

New Series

Volume 4

No. 1

May 2024

Pages 1-18



Authors: Brian Reynolds and Marco Lazzarotti

Title: Universal Belief and Local Apparition: Holy Mary and Inculturation in Taiwan

Abstract

The image of the Virgin Mary is one of the most effective instances of inculturation to be found in the Taiwanese Catholic world. This is already evident from her iconographic representation which bears many similarities to Guanyin (and Mazu), who are sometimes depicted as young women in traditional Chinese dress holding a child. This article will consider some of the similarities between these figures which have allowed Taiwanese Catholics to embrace Mary as a figure who is integrated with a certain ease into preexisting cultic beliefs and practices. At the same time, we shall consider how this process of inculturation has carried with it a certain risk of syncretism, of misunderstanding Mary's universal role in the economy of salvation, of taking the focus away from her Son as the universal Mediator (*Lumen Gentium* 60 and 62), a problem not unfamiliar in other parts of the world and in other times.

Authors

Dr. Marco Lazzarotti is a Researcher and Lecturer at the Institute of Ethnology of the University of Heidelberg, Germany.

Brian K. Reynolds is Professor of Italian at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taipei.

1. Introduction

The image of the Virgin Mary is one of the most effective instances of inculturation to be found in the Taiwanese Catholic world. This is already evident from her iconographic representation which bears many similarities to Guanyin (and Mazu), who are sometimes depicted as young women in traditional Chinese dress holding a child. But the similarities between these feminine figures run deeper. Holy Mother Mary, as she is called in Chinese, like the other Holy Mothers, Guanyin and Mazu, serves as a bridge between the needs and hopes of human beings and the strength and majesty of a transcendental spiritual power. Both Guanyin and Mary share the title "Gateway of Heaven," and both are characterized by mercy and compassion. Along with Mazu, both are figures to be turned to in times of need.

Key to an understanding of how these three female figures have been inculturated in Taiwan is the manner in which they have been "localized," which is to say, how they have come to be identified with specific places and cultic practices (shrines, temples, churches, rituals), while still maintaining a more universal image. Mary is the universal Mother *par excellence*, not physically associated with any one place like other Catholic saints (being assumed bodily into heaven, she left no tomb and few relics), yet through her apparitions, shrines, and devotions she is also linked to specific locations and even takes on national symbolisms.¹ Indeed, Mary is unique in both her universality and her particularity,² not least because she is not exclusively linked to any one culture, yet frequently takes on local characteristics. Guanyin, while by no means as universal a figure as Mary, is also not associated with any one place (other than in her incarnation as Miaoshan).³ At the same time, her cult is territorialized in specific temples, both Buddhist and Daoist. Mazu, on the other hand, both in the legend of her origins as Lin Moniang, a young woman from a small fishing village on Meizhou Island in Fujian, and in the focus of her cult, particularly strong in Fujian and Taiwan, is more localized.⁴ On the other hand, she too is regarded as a heavenly mother, and her association with the protection of her devotees, especially sailors, gives her something in common with the Stella Maris.

This article will consider some of the similarities between these figures which have allowed Taiwanese Catholics to embrace Mary as a figure who is integrated with a certain ease into preexisting cultic beliefs and practices. We shall argue that localization of the cult of the Virgin Mary through identification with specific shrines, along with her sharing of certain characteristics with the two major goddess figures on the island, and the embrace of

¹ E. R. Wolf, 'The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol', *Journal of American Folklore* 71, 1958, 34-39.

² E. P. Lozada, *God Aboveground: Catholic Church, Postsocialist State, and Transnational Processes in a Chinese Village*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001, 34.

³ P. S. Sangren, 'Female Gender in Chinese Religious Symbols: Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and the Eternal Mother.' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 9, 1, 1983, 4-25.

⁴ J. Bosco and P. Ho, *Temples of the Empress of Heaven*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1999.

devotional practices that are not that distant from the ritual practices of the temples, has aided Taiwanese Catholics in developing a closer relationship with Our Lady. At the same time, this process of inculturation has carried with it a certain risk of syncretism, of misunderstanding Mary's universal role in the economy of salvation, of taking the focus away from her Son as the universal Mediator,⁵ a problem not unfamiliar in other parts of the world and in other times.

We shall begin with a brief consideration of the figures of Guanyin and Mazu. While many may have some familiarity with the former, perhaps less well-known is Mazu. What we shall do here is give some consideration as to how these two figures are perceived by Taiwanese today, going beyond the question of iconography to the active role they may have in the religious life of ordinary people. We shall then move on to a discussion of the ways in which Mary has been "localized," in the first place more broadly within Chinese-speaking cultures, and then within the specific context of Taiwan. We shall look in particular at a few specific cases we have observed in Taiwan, including during a period of personal fieldwork, such as the Immaculate Conception at the Wanchin Basilica in Pindong, the Shrine of Our Lady of China in Meishan, located in southern central Taiwan, and the apparition of Virgin Mary in Mount Wufengqi, in Yilan County. Last but not least, we will also pay attention to popular devotion to the Virgin Mary shared by many believers in the Taiwanese countryside, and analyse how the localization of the cult of the Virgin Mary has taken on strong homegrown connotations.

