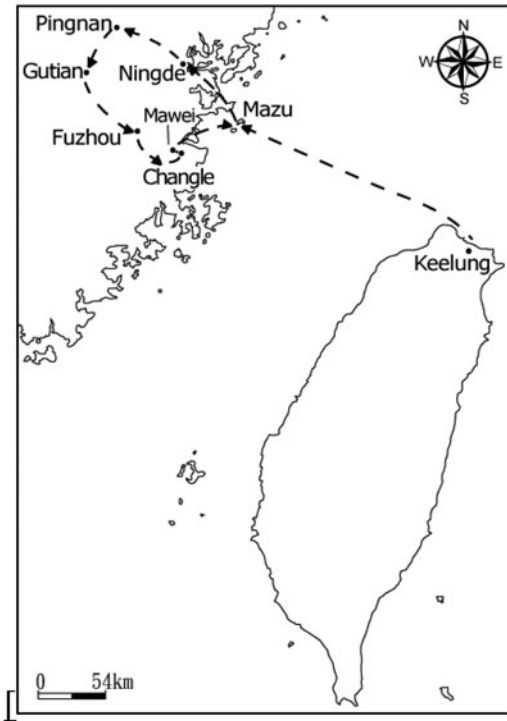
⁶ In 2000, the Taiwan Government unilaterally implemented “small three directs” as temporary channels connecting Taiwan and China through Mazu and Jinmen.

statues of Wuling Gong and the Lady of Linshui, young people carrying sedan chairs and puppets, women playing drums and gongs, and pilgrims following behind.

However, this pilgrimage was aimed at more than religious renewal. This is evident from the fact that the Mazu people did not directly head for their ancestral temple in Changle, but instead undertook an elaborately planned journey across the Taiwan Strait, starting from Taiwan and arriving in northeast Fujian Province (see [Map 2](#)). The five-day itinerary was as follows:

- 5 July—Keelung, Taiwan → Mazu → Ningde, China
- 6 July—Ningde → Pingnan (Baishuiyang Scenic Spot)
- 7 July—Pingnan → Gutian (Linshui Temple) → Fuzhou
- 8 July—Fuzhou → Changle (Longshan Temple) → Fuzhou
- 9 July—Fuzhou → Mawei → Mazu

The organizers rented the Hofu Ferry and departed from Keelung Port in Taiwan, where they invited officials from the Ministry of Transportation and the mayor of Keelung to a press conference. After stopping in Mazu to pick



MAP 2 The Route of the Ox Horn Pilgrimage.

up local residents, the ferry proceeded northwest into Sandu'ao Port and reached Ningde City in Fujian, China, where the city government welcomed the pilgrims in celebratory style. The next day, the pilgrims boarded a bus and headed northwest to the Baishuiyang Scenic Spot, before traveling south to the Linshui Temple in Gutian County, the root temple of the Lady of Linshui. They then continued further southward to Fuzhou City, whence they finally reached the ancestral Wuling Temple in Changle.

We may wonder why a pilgrimage held by Mazu would choose Keelung as its starting point? And why Ningde, a city not well known in Taiwan, as the point of entry into China? Why did a pilgrimage to the ancestral temple have to take a detour toward the northeast and arrive at Changle only after visiting the Linshui Temple in Gutian?

IMAGINING THE "CROSS-STRAIT ECONOMIC ZONE" IN THE NEOLIBERAL ERA

When the War Zone Administration disbanded in 1992, Mazu lost much of its significance as a military frontline, and had to confront the fate of being gradually forgotten by both Taiwan and China; especially so after 2008 when the Three Great Links were initiated across the Taiwan Strait. With this in mind, we can better understand why the Mazu-centered pilgrimage to China was designed so as to start from Taiwan and pass through Mazu before reaching China: it expresses the hope that Mazu can become a mediator between Taiwan and China. Looking again at [Map 2](#), we can see that the pilgrimage route reveals a clear message: Mazu is no longer as an insignificant archipelago between Taiwan and China, but is a "central point" connecting them. In other words, Mazu's people imagine that the pilgrimage has importantly transformed their archipelago's position.⁷

One of the main temple committee members, who is also the head of the Bureau of Tourism in Mazu's county government, proudly told me in a 2008 interview, "When I was invited to give a talk at the Ningde Tourism Exhibition last year, I told the audience, 'Mazu is not just an archipelago along the coast of Fujian; neither should it be considered as Taiwan's outlying islands. Mazu belongs to the world! If I draw a circle around Mazu, it will encompass all of you. In the future Mazu will be able to connect you with Taiwan.... Mazu is a connecting point in the Taiwan Strait, but it is also the central point.... We will soon launch a direct-sailing to Ningde.'" "After the demise of the War Zone Administration," he went on to say, "Mazu should play the role of fulcrum for the balance of cross-strait relations."

