

Introduction

When one walks along the streets and alleyways of Taipei or other Taiwanese towns, one feels tremendous life energy – not only in the truly terrifying number of motorized vehicles, but also the hustle and bustle of shops and street vendors well into the night, the offices and factories, the religious gatherings and festivals, and so on. In Taiwan, the challenges of contemporary Western and Japanese approaches to modernization have been successfully taken up, well demonstrating the adaptive capacity of Chinese tradition.

Be they correct or not, our perceptions of Taiwan are often framed in terms of the adoption of elements of Western modernity while preserving China's cultural traditions. Chinese, Japanese and Western business people will think of themselves as that representing modern efficiency and techniques, and hence are struck (or even angered) by the persistence of traditional forms. A Western tourist looking for the archetypical China, on the other hand, will be disappointed by the intermingling of traditional and foreign elements. Many Taiwanese will probably not be at all put out by the fusion of the old and the new, the Chinese with the Japanese and the Western. For them, this is simply Taiwan as it has naturally come to be. In many respects they are right, of course, for in the final analysis what is indeed so special about such an intercultural mix?

In our own Western cultures we equally mix the old

and the new, and we too have absorbed many foreign influences, including some from China. Who still thinks of China when wearing silk, drinking tea (a word, by the way, from the same dialect group as that spoken on Taiwan), writing on paper, or using a compass? And to mention but one example of distorting foreign culture, some of us even like to eat rice cooked in milk and sweetened with sugar. The list of cultural 'loans' by us in the West could of course be extended almost indefinitely (just think of tobacco, potatoes, cola, and much more from Latin America, but even wheat as well – millenia ago – from the Middle East. Similarly, we also combine traditional and modern elements in our cultures. Even today, and to the dismay of many, English elites still organize fox hunts. Especially in our rituals, be they religious or social, we cherish tradition. Thus, while it is fascinating to look at Taiwan in terms of intercultural encounter or the survival of tradition, this is hardly something unique in itself. The only difference is that Western culture is our own vantage point, and the Western modernization paradigm still carries unduly large weight.

Taiwan is very much a modern society, one deserving of understanding on its own terms. Recently, the political landscape has undergone some remarkable changes, moving from the former autocratic rule of the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) to a much more pluriform and democratic system.

Religious sects that had for centuries been repressed in China – and still are on the mainland – have now been legalized. The local Taiwanese language may now be spoken openly, and there is a flourishing concern for Taiwanese history and culture that serves to strengthen a specifically Taiwanese identity. Quite sensitive issues can now be discussed fairly openly, ranging from Taiwan's future status to political corruption and environmental pollution. Taiwanese citizens now cross to the mainland on a regular basis, whether for family reunions, religious pilgrimages, or business ventures. The southern part of Fukien Province – which faces Taiwan on the Chinese mainland – has already become a particular focus for major Taiwanese investment.

Along a similar line of thought, rather than labelling Chinese tradition as something to be overcome before Taiwan can modernize, it should be recognized as something that is simply there, for better or for worse. As much as with our own cultures, tradition and innovation will pop up at the most unexpected moments. My own favourite moments are those of the singsong girls at funerals or temple festivals, or the Chinese opera with disco sound and light. The enormous importance of education and examination results reflects more traditional concerns, since this was the only route providing access to the bureaucracy that governed China.

The only true way of understanding another culture is by immersing oneself within it for an extended period. If we do not have the time to do so, and cannot (as yet) go to Taiwan for whatever reason, we can start by reading books on the subject. Ideally, such a book should be accompanied by a videotape in which Taiwan is introduced in sound and image – the frenetic traffic in Taipei, the noise of a temple festival, the crushing of ice over a plate of red beans during summer, or the silence of nature. Furthermore, while watching and listening to this tape one should burn

some incense and put on the air-conditioning to get into the right mood, sipping tea or a fruit shake. Sadly, this is hard for us to accomplish at home. Failing this, a photo book with texts is then the best alternative. We leave it to the reader to provide the rest of what is needed, while undertaking his or her imaginary journey through Taiwanese contemporary life.