We shall conclude with some remarks on how the Catholic Church in Taiwan might more effectively "update" understanding of Mary in the light of some of the developments in post-conciliar Mariology, particularly by putting her forward as a model of the Christian life as "first disciple" of her Son.

2. Guanyin and Mazu

Guanyin

In Taiwan, Guanyin is worshiped in both Taoist and Buddhist temples, such as Longshan Temple (Wanhua District) one of the most important and well-known temples in Taipei City. In the Longshan Temple (which, by the way, is an extraordinary mixture in its pantheon of gods and goddesses, of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and animism, as well as local and national symbols) Guanyin occupies, with Mazu, the central position.⁶ The most notable

⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 1964, 60 and 62.

⁶ The central position of Mazu and Guanyin represents the increased importance of the affinal kinship bond as Taiwanese society moves from agriculture to industrial involution. See E.B. Morris Wu, *From China to Taiwan. Historical, Anthropological, and Religious Perspectives*, Nettetal: Monumenta Serica, 2009, 150.

instance of Guanyin iconography is her Thousand-Armed manifestation (representing her great compassion and power in reaching out to those who suffer). This is by far the most popular iconographic representation of Guanyin in Taiwan (as it is in China) and is also to be found in many Taoist temples and in those related to the Taiwanese Popular Religion (台灣民間宗教).⁷ The largest statue of the Thousand-armed Guanyin is in the Pure Land Buddhist Yuandao Temple in Damsui.

Nevertheless, it is on the altar located in most Taiwanese homes that the figure of Guanyin becomes an ubiquitous deity, revered and respected. In the center of these altars, which may be of various sizes, an image of a deity is displayed and worshiped (this is usually where Guanyin is located) and to the left of the deity (from the point of view of someone standing in front of the altar) are located the ancestor tablets. Small incense burners are placed in front of the deity and in front of the ancestors, along with small glasses containing wine whose contents are changed daily. Likewise, a small statue of Guanyin is often placed on the dashboard of cars to seek her protection. Interestingly, Catholics often replace her with a statue of Mary which looks almost identical. Indeed, one of the most usual and popular representations of Guanyin is as a beautiful and gracious woman, who holds a child in her arms and wears a rosary around her neck, an image which some have suggested was influenced by Marian iconography brought to China by the Jesuits.⁸

Guanyin is, therefore, a deity who is in the home—and also in many Taiwanese cars—who knows the people and their ancestors well, who listens to their requests, intercedes for them, and protects them from harm. Like Guanyin, the Virgin Mary is the personification of divine compassion; she is the Mother of Mercy and protector of the faithful from myriad evils. According to Madsen the eager acceptance of devotion to Mary by Chinese Catholics was due at least partly to Mary's similarity to Buddhist Guanyin and the Eternal Mother of the Northern Chinese secret societies.⁹ From this point of view, the image of the Virgin Mary is one of the most effective instances of inculturation to be found in the Taiwanese Catholic world.

⁷ Following the indication of Professor Philip Clart, we use the term Popular Religion instead of Folk Religion. This term means a syncretic combination of religious practices drawn from Buddhism, Taoism, and traditional shamanistic beliefs.

P. Clart, '“Popular Religion” as an Analytical Category in the Study of Chinese Religions', in Z. Wesolowski (ed.), *The Fourth Fu Jen University International Sinological Symposium: Research on Religions in China: Status quo and Perspective*, Taipei: Fujen University Press, 2006, 166-203.

⁸ J. Clarke, *The Virgin Mary and Catholic Identities in Chinese History*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013, 46.

⁹ R. Madsen, *China's Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 88.



Guanyin

Mary

Photos © Dr Lazzarotti 2024

Mazu

Another important female deity in Taiwan is definitely 媽祖 (Mazu). Mazu, whose real name was 林默娘 (Linmoniang), was a Fujianese shamaness from Meizhou Island, part of Fujian's Putian County, whose life span is traditionally dated from 960 to 987. According to one well-known story, while still a teenager she saved her fisherman father and her brothers from an ocean storm by slipping into a trance and plucking them to safety. Because of this miracle, she was revered after her death as a tutelary deity of seafarers, including fishermen and sailors. Her worship spread throughout China's coastal regions and overseas Chinese communities throughout Southeast Asia and beyond. Some Mazuist temples are affiliated with famous Taiwanese temples. One reason for her eminence in Taiwan is that settlers leaving Fujian often prayed to her before they set sail, carried icons of her on their ships, and later established shrines to express their gratitude for arriving safely. Many of the oldest Mazu effigies in Taiwanese temples arrived this way during the 17th century. She was thought to roam the seas, protecting her faithful through miraculous interventions. Her believers now generally regard her as a powerful and benevolent Queen of Heaven. Mazu worship is popular in Taiwan as large numbers of early immigrants to Taiwan are Hoklo people, and now she is worshiped as an all-powerful protective deity.¹⁰ During his fieldwork in Taiwan Dr. Lazzarotti witnessed the construction of many temples. In the syncretic Taiwanese religious world, anyone can potentially become a deity. So many small temples are built following the wishes of deceased people who have expressed, either through an apparition in a dream or through the intervention of a medium, their desire to have a temple dedicated to them. Since only a few people know, or knew, the person for whom the temple was erected, one of the first things the temple managers do is to invite a Mazu from one of the most important temples

¹⁰ P.R. Katz, 'Religion and the State in Post-War Taiwan', *The China Quarterly* 154 (S.), 2003, 395–412.

on the island. This is because Mazu enjoys a very high reputation in Taiwan, so her presence inside a new temple guarantees that the new temple is not a hoax and that the deity worshiped in it is powerful.