In other words, by planning this pilgrimage, the head of the tourism bureau echoed the mayor's idea of going beyond Taiwan. He not only

⁷ This point is developed from Huang 2005.

sought to transcend the center/periphery binary structure of modern state systems, but also expressed a desire to reverse Mazu's gradual marginalization by making it a focal point between China and Taiwan. From this perspective, we can grasp why the pilgrimage started from Keelung in Taiwan, and also why a pre-trip, formal press conference was held, to which government officials were invited.

But why was the relatively obscure city of Ningde chosen as the point of entry into northeast Fujian? The organizers explained this as a way to explore a new route in addition to the existing Jinmen-Xiamen and Mazu-Fuzhou links. Moreover, Mazu government officials and Ox Horn Temple committee members pointed out that after the 2009 opening of the Wen-Fu (Wenzhou-Fuzhou) high speed railway, Ningde could connect to north Fujian, further north to Zhejiang Province, and even to Shanghai. They were convinced that Ningde had the potential to become an economic relay point between Taiwan and Shanghai. They thought that such a route could make Keelung-Mazu-Ningde-Shanghai into a new path for economic development, as well as a unique cultural route combining tourism (to east and north Fujian) and religion (through the Lady of Linshui) (see also Jilong-Mazu-Ningde 2008).

This idea encapsulates the Mazu people's imagination of the "Western Taiwan Strait Economic Zone" (*haixia xi'an jingji qu*, hereafter "Cross-Strait Economic Zone"), a policy the Fujian government has proposed in recent years. The Cross-Strait Economic Zone was first put forth in 2004 as both a political strategy and regional economic development plan (Haixi cong 2009). Its ambit stretches beyond the province itself, most importantly east to Taiwan, and its main goal is to increase development in Fujian, which, due to tense cross-strait relations, had been neglected relative to the Yangtze and Pearl River deltas. This is to be accomplished by augmenting cross-strait exchanges, developing modern transportation and networks, and advancing manufacturing and tourism along the strait (Haixi tengfei 2009).

For example, one of its projects was the construction of the Wen-Fu Railroad, launched in 2005 and completed in 2009. This route reduced the travel time between Fuzhou and Shanghai from fourteen hours to a mere five, and Ningde is the first northbound stop from Fuzhou. In the past, the development of Ningde had been rather limited and relatively slow compared to other southern cities in Fujian owing to its proximity to Sandu'ao, an important military port. With its high-speed rail connection, the Mazu people now see Ningde to be a place with high potential for future development.

From a larger perspective, the Cross-Strait Economic Zone is an example of neoliberal design "with Chinese characteristics" (Harvey 2005). Since the 1980s, many such economic zones have appeared along China's southeastern coast, and the Chinese government is in the process of constructing highways and high-speed railways to link these zones with interior cities. However, one

consequence of this policy is that the cities in these zones are perpetually in ferocious competition, each scrambling to outdo its neighbors in business and cultural affairs (*ibid.*: 132). An important question for their ruling elites has become how to produce cities or regions with distinctive qualities and attractions (see also Harvey 1990: 295).

It is from this neoliberal perspective that we can better comprehend the enthusiasm of Ningde people to make this pilgrimage a success—for them, connecting to Taiwan through Mazu was a major breakthrough. The Ningde government's website trumpeted how the pilgrimage could accelerate development of tourism and religious culture in northern Fujian (Mou 2008). The city's top administrator came to the welcoming ceremony held in Ningde's city hall on 5 July and declared, "Hofu Ferry brought a full boat of Taiwanese fellow countrymen to Ningde, realizing the first direct-sailing between Ningde and Taiwan, marking a historic breakthrough in the exchange and cooperation of Ningde and Taiwan" (Ningde xiying 2008). Afterward, he talked about developing Ningde into an important city in the Cross-Strait Economic Zone: "Ningde is a large port bursting with business opportunities ... the entire city ... [will in the future] put forward its best efforts to push [Ningde into becoming] a central city in the northeast wing of the Cross-Strait Economic Zone" (*ibid.*).