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Traditional Chinese Religion on Taiwan

For millennia, religion has been an intrinsic part of Chinese life. There have, of course, always been sceptical or disinterested members of society, both among intellectual elites and the general population. Still, it is no exaggeration to claim that the social and symbolic structure of Taiwanese society was – and to a considerable extent still is – largely structured in religious terms. The family defines itself through the worship of its ancestors at the house altar, as well as its worship of the Lord of the Stove. Larger groups of people who perceive themselves as having descended from a common ancestor organize themselves in lineages, maintaining collective worship in an ancestor hall and sharing common property. A neighbourhood worships the Lord of the Earth in a small shrine, and a larger residential unit worships a tutelary deity at a larger temple. In Taiwan, shared provenance from the same socio-cultural region in Southern Fukien or Northeastern Kuangtung traditionally influenced one's choice of cult(s) to be worshipped. Professional groups had (and, for instance, puppeteers still have) their guilds, which were organized around the worship of the founding fathers of their profession. The educated elite (traditionally the Confucian literati, nowadays a variety of professional groups) also takes part in ancestor worship and local cults, as well as traditionally in Confucian schools or academies.

Besides these groups in which membership is determined more or less automatically by principles of common descent, a notion of shared residence and provenance, or the same professional activities, there exist many groups which people join on a strictly voluntary basis. Some of these, generally only loosely structured, are gatherings for reciting Buddhist texts and/or engaging in collective worship at local temples. Other groups have a distinct cosmology, believing that one should actively prepare for the end of time by proper worship and a vegetarian lifestyle. These groups are often referred to as "sects", and for centuries have been outlawed as rebellious and subversive by successive Chinese governments. In recent years, they have been legalized in Taiwan. As a result, they have now completely come into the open, attracting large numbers of new adherents.

Political organization nowadays takes place through independent parties, but traditionally this too was intimately linked to religion. The emperor and his representatives (imperial officials and local magistrates) supported individual cults and Buddhist or Taoist monasteries. They also maintained specific state cults, to assert their ultimate ideological and religious supremacy over the deities, ghosts, and people in their territory. Local elites used the lineage of which they were a part and the cult groups of important temples of the area in which they lived, in

order to express and enlarge their power and influence. Religious activities still form one channel for establishing contacts with local people, all the more important as one nears the grassroots level. One can often encounter local representatives handing out soup at a festival. For decades after the establishment of the Kuomintang government on Taiwan, local religion has been one of the few relatively unhampered means of giving expression to a specific Taiwanese identity. The close ideological links of the imperial past, however, have been broken with the founding of the formally agnostic republican system (whose leaders often were Christians!).

The groups that are formed through religious activities do not have the high level of institutionalization that one finds in Western European or North American, especially Protestant, Christian churches. Under the Japanese occupation, an attempt was made to enforce such institutionalization, but most of these groups remain fairly diffuse. They work by creating networks of contacts and symbols that weave society together. The occasions are not weekly congregations, but chance meetings at temples and shrines, the organization of festivals to celebrate the birthday of a deity or some other day relevant in his or her hagiography, the ritual conclusion of marriages, smaller or larger scale exorcisms and funerals, and community rituals such as the plague expulsion festivals of southern Taiwan and the cosmic renewal festivals. On these occasions groups act as collectives, although they are represented by chosen individuals. There is no prescribed attendance, except by the community representatives.

Each locality has its shrine for the Lord of the Earth, supported by an association. The shrines are small in size, consisting of a roofed-over small altar with three walls and open in front. The worshipper stands outside, while the deity sits inside, represented by a statue, picture or text. Often, the shrine stands in

front of an old tree. This reflects an older stage of Chinese religion, in which trees and stones as such represented the Lord of the Earth. Nowadays, the Lord of the Earth is represented as an old man with a long and flowing beard who nevertheless has remained young, as is often indicated by the pinkness of his face. He wears the cap of the country gentlemen, who is without official rank but still of great local influence. In his left hand he holds a golden ingot (denoting prosperity). Hence his official title, "Upright Lord of Prosperity and Virtue". He is the divine parallel of the local man of influence, protecting the locality and its inhabitants from demons and bringing good fortune. His powers are, however, limited. For larger scale protection and favours, one needs to have recourse to more powerful deities.