3. The Virgin Mary in Taiwan

Let us begin with a brief presentation of Catholicism in Taiwan. While there has been a presence of the Church on the island since the 17th century, the number of Catholics has always remained a tiny majority of the population. At the beginning of the Japanese occupation in 1895, there were as few as 1000 faithful, a number that rose through modest conversions and natural increase to slightly more than 10,000 at the end of World War II,¹¹ with the clergy numbering only fifteen.¹² Over the next twenty-five years, the Church experienced a period of rapid expansion due to a huge influx of Chinese fleeing from the regime of Mao, and the considerable number of "rice conversions" thanks to the charitable activities of a much-expanded clergy (834 by 1969), most of whom had also fled from the Communists. At its peak, Catholics numbered approximately 300,000,¹³ however, this number has now more than halved by most estimates, with even fewer practicing on a regular basis.

One must also note that the Church in Taiwan is characterized by strong concentrations of Catholics among some of the indigenous peoples, mainly in the east of the island, though also in the plains' village of Wanchin, which is a significant center of Marian devotion, as we shall see presently. There are also some rare examples of Chinese-origin villages, such as Shuiwei, in the Taichung area (studied by Dr. Lazzarotti),¹⁴ where the majority is Catholic. In the urbanized areas of Taiwan where the majority of the population lives, Catholics are a drop in the ocean, though they are well-served by parishes that continue to be active despite the overall decline in numbers, including of priests.

Marian devotion must therefore be considered in this context of a minority faith-community in which, outside of the Catholic villages with a longer-standing Catholic tradition, a not inconsiderable number of the faithful are first or second-generation converts. Overall, this has the effect of enhancing a sense of common identity over and against the majority population and therefore a tendency towards the practicing of rites that reinforce the

¹¹ W.Y. Ku, 'Catholic Church in Taiwan during the Japanese occupation', in F. So, B. Leung, E. Mylod (eds), *The Catholic Church in Taiwan*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 39-67.

M.Cs. Chang, 'The Internal Development of the Taiwan Catholic Church: 1950s–1960s', in So, F., Leung, B., Mylod, E. (eds) *The Catholic Church in Taiwan. Christianity in Modern China*, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2018, 27-55.

¹² Chang, 'The Internal Development of the Taiwan Catholic Church: 1950s–1960s', 27-55.

¹³ B.K.F Leung, 'The Introduction', F. So, B. Leung, E. Mylod (eds), *The Catholic Church in Taiwan*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 1-11.

¹⁴ M. Lazzarotti, *Place, Alterity, and Narration in a Taiwanese Catholic Village*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

distinctiveness of the Catholic faith, including devotion to the Virgin. However, it could be that the insistence on rites such as novenas, rosaries, and processions, also mirrors the practices of the Buddhists and Taoists in their worship of Guanyin and Mazu.

The Virgin Mary seems to be, therefore, very present in the lives and experiences of Taiwanese Catholics. Many churches and some shrines in Taiwan are dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Let us turn now to some of the specific practices of Marian veneration in Taiwan, which will illustrate how devotion to the Virgin has been inculturated in a local context.

a. The Immaculate Conception at the Wanchin Basilica

The most prominent Marian shrine in Taiwan is to be found in the Wanchin Basilica of the Immaculate Conception (萬金聖母聖殿), in Wanchin Village, Wanluan Township, Pingtung County, which is also the first basilica church in Taiwan. The church, founded by the Dominicans in approximately 1858, benefits from a local population that is over 80% Catholic.¹⁵ Initially dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary, it was rededicated to the Immaculate Conception in 1862 when a new church was built to replace the earlier structure.¹⁶ The Church possesses three statues of Mary, the original image of the Immaculate Conception, now damaged, a replacement, purchased in the 1980's, and a third, also of the Immaculate Conception, named "Our Lady of Wanchin." Chua notes that this third statue originally had black hair but it was dyed brown, because, according to the parish priest of the time, Fr. Martinez, "People in Wanchin prefer to have a European Mary than a Chinese or an Asian one. For them, Mary is not Chinese."¹⁷ This is a phenomenon common to both Taiwan and China, where, other than a brief period during the 1920s and 30s, when the Fu Jen art school, at that time still in Beijing, with the encouragement of Celso Constantini, the apostolic delegate, promoted Chinese images of Mary and Christ, there has been little taste for indigenous images, perhaps because of a concern that they might be taken for Chinese deities.