Thus, this pilgrimage was significant for Ningde in many important ways: not only did it allow the city to transcend its previous status as a military port with little contact with the outside world, but it also immediately gained it a higher profile and greater prominence in the Cross-Strait Economic Zone. By carrying off the pilgrimage successfully, Ningde recreated itself as a place with economic and cultural potential. Therefore, we can say that such a pilgrimage is without doubt the result of a joint vision of both sides of a new politico-economic zone in the neoliberal age.

VIRTUAL RECENTRALIZATION THROUGH THE WELCOMING CEREMONY

We can take one step further by exploring exactly how this pilgrimage brought about this imaginary recentralization of Mazu. To facilitate the arrival of the pilgrims, Ningde city officials were extraordinarily cooperative with regard to customs and transportation. The city government cleared the port to welcome the ferry and to clear the Mazu pilgrims quickly erected a temporary customs office in a former cement factory next to the port. They were treated with the utmost courtesy during the pilgrimage events over the next five days. For instance, the group was escorted everywhere by police cars and important officials such as Ningde's deputy mayor and the deputy chairman of the city's People's Congress, and police were stationed at every intersection along the route to assist with traffic control. The nine tour buses carrying the pilgrims seldom encountered a red light and roamed the streets with ease.

A carefully designed welcoming ceremony reinforced the image of Mazu linking China and Taiwan across the Strait. Just after disembarking their boat the pilgrims were escorted to an auditorium where a long red carpet had been laid at the entrance to welcome them. On either side, arrays of people danced, played gongs and drums, and set off firecrackers in cordial welcome. Walking into the auditorium, they confronted a gigantic picture depicting a boat sailing westward toward the Lady of Linshui (figure 1). On its each side hung large golden medallions decorated with shining lights, with Taiwan, Mazu, and Ningde prominently marked, to make explicit the significance of the direct pilgrimage in binding together the three places. The event's design and decorations palpably conveyed the importance of the Mazu people's role as intermediary, for it was they who had managed to connect Ningde and Taiwan for the first time.

Apart from the pilgrims, the auditorium was full of officials from all levels, and media from the Ningde area and even Fuzhou. Leaders from both sides—the top administrator of Ningde and the mayor of Mazu—delivered long speeches brimming with visions of future political and economic interaction. They formalized their alliance by exchanging gifts, including votive tablets (*bian'er*) and local specialties (*techan*). Such political alliances were stressed throughout the pilgrimage; wherever the pilgrims went, local



FIGURE 1 The auditorium for the welcoming ceremony in Ningde.

government officials held banquets in their honor, and accounts and photographs of the numerous ceremonies during the trip were published in newspapers and on websites in Mazu, Taiwan, and China. The imaginations here differed from those expressed in traditional pilgrimages through religious symbols, legends of saints, or sacred topography (Turner 1967; 1968; Turner and Turner 1978); here, what made possible Mazu's imaginary mediatory role, or more exactly, its virtual recentralization, were the careful organization of rituals, the administrative and transportation privileges extended to the pilgrims, and the accounts of the journey rapidly disseminated by the media.

We may wonder why such a political and economic project should be realized by means of a religious activity such as a pilgrimage. Sangren has shown that the relationship between a branch temple and its ancestral temple is a special, cultural-spatial one (2000: 100). It operates by a mechanism that is not readily reducible to political orders, as has been further shown by Yang's research on the ritual space of the Goddess Mazu stretching across China and Taiwan (2004: 228). In this pilgrimage, we see that the cultural-spatial relation between Ox Horn and its homeland, Changle, was expanded to connect Taiwan and northern Fujian. It imaginatively articulated the Mazu residents' changing political and economic circumstances (see Kapferer, Eriksen, and Telle 2009: 3), and helped them to envision new prospects for their future.

JUXTAPOSED THEMES OF CONTEMPORARY PILGRIMAGE

To understand this contemporary pilgrimage we must further examine the different types of Taiwanese pilgrimage from which the Mazu people have borrowed. The first, pilgrimages to ancestral temples, occur regularly and the entire community usually participates. Most famous of these is the annual pilgrimage organized by the Zhenlan Temple in Dajia (Chang 2002; Sangren 1987). In a second type of pilgrimage, which scholars have studied less owing to their irregular frequency, people or interest groups organize visits to popular temples that are combined with tourism. These are usually more impromptu, and have no fixed route or destination.