These other deities may also have cults restricted to one neighbourhood, but potentially they can attract much larger cult groups. The variety of deities is huge, with each temple housing any number of them at the same time. Famous is, of course, Matsu or T'ien Hou the "Empress of Heaven" (originally from P'u-t'ien County) and the protectress of seafarers including fishermen. On Taiwan, other important deities are the doctor Pao-sheng ta-ti or Perfected Lord Wu from T'ung-an County, the monk Ch'ing-shui tsu-shih or P'u-tsu from An-ch'i County, Kuo Sheng-wang the cow herd deity from Nan-an County in the vicinity of Ch'uan-chou, and K'ai-chang sheng-wang the founding father of Chang-chou Prefecture. Originally, they were first and foremost territorial deities, supporting only people from their particular region of origin. Matsu has long since become a more general deity and the others are also slowly losing their more specific ties. Another important deity, the widely popular Kuan Yu, also started as a local deity in the Southern Shan-hsi region, combining a martial dimension (in which role he drives away demons and

brings good fortune), with a civilian one (in which role he is, for instance, invoked in spirit-writing sessions). Only a City God (Ch'eng-huang shen), such as the Hsia-hai ch'eng-huang not far behind the train station of Taipei, is not of regional descent and formally reigns over entire county units like a magistrate. Every county normally has a different City God, who is part of the officially recognized heavenly bureaucracy, and is also the boss of the different Lords of the Earth in his territory.

Each local cult has a specific catchment area, i.e. the region from which its worshippers predominantly come. This functions in two different ways. First of all, there is the immediate day-to-day following of the cult, which takes on the tasks of organizing festivals, maintaining the temple, and so forth. On festival days, the temple deity makes an inspection tour through the surrounding area by means of a procession that can take several days, staying overnight at different temples within his or her territory. This journey marks the territory of the deity as much as it marks the sphere of influence of the cult and its supporters. Secondly, larger centres attract pilgrims from outside the temple's immediate sphere of influence during their festival periods. These pilgrims stem from cults that have (or claim to have) been ritually split off from these centres, and they attend in order to renew this ritual tie. It is clear that in this way larger regions can be tied together symbolically and socially. The great Matsu pilgrimage of Peikang so unites the whole of Taiwan, while the revived pilgrimage to its temple of origin on Mei-chou Isle – facing the Fukien coast – bonds Taiwanese people to the mainland (and vice versa). The political, social and economic implications of such pilgrimages should not be underestimated.

At the same time, the festivals are extremely lively and colourful occasions for the reproduction of the ever evolving traditional culture. The bustling crowds

of worshippers, the clouds of incense, the tables spilling over with offerings, the noise of rituals and theatricals being performed, all of this is felt to contribute to a "hot and noisy (*je-nao*)" festival. This notion is absolutely essential in the Chinese perception of a successful religious and, for that matter, social celebration. In contrast to Western expectations of religious gatherings, which "should" be solemn, clean and silent, Chinese desire these to be boisterous and lively, colourful and replete. One reason is undoubtedly the exorcistic function that is accomplished through noise, but there can be no doubt that noise is also seen as a positive element in and of itself. In this respect, the Chinese festival comes close to our carnival, except that every festival shares in this atmosphere and not only but once a year.

Elite critics with orthodox Confucian, Daoist or Buddhist orientations have attempted to introduce different standards, but without success as far as these cults as a whole are concerned. Only in the Confucian cult, and in so far as they could control parts of ancestor worship and local temple cults, have they been more successful. One can easily see this difference when one visits the Confucian temple and the Pao-sheng ta-ti temple that are located close to each other in Taipei. Contemporary political and intellectual elites (often with a Christian background) have continued these efforts, using concepts of hygiene and safety as well as arguments about the need to save national wealth.