A special moment for the Virgin Mary in Taiwan was the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Catholic Church, which was celebrated in 2008–2009.¹⁸ One of the many activities planned by the Bishops' Conference in Taiwan was a pilgrimage, across all the parishes of the island, of the statue of the Virgin Mary of Wanchin, which is where the Dominican missionaries started the evangelization of Taiwan. The pilgrimage was organized by the Bishops' Conference so that each parish could host the statue of the Virgin Mary for at

¹⁵ C. Chua, *An Investigation on the Inculturation of Marian Devotion in Taiwan Catholicism: A Case Study of Marian Devotion at the Immaculate Conception Minor Basilica in Wanchin, Pingtung*, Taipei: Taiwan Licentiate in Theology, Faculty of Theology "Marianum," Rome, 2000, 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁸ A. Fides, 'At the close of celebrations for the 150th anniversary of the evangelization bishop of Kaohsiung calls everyone to open wide the missionary doors', Vatican City: Agenzia Fides - Palazzo "de Propaganda Fide", 2009.

least a few hours.¹⁹ Each parish had the task of picking up the statue in the previous parish and escorting her to their own church. The pilgrimage reached all the parishes of the island. This event was intended to reinforce the cohesion of the Taiwanese dioceses and to give new strength and encouragement to the Taiwanese faithful and especially to allow Catholics to show their faith publicly. With the slogan “Holy Mary and the Lord travel together to bless the 150th anniversary of Taiwan 聖母與主同行福臨臺灣150年 (*Shengmu yu zhu tongxing fulin taiwan 150 nian*)”, the Church hierarchy wanted to make clear that Jesus was the center of the Catholic faith, also because in Taiwan the difference between Catholic and Protestant Churches is not so clear. Therefore, people tend to indicate the Catholic Church as the Church where the Virgin Mary is worshiped. The symbols displayed at this event can be read in the intent by the Taiwanese Catholic church to allow all the faithful around the island to feel part of the unique family represented by the Church. It is important to note that Mary is commonly called Holy Mother 聖母 *Shengmu* in Taiwan. The faithful often refer to her with the devoted and familiar term 聖母媽媽 *Shengmumama*. (Holy Mother Mama) The figure of Mary as Mother of all the Faithful acted as the catalyst for all believers who rediscovered and re-evaluated their positions as brothers and sisters among the family represented by the Church. At the same time, the national pilgrimage allowed many non-Christians to discover for the first time the image of the Holy Mary. Indeed, the statue of the Virgin Mary was also welcomed by non-Christians, as if it was a "Christian variant" of Mazu. Just as tradition dictates, many deities came out of their temples to welcome the visitor and pay homage to her, as the photo below shows.



The Wanchin Virgin Mary and the legendary god of agriculture *Shennong* 神農大帝 in front of the temple of *Shennong* in Tainan²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and to use their permission for the use of copyright material. The editors would be grateful to be notified of any corrections that should be incorporated.



This Marian pilgrimage reminded many Taiwanese of the annual pilgrimage of the Mazu of Dajia (Changhua County), the most prominent of the hundreds of pilgrimages, both large and small, that are made in Taiwan every year. During the Mazu of Dajia festival, a statue of Mazu is placed on a litter and carried by foot on a round-trip from Zhenlan Temple (鎮瀾宮), Taichung to Fengtian Temple (奉天宮) in Xingang, Chiayi, stopping at many temples along the way. The festival lasts for nine days and attracts large crowds of pilgrims, who travel alongside the litter. Mazu and her procession of helpers and pilgrims spend the night in certain temples along the way.

As will be immediately evident, there are powerful parallels between this annual Mazu pilgrimage and the 150-anniversary Taiwan-wide tour of the Immaculate Virgin of Wanchin, including the visits to parish churches, where Mary's presence was perceived to bring special grace and favor, giving both Catholics and non-Christians an image of Our Lady that was very much in tune with traditional Taiwanese religion.

b. Our Lady of China

Another important sanctuary is the Shrine of Our Lady of China (中華大聖母, Zhōnghuá Dà Shèngmǔ) in Meishan, a church located in the main town of the rural township of Meishan, in Chiayi County in southern central Taiwan, to which the Catholic Church has given the status of diocesan shrine. Our Lady of China is a title for the Virgin Mary in China who is believed to have appeared in the small village of Donglu, a village in the province of Hebei, in 1900, miraculously protecting the faithful from the violence of the Boxer Rebellion. In 1908, the local priest, Father Rene Flament commissioned Liu Bizen, a Chinese Jesuit in Shanghai, to paint an image of Mary in the style of a recent portrait of the Chinese dowager Empress Ci Xi, which in turn was modeled on Guanyin. In 1924, at the first national synod of bishops in Shanghai, at the initiative of Cardinal Celso Constantini, the portrait was raised from its original title of Our Lady of Donglu to Our Lady Queen of China to whom the Chinese people were consecrated. The original image was destroyed in 1966 during the Cultural Revolution.²¹

The presence of this image is linked to the fact that the church of Meishan was managed by a priest from China who came to Taiwan after 1949. He brought with him the image of Mary which is in the Church, thus beginning the transformation of Meishan from a simple parish to a shrine. It was this priest who gave the name 中華聖母 (Our Lady of China) to the sanctuary. In 2020, the former Bishop of Chiayi, Thomas Chung An-Zu, at the request of the then-Filipino parish priest who managed the sanctuary, requested a coronation for the

²¹ For an extensive treatment of the history of Our Lady of Donglu see Chapter 3 of J. Clarke, *The Virgin Mary and Catholic Identities in Chinese History*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013.