The pilgrimage held by Ox Horn combined both types. It had the first type's community-based and root-searching quality—the destination was their homeland, Changle, and the more than three hundred participants were mainly Ox Horn residents and their relatives in Taiwan. They included couples, parents and children, and sometimes relatives from three generations. One family seized on the pilgrimage as a chance for a “reunion” (*jiaju*) of twenty-six of its members. Many elders went along to seek the well being of their families; having experienced warfare and poverty, most elders led austere lives and consented to travel far from home only for this reason. Younger participants saw the pilgrimage as a chance to show filial piety to their elders. I also observed many emigrants bring their families back from Taiwan to meet relatives in Mazu.

And yet the pilgrimage also had its improvisational and flexible aspects. For the Chinese, the boundary between pilgrimage and tourism is sometimes difficult to draw clearly (Oakes and Sutton 2010). The general pilgrims, when asked why they participated, frequently answered: “We come for fun” (*women lai wan*), and in fact much of their time was spent visiting cities and scenic spots. For example, to reach Baishuiyang, a new tourist spot promoted by the Ningde government, involved traveling a long route that circled to the northeast of Fujian. Also, as the itinerary shows, three out of the five days were spent in the vicinity of Fuzhou City, and once there the pilgrims immediately went their separate ways. Those in politics and business did their share of networking, while those interested in buying houses went to see prospective properties. Still others went on shopping excursions, or for a massage. The actual worship at Changle Temple took up only one morning.

Given that the pilgrimage tried to juxtapose and satisfy so many disparate aims, it was inevitable that paradoxes and contradictions would arise. For instance, the organizers deliberately arranged to visit Gutian first, both to promote the Lady of Linshui in Mazu and to attract her followers in Taiwan to pass through Mazu when making pilgrimage to her root temple in Gutian. To do so, they opted not to journey directly to Changle, where the main deity of Ox Horn came from, yet they also made the Lady of Linshui the focus of the pilgrimage. Although the Lady of Linshui is commonly worshipped in Mazu, she is considered a deity of lower status. In the new Ox Horn temple she is ranked fifth among the eight deities. The route’s itinerary therefore implied an inversion of the deities’ hierarchy, and this sparked protests from elders who insisted the pilgrimage should first visit the ancestral temple of Changle before proceeding to Linshui Temple or elsewhere. Although younger organizers persuaded them that “what comes later is more important” (*houzhe weida*), this modern pilgrimage clearly gave greater prominence to political, economic, and entertainment aspects than to its traditional religious meanings.

RECONFIGURING POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND RELIGIOUS SPACES

The pilgrimage to Ningde is unusual, but not unique. In this section I analyze three other direct-sailing pilgrimages, and a pilgrimage-like exploration held by other villages in Mazu, to help explain what is different about the Mazu pilgrimages of recent years. Another temple in the Mazu islands, the Tianhou Temple in Magang, had earlier organized three such direct-sailing pilgrimages and I want to look at these as well as the temple’s sponsorship of an expedition to Mt. Everest.⁸ Magang’s temple is located on the harbor where military fleets used to anchor, and hence the temple was greatly valued by the army. The county government has systematically promoted the Tianhou Temple owing

⁸ Tianhou, literally “The Queen of the Heaven,” is another term for the Goddess Mazu.

to the homophonous connection between the Goddess Mazu and the Mazu islands, the legend that the temple is the goddess's burial site, and her popularity in Taiwan and Fujian.

Mazu people apply the term "direct-sailing" in a way slightly different from normal usage. It generally refers to traveling directly between two political entities that share no diplomatic relations, which usually requires going through a third country. But Mazu residents apply the term to any significant travel by ship, even within the same country. Thus, a journey from Mazu to a city in Taiwan, both within the "Republic of China," is still referred to as a "direct-sailing" trip. This local interpretation shows again how much they value their role in directly connecting different places.

The first direct-sailing pilgrimage was from Mazu to Meizhou, China, via Mawei port. On New Year's Day of 2001, the "small three directs" were officially launched, allowing direct voyages from Jinmen to Xiamen, and from Mazu to Mawei. Owing to disagreements with the Chinese government, the small three directs were only implemented unilaterally by Taiwan.⁹ Skirting sensitive political issues, Mazu residents organized this first pilgrimage that January to mark the beginning of the small three directs. The pilgrims arrived at Mawei by boat and took a bus to Meizhou, birthplace of the Goddess Mazu. This pilgrimage carried the political significance of breaking the ice of cross-strait tensions.