The cults mentioned up to now are all fairly respectable. The deities are depicted as persons who have been canonized because of their virtuous lives and the good deeds performed by them after their deaths. However, there is more here than meets the eye. Virtually no Chinese deity ever started out as a farmer, even though this was the most common livelihood of Chinese people throughout the centuries. They always lived unusual lives and died

different deaths from the average person. Matsu was a shamaness, who died young without ever having married. She acquired family only in the course of the development of her hagiography. Pao-sheng ta-ti was a doctor, and also died without progeny. The same applies to the monk Ch'ing-shui tsu-shih, who was originally worshipped as a mummy. The boy Kuo Sheng-wang died a mysterious death while tending the cow of his parents, and his corpse was found on top of a mountain. He only married after his death and begot as many as thirteen children. K'ai chang sheng-wang died in battle; he had descendants who then faded away into the darkness of history and at the time no ancestor worship was instituted. Otherwise he could not have become the object of popular worship. Although it is difficult to prove conclusively in the absence of reliable historical sources, most deities had fates similar to those of hungry ghosts. A typical Taiwa-nese example are the Wang-yeh cults, devoted to persons who died violently, and have subsequently become protectors of a community.

Hungry ghosts are human beings who have not lived through the full cycle of birth, marriage, begetting children and natural death. They have died an unnatural death and have not received the appropriate funerary rites that would have enabled them to pass through all the stages of death and subsequent rebirth. As a result, they are stuck in the transitional lands and waters between the worlds of the living and the dead – in wells, lakes, floods and seas, wastelands, mountains and so forth. They are dangerous because of their unspent life-energy; they also want to find other lives to take their place. Much ritual effort is spent to guarantee that they do no one harm, varying from elaborate rituals to simple amulets and protective objects. Doors are adorned with gods, always of a martial aspect. The famous Chinese-style lions play a similar role, whether as statues at the gates of buildings and thoroughfares, depictions on

clothing, or in the form of the lion dance that brings good fortune and expels evil. Spirit walls are placed behind the entrance door to prevent the ghosts from walking straight through (since they cannot make turns, this is quite effective).

Important in this context are the Five Encampments, being five armies of spirit soldiers led by five different spirit generals. The principal general is Third Prince Li, also known as Nuo-ch'a, the ferocious child who travels around on firewheels. There is one army for each direction of the wind and one in the centre, each with its own colours. They are summoned by Taoist priests to combat the huge masses of evil demons. They can be symbolized by complete statues or, more commonly, by sticks or daggers with heads or just merely a piece of coloured cloth around the top, and finally by coloured sheets with amulets on them, and in which the name of the respective general is then written. These representations can be found in temples or shrines, or simply at five appropriate points in a village.

During one's lifetime each person gathers a certain amount of karma, which can be seen as the net effect of the good and bad deeds that one has performed. This karma then determines one's rebirth (as human or in a variety of animal forms) in a next life, after a shorter or longer stay in the underworld. There, the judges pass sentence upon everyone and can assign the most brutal punishments before one is allowed to again be reborn. It is believed that around the Fifteenth Day of the Seventh Month of the lunar year, all hungry ghosts can leave their respective hideouts and become a threat to all living beings. During this period, special rituals are thus organized to feed these ghosts and to send them on their way again. Rituals for one's own ancestors are also organized in this same period.

At this point the reader may wonder why nothing has as yet been said about "beliefs". We have not done

so for a good reason. As one can easily observe when participating in a Chinese religious occasion, even without a terrific command of the language, the public expression of explicit beliefs is not important. The worshipper burns three sticks of incense at the burner outside or under the eaves of the temple roof (for the Lord of Heaven or the Jade Emperor), and then enters the temple itself, to burn three sticks at the central image. The burning of incense establishes a link of communication with the deity(ies) invoked. It is the most basic and omnipresent religious act, that may or may not be accompanied by further acts, such as prayers or offerings. The incense burner is the ritual centre of a cult. The chosen chief official of a cult is therefore referred to as the "head of the incense burner". The establishment of a cult takes place by taking some incense from the burner of the old cult and placing it into the burner of the new one.