Marian image, which was granted and merited a decree of pontifical coronation from Pope Francis on 19 February 2021. The image is not without controversy in the current climate of tension between China and Taiwan, where the vast majority of Taiwanese are resisting pressure to unite with China with many no longer wishing to be labeled as Chinese. This may be a factor in the shrine not gaining the same popularity as the Wanchin Mary, which is far more deeply rooted in Taiwanese history.

c. Apparition of Mary in Wufengqi

On Nov. 9, 1980, the Virgin Mary appeared to five elderly men during a hiking expedition to Mount Wufengqi, in Yilan County. The five climbers - equipped with only a few candles - got lost while they were going down the mountain in the evening and ended up trapped on a steep slope for four hours. Around 9pm they finally reached the safety of a path and suddenly saw a woman in a long white robe walking down a 50-step staircase. They followed the woman who showed them the right path until they arrived home safely. They said they could not see her face clearly and she disappeared into the woods. Minutes later, they recalled that the woman resembled the Marian statue standing beside a hut built by Camillian missionaries on the mountaintop. The men believed that the Blessed Mother had helped them and they prayed in thanks to her for her protection.

One of them, returning to work the next day, saw on the desk of a Catholic colleague an image of the Virgin Mary. For him that was not merely a coincidence, but confirmation that it was indeed the Virgin Mary who had saved their lives the previous night. This man expressed the wish to be baptized. With the help of some faithful, he encouraged his companions to seek religious instruction in Catholicism and erected a Marian statue at the apparition site.²²

Today the site of the purported apparition has become a popular pilgrimage site complete with a church dedicated to Our Lady of Wufengqi. Despite the lack of any official recognition by the hierarchy, it is estimated that there are approximately 50 visitors each day. Sometimes 300 to 400 pilgrims a day visit the site, many coming from Japan and the Philippines.²³

²² Ucanews, 'Marian apparition site still popular with pilgrims', ucanews.com, 2013; Corpus Christi Webpage, '介紹-五峰旗 聖母', 2009.

²³ Ibid.



The Church of Our Lady of Wufengqi

© Wikipedia Commons

Indeed, the necessity of proving the veracity of the apparition through some sort of formal process is almost certainly less of an issue in the Taiwanese context than it might be in the West, or in official Church circles, given how visions and spirits are perceived in Chinese religion and culture.

In the complex - and at least for Westerners, different - conception of the world in Chinese traditional culture, people, and spirits (ancestors, ghosts, or deities) physically share the same living space, the same living time, and also the same preoccupations and bodily needs. As Francis Hsu notes in his *Under the Ancestors' Shadow*, “The attitude of the living toward the dead and that of the living are functionally one. The relation of the living with the dead is essentially modeled upon that of the living with the living. In glorifying the dead, it is both idealized and it sets the standard and pattern for kinship relationship”.²⁴

Thus, we can say that all those who have already left, who presently live in, and who will in the future live in this world share the same lifetime and the same existential world. In other words, these categories all live in one eternal present or, in a different perspective, one eternal past. Because of the complex interrelations between these categories, the bonds between living and those who have died (whatever kind of being they have become: an ancestor, a ghost, or a divinity) are very strong and real for Taiwanese people. It is not strange for people to make contact with these invisible (but present) entities, perhaps through the help of mediums and shamans, but also through direct contact directly involving human senses.

To provide some instances of how this is so, even for a Taiwanese Catholic, here are two stories collected during the fieldwork:

²⁴ F. Hsu, *Under the Ancestors' Shadow: Kinship, Personality, and Social Mobility in Village China*, Garden City, N.Y: Anchor Books, 1967.

A parishioner told me about an incident that occurred to his friend. He was going back to his home when he saw a little boy sitting on the parapet of a bridge. The man asked him what he was doing here at that time, and the little boy answered that he was waiting for his big brother. Content with this answer, the man went back to his home. When he arrived home his wife told him that a little boy and his big brother were found dead in the river just under that bridge.²⁵

Miss Tang was a forty-year-old parishioner I worked with for a period in 2007. One day, when we were in her office, she received a phone call. She told me that it was another believer who called her because “someone” saw “someone” around her. This meant that maybe a medium (Dang Ki), or someone with *Yin Shi* (someone whose eyes can see these supernatural presences) told her that there were some ghosts following her.²⁶

As will be apparent from these experiences in the Taiwanese context, the boundary between what is natural and what is supernatural is far more blurred, even for Catholics, so believing in an apparition of Our Lady on a mountainside is not a major leap of faith.