By 2007, Taiwan and China had already had contacts for several years and a substantial number of Taiwanese tourists had visited the mainland. That year, the second direct-sailing pilgrimage was launched to promote Mazu's religious tourism. This trip, again from Mazu to Meizhou, advertised as a journey from the Goddess Mazu's burial site to her birthplace, was intriguingly named the "Sacred Sea Route" (*haishang shengdao*), in emulation of the ancient Silk Road. The Mazu people hope that it will become a model route that Taiwanese pilgrims take through Mazu on to Meizhou (Mazu xiangqin 2007).

The third journey, called "The Direct-Sailing to Taichung," was organized in September 2008, with a ferry going directly to Taichung Harbor in Taiwan, and pilgrims then going on to visit the Mazu Temple in Dajia. The group subsequently continued north and visited places where Mazu emigrants had settled and other places with temples connected to those in Mazu. The purpose of this pilgrimage was to foster exchanges between the temples in Mazu and those in Taiwan (Mazu jinshen 2008).

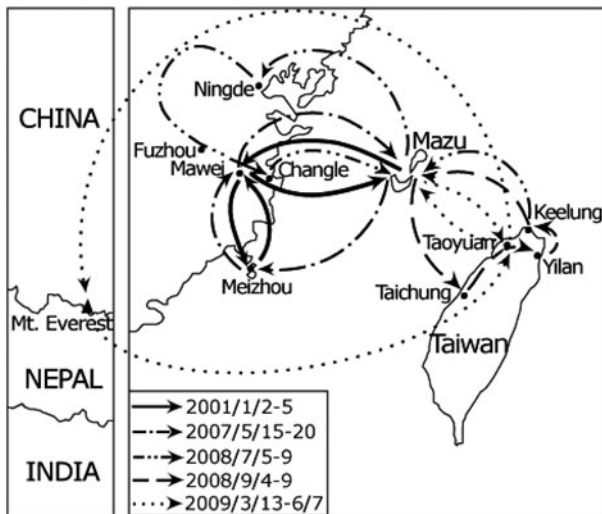
More unusual still was when, in 2009, the temple and the county government sponsored a retired teacher from Mazu—now an enthusiastic explorer-adventurer—to lead an expedition to climb Mt. Everest. The temple made a 16 centimeter-high figurine of the Goddess Mazu for him to carry to the

⁹ China initiated small-scale trade exchanges between its southeast provinces and Taiwan in 1994, but these were regarded as unofficial.

peak. Since Mount Everest in Chinese is called “Mountain of the Sacred Mother” (*shengmu feng*), and because this female connotation allows for an association with the Goddess Mazu (which literally means “grandmother”), this journey bore the markings of a pilgrimage. Indeed, the explorer was ceremonially sent off and heroically welcomed back with rituals, firecrackers, and drums. Numerous press conferences and photo exhibitions were held to proclaim how this climb to the highest mountain had joined Mazu not only to Mount Everest but also to the world (Cao 2009a; 2009b).

Distinctive features of Mazu pilgrimages can be seen more clearly from the routes pictured in Map 3, which, though somewhat complicated, shows how the Mazu-organized pilgrimages differ from Taiwanese *jinxiang* in general. First, their timing betrays a lack of the regularity typical of Taiwan pilgrimages (such as those to Dajia): they were improvised spontaneously to meet various needs. Second, the Mazu pilgrimages were deliberately designed to fulfill different purposes—depending on the particular needs of the local society, they could be organized to promote political communication, increase tourism, or expand networks. Finally, Map 3 most prominently shows how these routes were designed to connect Mazu with Taiwan, China, and even the world, and this gives us a clue as to how strongly Mazu people want to employ these rituals to transcend their marginal position.

Note, too, that all of these pilgrimages occurred during a period when cross-strait relations were rapidly changing: tensions between Taiwan and



MAP 3 Four direct-sailing pilgrimages and an exploratory journey to Mount Everest (not drawn to scale).