In the same way, a tremendous number of activities takes place during religious festivals, but few of these resemble the more formalized expression and discussion of "beliefs" that a Westerner would expect from a religious occasion. Answers to the question of what is someone's exact affiliation, are generally vague and inconsistent (at least from the bias of a Westerner's point of view). This is not to say that the Chinese have no religious conceptions, symbolism, practices and so forth. On the contrary, they indeed exist, but these are not made explicit in the form of a systematic doctrine and then made the subject for exegesis. The focus of religious observation is on correct practice (*orthopraxis*, which may be compared with our term *orthodoxy*, which focuses on correct beliefs or ideas).

This comes out quite clearly in the relationship of individuals towards their deities, including those of predominantly Buddhist or Taoist affiliation. As an individual, one is not restricted to the neighbourhood cult, but is allowed to address any deity who possesses

sufficient power to help. The crucial criterion is the perceived effectiveness of a cult, which is called *ling*. In many temples lamps are burned to bring good fortune – whether this be good health and long life, or success in the examination hell through which all Taiwanese youth must pass in order to obtain the best possible start in their working career. In other temples, one prays for good health and children. The choice of a particular temple depends entirely on its perceived amount of *ling*.

Personal wishes are preferably addressed to female gods, such as Matsu and Kuanyin. Kuanyin is the sinicized form of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara (called Kannon in Japan). Originally male, the most common transformations of this Bodhisattva nowadays are female, such as the White Robed Kuan-yin with child, who brings children and good health. Female deities are perceived as more empathetic and therefore more open to emotional, individual requests.

Worshippers communicate with deities in a variety of different ways, but the most common form is individual prayer. When one wishes to obtain the response of a deity to concrete questions, one can throw moon blocks. These are a pair of blocks made of wood or bamboo, cut in the form of a crescent moon, rounded on one surface and flat on the other. The blocks are held out upon one's two handpalms, raised upward and then left to fall upon the floor. Only if one block falls rounded side up and the other round side down, is the deity taken to have assented to the wish uttered in prayer.

In addition, different ritual specialists can be called upon for different purposes, and again without entailing conversion in the Western sense of the word. These specialists range from various kinds of fortunetellers, geomancers and spirit mediums, to Buddhist and Taoist monks or priests. Fortunetellers interpret the state of the cosmos and the individual's

place in it, so allowing them to predict future events. Geomancers interpret the landscape ("wind and water" or *feng-shui*), in order to establish the proper cosmic location of important buildings and graves. This is of the utmost importance, since the location decisively determines the fates of the users of those buildings and the descendants of the deceased buried in those graves. Strictly speaking, fortunetellers and geomancers do not communicate with the supernatural world, but rather interpret signs.

Spirit mediums (*tang-ki* in the local Taiwanese language) clearly do. They are possessed by specific deities, and during their trances serve as a vehicle for the messages of their respective deities. One form of communication then takes place through spirit-writing, where a medium holds a wooden pencil and writes on a wooden board or holds a brush and writes on paper. The resulting script is divine (the medium may also well be illiterate, since he or she is only an instrument of the gods and not themselves writing, as such) and must then be properly interpreted by an assistant. Alternatively, the deity will speak through the mouth of a medium. This speech, too, is divine, and to most unexperienced listeners quite incomprehensible. On special occasions such as processions, male mediums publicly mortify themselves with different kinds of weapons, such as a studded-ball or sword, beating themselves until they bleed profusely. Or, they might stick long needles through their cheeks. This proves the genuineness of the possession, since deities cannot feel pain. Through the mediums, deities explain diseases and personal troubles, and perform exorcistic healing. In the latter case, amulets (instructions from the deity in a special, more powerful type of writing) are composed to be carried on the body or to be burned and then consumed.

There are various kinds of Buddhist monks and Taoist priests, as well as certain categories of lay ritual

specialists (even including puppeteers!). In different parts of Taiwan, different ritual traditions exist. Generally speaking, Buddhist ritual specialists are monks, who live in monasteries and come out to perform rituals at funerals or religious festivals. Especially interesting are their rituals for deceased mothers. In the process of giving birth, these women have spilled so much blood that they will be stuck in the Pool of Blood in the underworld and cannot be reborn, unless their filial children have the proper rituals carried out for them.