d. Popular Devotion to Mary among the Faithful: Case-Study from Rural Taiwan

In the encyclical *Evangelium Gaudi*, Pope Francis writes that “expressions of popular piety have much to teach us; for those who are capable of reading them, they are a *locus theologicus* which demands our attention”.²⁷ Faith needs symbols and affection to intertwine with life lived; it cannot be limited to an intellectual exercise. With regard to Mary, the Pope said “If you want to know how to love her, you have to ask the people. In turn, Mary loved Jesus with the heart of the people”.²⁸ It is this sort of popular faith that characterizes Taiwanese Catholicism, where devotion to Mary is expressed above all in ritual practices such as the rosary and novenas. Even in the urban context of Taipei, it is quite common for the faithful to gather before the daily mass and recite the rosary and the Litany of Loreto together, and to observe novenas to Our Lady. Typical is the parish of Banchiao in Taipei where during the Marian months of May and October a small altar is set up with fruit, flowers, and incense placed in front of the statue, precisely as they would be for Guanyin or Mazu. After the Mass, the priest raises the fruit, flowers, and incense in offering to Mary and concludes with three deep bows, followed by the whole congregation. There can be no doubt, then, that there is great affection for Mary and a profound belief in her maternal care for the faithful. From a

²⁵ M. Lazzarotti, *God, Jesus and the Ancestors. An Ethnography of the Ancestors’ Rites in the Taiwanese Catholic Church*, Heidelberg: Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing, 2023.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World*, Vatican City: LEV, 2013, 126.

²⁸ A. Spadaro, ‘La prima Intervista di papa Francesco’, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 2020.



theological standpoint, however, few would be able to explain any of the Marian doctrines, which mirrors the general situation of the faithful whose catechetical formation tends to be decidedly weak.

If this is the situation in urban parishes, even more notable is the privileged place given to Marian devotions in the countryside. One thing that Dr. Lazzarotti noticed during his field research in the central part of Taiwan, characterized by small villages still based on a purely agricultural economy, was that Marian devotion replaces the daily practices of the Mass and the sacraments, especially in smaller settlements where there is no priest.²⁹ This was the case in the small Catholic village in the countryside of Yunlin County, founded by Dominican missionaries more than a hundred years ago, where Dr. Lazzarotti lived for nearly three years. Given the particular situation, Mass was not celebrated daily, but this village had weekly Mass on Saturday evenings because on Sunday the priest also had to serve other neighboring villages. A similar situation was noted by Chua in her study of the community in Wanchin, who preferred to go to recitation of the Rosary than to daily Mass (which was available unlike in Lazzarotti's community), and who put the Rosary ahead of the Eucharist in importance.³⁰

Saturday evening was the only day of the week when the faithful did not gather to recite the rosary. Almost all the faithful gathered every day in the village church for the recitation of the rosary. In case of particular events, such as novenas to Mary and in May, the faithful also recited the Marian litanies. Also, pilgrimages and visits to Marian shrines were fixed annual recurrences. Moreover, all the houses in the village placed a statue of the Virgin Mary in a prominent place in their homes, and a couple of families also built outdoor structures where they could house a statue of Mary and pray the rosary in the summer months. One or two even built a reconstruction of the Lourdes grotto, with the statue of Mary inside the grotto and a small pool of water in front of the grotto. A miraculous experience collected from one family is linked to Our Lady of Lourdes:

One day, the owner of this grotto told me this story: Did you see the small pool in front of the grotto of our Lady of Lourdes I built in my backyard? When my grandson was more or less the same age as your son [between two and three years old], he fell into that pool. At that time, I had not built any fencing around the small pool, I did it just after my grandson had fallen into the water. He fell into the water, but he was able to stand on a rock in the middle of the pool. His body was under the water and only his head was outside. We were busy with customers [he was selling agricultural products] and did not pay attention to him. Besides, as you can hear, the noise coming from the road is too loud [his shop is located along a big national road]. He was calling us, asking for help, but since we were chatting with the customers, none of us heard him. It was one of our customers who first noticed his cries. I don't know how long he had been in

²⁹ M. Lazzarotti, *Place, Alterity, and Narration in a Taiwanese Catholic Village*.

³⁰ C. Chua, *An Investigation on the Inculturation of Marian Devotion in Taiwan Catholicism: A Case Study of Marian Devotion at the Immaculate Conception Minor Basilica in Wanchin, Pingtung*, 44.

Universal Belief and Local Apparition

the water, but I think quite a long time because when we brought him out, he was freezing and exhausted. Can you imagine this? A little kid around three years old was able to stand on a small rock in the water for such a long time. I think that it was a miracle. Also because he recovered very fast. After this fact, all of our customers and neighbors began to say that our Mary is very Ling (靈 - efficacious).^{31 32}

The family regarded this miracle as the Virgin Mary's response to the special devotion they had towards her. Both husband and wife were committed members of the Legion of Mary (which is still very active in almost all parishes in Taiwan) and were among the most frequent visitors to the evening rosary.