China were diminishing, but no consensus had yet been reached as to how their relations should develop. Mazu people, sensing the imminent danger of being forgotten in the new circumstances, tried relentlessly to attract the attentions of both sides through pilgrimages. That is why these rituals appear to be contingent, instantaneous, and improvised, and inflected with fictive and novel tones (see Harvey 1990). To wit, they were performance-oriented, intended to create more dramatic effects. Unlike traditional pilgrimages, they were eclectic in their combinations of different elements. Each was thus a peculiar religious reconfiguration in response to changing political and economic contexts. Together, they show the Mazu people's strong desires to engage with, and even to break the constraints that came with being caught between the shifting tides of cross-strait relations.

THE ILLUSION OF RECENTRALIZATION

Observing how the Mazu islanders continue to change pilgrimage routes so as to forge more connections, one may ask several questions: Have Mazu residents succeeded in creating these economic, political, and religious links? What concrete results have the pilgrimages brought about? How much trade has flowed between Keelung, Mazu, and Ningde, and how many tourists? These do not seem to be important questions for the pilgrims or the temple committees. The main organizer of the Taiwan-Mazu-Ningde direct-sailing pilgrimage described their significance like this: "In the future each island will be able to radiate its own connections to the mainland, creating its own chances of survival." In other words, Mazu residents recreate pilgrimages to generate possibilities for future development. Contemporary Mazu pilgrimages are thus like a blueprint for the future, or in Miyazaki's phrase, "methods of hope" (2004). They point to the coming world to which the Mazu people aspire.

The success of the pilgrimage to Ningde aroused the interest of Wenzhou City in Zhejiang Province, the northernmost city in the Cross-Strait Economic Zone. City officials proactively contacted the Ox Horn temple committee and invited the people of Mazu for a visit. After visiting the Zhejiang administration in 2008, the committee soon planned a second trip that went through Fuzhou City, moved north to Wenzhou, and finally arrived at Ningbo City (6–11 July 2010). This journey was not called a pilgrimage, but rather an "incense exchange" (*huixiang*) between temples. However, in contrast with the traditional exchanges between temples in Taiwan, the people from Mazu conveyed no deity statues or incense burners, nor did they play gongs or drums.¹⁰ The team's leaders carried only incense flags (*xiangqi*), and used them just to indicate directions their team should move in, much as tour guides do. Though the group visited a Buddhist sacred site, Mt. Putuo, it did

¹⁰ On the importance of carrying deity statues in temple exchanges, see Lin 2008.

not meet the heads of the temple there. Generally speaking, the religious significance of this exchange was peculiarly toned-down. Its main purpose was revealed by the group's official title—the Pioneer Group to Zhejiang from Mazu, Taiwan—which was meant to emphasize that this Mazu group was the largest entourage from Taiwan to have visited Zhejiang. The temple committee had the participants wear uniforms to show their unity, and it was indeed a magnificent sight when 450 people in bright orange uniforms appeared.

However, the connections that the Mazu people longed to forge through their pilgrimages and religious exchanges suffered setbacks during this 2010 trip, owing to changed external circumstances. The Wen-Fu High Speed Rail, commissioned in 2009, greatly shortened the journey between Wenzhou and Fuzhou, and so people from Taiwan can now fly directly to Fuzhou (following the opening of the “big three directs”) and conveniently proceed to Wenzhou. Officials from the latter city therefore no longer have a strong incentive to encourage visits through the sea route from Mazu. Without reaching any consensus with these officials regarding the trip's itinerary, the Ox Horn temple committee decided to take the railway and had only a short layover at Wenzhou. Though the original purpose of the trip had been to facilitate connections between Mazu and Wenzhou, the leaders of the two sides did not interact at all.

Equally telling was the way they were received in Ningbo City, the trip's final destination, to which direct flights from Taiwan are now available. A local newspaper referred to them as a “tourist group” (Peng 2010), and only travel agents were sent to accompany the people from Mazu when they toured Ningbo. The highest-ranking official they met was the lowly deputy director of market development, a department of the city's Tourism Bureau. This was in stark contrast to what the Mazu people had experienced in Ningde two years before. On the Ningbo trip I frequently heard them reminiscing about the high-profile reception they had enjoyed in Ningde, and wondering why they were not being escorted by police cars. One woman told me, “I miss the gongs, drums, firecrackers, and boisterous atmosphere (*renao*) of the Ningde trip.”