In their monasteries, the monks engage in a highly ritualized lifestyle, which includes a vegetarian diet and the study – and especially the recital – of sutras and other Buddhist texts. These texts are recited for the individual's own benefit, or for the benefit of deceased persons whose ash-laden urns have been entrusted to the monastery (in exchange for donations). The purpose of the rituals is to guarantee the rebirth of their dead in the Pure Land or Western Paradise. This is a land of bliss, where devout lay Buddhists can strive to be reborn, since that would guarantee their eventual Buddhahood. Nowadays, Buddhist monks also carry out public lectures on the tenets of Buddhist doctrine and the appropriate lifestyle. Influenced by Western preaching on American television, there now also is constant Buddhist exegesis available on cable networks and one can buy lectures on videotape.

Taoist priests can be divided into two ideal types. There are specialists who carry out rituals in the vernacular language (in this case Taiwanese), usually exorcisms of evil spirits and demons that cause sickness. Another service is changing the sex of the unborn child from female to male. These specialists wear a red piece of cloth around their heads (hence the popular appellation Red Heads). They appeal to concrete deities to assist them (such as the spirit armies of the Five Encampments), and recite their

texts by heart (even though written versions exist). Their rituals often enact the symbolic passage by the client through the lands of the unborn, the living, and the dead.

Then there are the specialists who carry out rituals in the old classical language, intended to influence the cosmic well-being of communities. They wear elaborate clothing, adorned with representations of the cosmos (such as the stars of the Northern Dipper, the Eight Trigrams and so forth). Their deities are abstract cosmic beings. They recite from written texts, even if they may well know large parts by heart, and they build an elaborate altar to represent cosmic space. By means of recitations and complicated steps through this space, these priests enact a cosmic journey that re-orders time and space. Thereby they are able to stabilize the fate of the community that has paid for the rituals.

Both types of Taoist priest marry and have families. Their jobs are hereditary, especially that of priest in the classical tradition, where only one son will succeed his father. How sharply the dividing line between these ideal types can be drawn in practice is not altogether apparent. For instance, there are clear examples of priests of the second type carrying out exorcist healing rituals of the first type.

As has already been briefly alluded to above, we should not approach Taiwanese religious life too much in Western terms of doctrine, belief, and mutually exclusive congregations. In fact, we can fruitfully compare the situation with the one that existed on the eve of the Reformation in Western Europe, and which in many ways still exists all over the world (including Japan). There is, however, one type of group that forms an exception to this claim. These are the "sects" that we referred to at the outset of this short essay, having a very distinct cosmology and lifestyle. Its lay members take on ritual functions in sutra-recitation rituals, funerals, exorcisms and the

like, functions which are normally the preserve of specialists, such as Buddhist and Taoist priests or shamans and mediums. The lay members lead their own institutions and strictly keep to a vegetarian and generally Confucian moral lifestyle. One joins out of personal choice and often out of very individual needs. The centre of veneration is the Venerable Eternal Mother, which is remarkable given the more empathetic character of female deities. She will save her chosen followers when the end of times arrives. Otherwise, these are by no means the kinds of iconoclastic groups that the use of the term "sect" might suggest, and other deities are also worshipped. In these groups, such as the Compassion Society (*tzu-hui t'ang*) and the Unity Way (*i-kuan tao*), much attention is also paid to educating the members by means of lectures and written propaganda material. Here we find a high level of institutionalization and self-consciousness, something that seems to imply a development in the direction of a more Western type of congregational religious group.

Offering Incense

An offering of incense to gods, ghosts, and ancestors is the most basic of all devotional acts in Chinese religion. The first act of a visitor to the temple is to burn incense for the gods, starting with three sticks for the Lord of Heaven or the Jade Emperor. These are stuck in the incense-burner outside, facing away from the temple towards heaven. Thereupon, the visitor proceeds with an offering of incense to the different deities inside, normally first the main deities in the centre, followed by the deities on their right (as viewed by us) and then those on their left. Especially during festivals, temples are filled to the brim with incense smoke.