Conclusion

With the examples described above, we have tried to give the reader a complete picture of the enculturation process of Holy Mary in Taiwan. This process is not formed by stages that follow one another in a regular pattern but is more like a mosaic where new pieces overlap with the previous ones. It is in this sense that one can interpret the first example we examined, of the procession of Holy Mary of Wanjin. Indeed, the procession mirrors, both in execution and practical consequences, the processions of deities that very often pass through and enliven the streets of Taiwanese villages and cities. From this example, it is possible to note that the figure of Mary fits neatly within the devotional practices of the mainstream Taiwanese Popular Religion, and that indeed, both the faithful and the hierarchy of the Taiwanese Church have consciously exploited this feature to model the procession of Mary of Wanjin on those with a national (or inter-county) character such as Mazu.

From another perspective, the local people, reacting genuinely and spontaneously to the procession, demonstrated how natural the assimilation of the Virgin Mary to the other deities that govern the lives, customs, and behaviors of most Taiwanese could be. On closer analysis, this may help explain how the Taiwanese faithful, especially recent converts, approach the image of Mary as they approached the images of Mazu or Guanyin before they were converted. Their devotion still manifests itself in the forms and behaviors typical of the faithful of the Taiwanese Popular Religion.

The second example is the one most linked to the historical dialogue of the Taiwanese Catholic Church with the Taiwanese sense of identity. When the Chiayi Diocese was established, the first group of priests who were assigned to take care of Meishan Parish came

³¹ This kind of term is not used among Catholics, but is very common for the believers of the Taiwanese popular religion. In fact, the god or gods worshiped by people are always believed to have ling for the individual worshiper. See D. K. Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, & Ancestors: Folk Religion in a Taiwan Village*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972, 103.

³² M. Lazzarotti, *God, Jesus and the Ancestors. An Ethnography of the Ancestors' Rites in the Taiwanese Catholic Church*, 162-163.



from China. This is why the image of Mary was called Our Lady of China. This fact reflects the Taiwanese Catholic Church's historical situation after World War II. With the expulsion of all the foreign missionaries from China in 1950, Chinese priests and a few Chinese bishops escaped the persecution and took refuge in Taiwan.³³ The beginning of the democratization process on the island brought with it the defining of a Taiwanese identity separate from the Chinese identity to which the KMT had hitherto linked it. Since Chen Shuibian's presidency from 2000 to 2008, Taiwanese identity has been based on the principle of *Běntǔhuà* 本土化 (indigenization), an effort that has enforced the national sense of being an independent and democratic state. Terms such as 本省人 *Benshengren* and 外省人 *waishengren* (indigenous and outsider) became, during this period, terms that indicated not only the origin but also the identity and the political affiliation of Taiwanese people.³⁴ This also influenced the Our Lady of China sanctuary: the environment was not suitable for calling it "Our Lady of China" 中華聖母, so it was called the "Chinese Statue of the Virgin and Child" 中華聖母子像.

The third episode, the apparition of the Holy Mary on Mount Wufengqi, is open to many interpretations and linked with both the Taiwanese religious background and Catholicism in Taiwan. From a Catholic point of view, the believers are reinforced in their faith by these divine interventions. Talking about the importance of miracles in the Chinese Catholic world, Madsen argues that the apparitions of Mary are deeply connected with the general belief in miracles of Chinese people.³⁵ Lozada further points out that the belief of Chinese Catholics in apparitions of Mary is closely connected to their general belief in miracles, a belief that defies all the education they received at school through secular science.

In his work, Lozada argues that almost all the Catholics he asked said they had personally experienced miracles, and they often claimed that their faith was strong precisely because they had been blessed with such experiences. The most commonly cited miracles are humble acts of unexplained good fortune.³⁶ According to Madsen,³⁷ believers consider God as the author of these miracles, usually through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and this without asking the opinion of a priest or following any ecclesiastical rule, a position that Lozada also takes.

The only necessary condition is that the individual believer sincerely seeks God's help. The miracles are independent of any human effort. Sometimes, miracles manifest themselves

³³ M. Lazzarotti, *God, Jesus and the Ancestors. An Ethnography of the Ancestors' Rites in the Taiwanese Catholic Church*, 48.

³⁴ *Benshengren* 本省人, are those with ancestors who lived in Taiwan before the start of Japanese rule in 1895, and *waishengren* 外省人, those with ancestors who moved from China to Taiwan between 1945-1950. S. Tzeng, *From honto jin to bensheng ren, the origin and development of the Taiwanese national consciousness*, Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2009.

³⁵ R. Madsen, *China's Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society*, 94.

³⁶ E. P. Lozada, *God Aboveground: Catholic Church, Postsocialist State, and Transnational Processes in a Chinese Village*, 94.