Indeed, the Zhejiang exchange could not compare on any level with the journey to Ningde—in neither Wenzhou or Ningbo was it considered an important political, economic, or even religious event. Undoubtedly, the status of Mazu in the cross-strait relationship had quickly diminished due to macro-politico-economic developments, including new direct flights and sea travel between China and Taiwan, China's regional policies, and its greatly improved transportation infrastructure. In the midst of these fast-changing neoliberal dynamics, this trip nearly dashed the islanders' dream of recentralizing Mazu between China and Taiwan by means of pilgrimages and religious exchanges.

It is undeniable that, lacking political, economic, or religious significance, the pilgrimage was little more than a sightseeing tour. For the temple committee, however, the trip still had an important meaning: “We have already gone beyond Fujian, and moved northward to Zhejiang.” In other words, the imagination entailed in pilgrimages and religious exchanges continues to generate opportunities and hopes for them. On the way home, I heard them discussing their next destination: Tianjin in northern China!

CONCLUSION

While on the 2008 pilgrimage to China I was surprised to learn that, like me, the Mazu people were unfamiliar with Ningde. But I was reminded of something once said by a ninety-year-old Mazu immigrant living in Taiwan who had been a fisherman: “Before Chiang Kai-shek’s troops came over, people from Ningde or even further north would come by boat to Mazu to buy fish. At that time, Mazu people could travel anywhere. Mazu was a free place then!” The war separated the two sides of the Taiwan Strait and isolated the Mazu islands. But today, the people of Mazu are trying to use religion to reestablish links between the two sides. The new temple in Ox Horn has created a new sense of identity for the residents, and the process of building a temple and traveling across the Strait strengthened relations on both sides. After the completion of their new temple, the Ox Horn residents took their deities on a pilgrimage to the ancestral temple in Mainland China, witnessing and commemorating the bitter history of separation over the previous fifty years (see Jing 1996).

As relations between Taiwan and China improve, and with intensifying contact and interaction between the two sides, Mazu—an important strategic frontline and a buffer against communism during the Cold War—is today threatened with becoming even more marginal than before. The appearance of new types of pilgrimage must be understood within this context.

We have seen that in earlier times Mazu merely served as a temporary stopover for fishing boats, and most of its cultural activities were performed on the mainland. Since pilgrimages were never a part of Mazu’s historical tradition, the local people can be relatively spontaneous and improvisational in planning them now. Inspired by the pilgrimages of Taiwan, contemporary Mazu pilgrimages have creatively combined traditional types to formulate new ones, either by expanding ancestral visits aimed at forging new links, or through adventurous journeys undertaken by individuals but imbued with the collective expectations of the islanders. They are grounded less in traditional cultural ideas than in their speculative and virtual qualities. Put more exactly, they are the islanders’ social imaginaries (Taylor 2002; 2004), the ways in which the local people imaginatively reconstitute the rapidly shifting cross-strait political economy. This is why these pilgrimages are always

instantaneous configurations of novel or even paradoxical styles geared toward catching the attentions of the wider world and coping with present-day changes.

The anthropological literature shows that it is in marginal societies that the gap between the real and the possible is widest; it is in them that speculative capital grows and thrives (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; 2000; 2002; Muegler 2001; Tsing 1993; Weiss 2009). This is not at all to say that imagination is only important in marginal places. As Appadurai wrote, “The world we live in today is characterized by a new role for the imagination in social life” (1996: 31). Previous research has shown how visits to Disneyland, Elvis Presley’s Graceland, or war graves can be seen as pilgrimages (Reader and Walter 1993). This paper illustrates how contemporary pilgrimages can also incorporate novel and improvised elements, and how the imaginations imbued in them can, for the people involved, paint alternative and more desirable pictures of their potential futures in the neoliberal world.

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Abstract: Drawing on ethnography from Mazu, a group of demilitarized islands between China and Taiwan, this article argues that contemporary pilgrimage is an imaginative work that generates hope and potentialities for the increasingly marginalized islanders. I explore the imaginative qualities of the rituals, qualities that I refer to collectively as “virtual recentralization.” “Recentralization” connotes the islanders’ longing to regain their Cold War status as the focal point between China and Taiwan, even though the desired goal can only be “virtual” as cross-strait tensions continue to diminish. These pilgrimages, with their eclectic, improvisatory, and novel forms, differ from traditional pilgrimages in important ways: rather than transmitting permanent and solid religious values, they are oriented towards performance and are imbued with elements of fiction and fantasy. They are the means by which the Mazu islanders, in this neoliberal era, imagine their future, reconfigure political, economic, and religious space, and forge new connections between China, Taiwan, and even the wider world.