One burns incense during specific rituals, upon visiting a temple or shrine to bring an offering or ask the deity for advice, for the pictures of one's ancestors in the household shrine, while reading religious works (ranging from Buddhist sutras to Taoist and/or Confucian inspired ethical tracts), and so forth. The act of worship in a temple or going on a religious pilgrimage is referred to as "offering incense" and the worshipper is called an "incense guest". The altar is the "incense table". The popularity of a cult can be described in terms of the state of its "incense fire". Some "sects" considered the act of burning one stick of incense to be their most important act of devotion, calling themselves the "Teachings of the Single Stick of Incense" or the "Teachings of Burning Incense". Not surprisingly, healing and protective powers are

ascribed to incense ashes, which are then consumed with water or carried around on the body in a small pouch. Mediums intoxicate themselves with incense smoke to get into trance. One does not need to be a follower of a particular deity or religious institution in order to burn incense there; the offering of incense is a simple act of reverence that transcends all doctrinal affiliations.

Historically, the burning of incense probably derives from the use of fragrant smells and smoke from specific plants and woods to fumigate and thereby purify places, to get rid of evil influences both on a literal level (especially all kinds of harmful insects) and on a supernatural level (evil demons). At least by the end of the Han dynasty, incense was already used to open up a communication channel with the supernatural world. Through it, the gods are invited to attend and messages can be communicated to the supernatural world.

Any vessel may serve as an incense-burner. One even encounters old tin cans and the like serving as temporary burners during funerary and other rituals. Usually, they are made out of earthenware, porcelain, bronze or copper. They can bear the name of the deity or the temple, some ornamentation and possibly the name(s) of the donor(s) and a date. They might also contain a short auspicious phrase. As a precious object, the incense-burner also provided legitimacy for a cult. This function goes back to the earliest days

of Chinese history, when possessing great wealth in the form of bronze ritual vessels served to legitimize royal and imperial rule. At the time, these vessels were meant for preparing and presenting offerings, not for burning incense. Nevertheless, later incense-burners are often shaped like archaic bronze vessels, especially in the form of huge tripods. Donating a burner to a cult is a highly meritorious act and a sure method of obtaining (and expressing) local prestige. Since burners are made of durable material, such as bronze or stone, they last much longer than the buildings they stand in. This no doubt further serves to enhance their value as authenticating objects.

The collective maintenance of an incense fire in a cult serves as the ritual basis for the formation of groups. In fact, almost all social groups in traditional Chinese society are organized as a cult, consisting of the worship of a supernatural entity (human or otherwise) by means of burning incense and sacrifices. Cult groups are structured around the offering of incense, centred on the incense-burner rather than statues, relics or the building that houses the deity. Significantly, the chief of the cult group is called the "chief of the incense-burner". The local group as a social unit coincides with the worshipping group; only by participating in a cult can people belong to the social group and have a say in its goings on.

Cults can be transmitted by means of relics (of the body or of objects), or by "splitting incense", i.e. by taking incense from the burner of the ancestral cult. Symbolic links are thus created between different local groups over considerable distances. Most Taiwanese cults have been created in this way, by splitting off first from other cults on the isle and ultimately from cults on the Chinese mainland. These ties are maintained by pilgrimages from the home temple to the ancestral cult. For obvious political reasons, pilgrimages to the mainland were impossible

until a few years ago. Nowadays they have been revived and – thanks to Taiwan's considerable economic wealth – on a huge scale, as well. The example of Matsu has already been mentioned, but the pilgrimages of the doctor-god Pao-sheng ta-ti, the monk Ch'ing-shui tsu-shih and the cow herder Kuo Sheng-wang are also once again flourishing. The ancestral temples on the mainland have been restored and refurbished to their former grandiose scale with the funding of Taiwanese and Overseas Chinese worshippers. The ritual necessity to renew the incense-fire of the home temple by going to the ancestral cult thus caused an intensification of ties between Taiwan and the mainland that goes beyond and outside political and economic interests.