³⁷ R. Madsen, *China's Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society*, 94.

in the form of a direct call by God to serve the Church, without the believers needing the approval of official Catholic Church authority.³⁸ In this sense, by separating the miracle, and therefore the figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary, from the ecclesial hierarchy, Mary is linked even more to Taiwanese forms of devotion, where people turn to the divinities directly without the need for intermediaries. In other words, the miraculous event directly inserts the Virgin Mary within the Taiwanese religious universe. Mary, separated from the hierarchy further approximates to the aforementioned figures of Guanyin and Mazu. In other words, the miraculous event directly inserts the Virgin Mary within the Taiwanese religious universe. Within the Taiwanese Catholic world, Mary is identified more as a deity than as the mother of Christ.

As we have noted above, within the context of the Taiwanese cultural milieu and religious beliefs, the cult of the Virgin has inculturated with a certain ease due especially to the striking similarities between Mary and the two most popular local goddesses, Guanyin and Mazu, whose iconography bears many resemblances, and who, like Mary, are seen as figures who protect. This is especially true in the case of Guanyin, since the parallels between her compassion for a suffering world and Mary's mercy towards those who turn to her can, once the theological differences are left aside, lead to a certain affinity between the two.

Nevertheless, from an orthodox Catholic position, while these affinities between the iconography of the Virgin and the deities Guanyin and Mazu, and certain commonalities in their role as mediators and compassionate mother figures make it easier in some respects for Taiwanese to identify with Mary, there is also a risk of confusion and syncretism. For those who are not particularly familiar with the Catholic faith, it is not uncommon for them to think that Mary is worshiped as a goddess, while for Catholics themselves, it is important to avoid the practice of turning to Mary without reference to her Son, especially in times of need. Moreover, in a religious climate where the granting of favors by the gods (whether health, good fortune, or wealth) is often put down to correct ritual practice and offerings, the urging of Pope St. Paul VI still rings true, to avoid "vain credulity, which substitutes reliance on merely external practices for serious commitment".³⁹

The fourth example is strongly linked with the reflections related to the second one: the separation of Mary from the Church's official hierarchy. As we have noted, devotion to the Virgin in Taiwan tends to take more traditional forms such as recitation of the rosary, novenas, processions, pilgrimages to shrines, and belief in apparitions and the power of the Virgin to protect and heal. While this in part may be down to the innate conservatism of the Catholic Church in Taiwan, typical of a minority religion, it is undoubtedly also a result of influences from the prevailing religious beliefs and practices. This "localization" of Mary is a

³⁸ E. P. Lozada, *God Aboveground: Catholic Church, Postsocialist State, and Transnational Processes in a Chinese Village*, 94.

³⁹ Pope Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation Marialis Cultus*, Vatican City: LEV, 1974, 38.

natural and welcome outcome of inculturation. Nevertheless, it has meant that some of the stresses of post-conciliar Mariology have largely passed the Taiwanese faithful by, such as a greater emphasis on Mary's universal role in the economy of salvation, as "first disciple" and icon of the Church, God's people. To quote Pope St. Paul VI again, there is a certain risk of "small-mindedness which obscures the figure and mission of Mary".⁴⁰

On a more practical level, it is possible to observe that considering the Blessed Virgin Mary as an element of faith not included in the ecclesial hierarchy explains how the faithful's participation in the recitation of the rosary, takes on an almost greater importance than participation in the Mass.

References

Bosco, Joseph and Ho, Puay-peng (1999), *Temples of the Empress of Heaven*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press

Corpus Christi Webpage. 2009. 介紹-五峰旗 聖母. (2009, February 17). Retrieved from <http://cchristi.catholic.org.tw/youth/hiovwen.htm>

Clarke, Jeremy, 2013. *The Virgin Mary and Catholic Identities in Chinese History*. Hong Kong University Press.

Clart, Philip , 2006. "Popular Religion" as an Analytical Category in the Study of Chinese Religions. In *The Fourth Fu Jen University International Sinological Symposium. Research on Religions in China: Status quo and Perspective*. Zbigniew Wesolowski edited. Taipei: Fujen University Press.

Chua, Celia (2000) "An Investigation on the Inculturation of Marian Devotion in Taiwan Catholicism: A Case Study of Marian Devotion at the Immaculate Conception Minor Basilica in Wanchin, Pingtung. Taipei, Taiwan Licentiate in Theology, Faculty of Theology "Marianum," Rome

Chang, M.Cs. (2018). The Internal Development of the Taiwan Catholic Church: 1950s–1960s. In: So, F., Leung, B., Mylod, E. (eds) *The Catholic Church in Taiwan. Christianity in Modern China*. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-6668-9_3

Fides, A. 2009a. At the close of celebrations for the 150th anniversary of the evangelization bishop of Kaohsiung calls everyone to open wide the missionary doors. http://www.fides.org/en/news/25430-ASIA_TAIWAN_At_the_

⁴⁰ Pope Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation Marialis Cultus*, Vatican City: LEV, 1974, 38.

Universal Belief and Local Apparition

close_of_celebrations_for_the_150th_anniversary_of_the_evangelization_Bishop_of_Kaohsiung_calls_everyone_to_open_wide_the_missionary_doors#.VjCS1d8SppQ. Accessed February 1, 2017.

—. 2009b. Brief overview of the church and celebrations for the 150th anniversary of the evangelization.

http://www.fides.org/en/news/25455ASIA_TAIWAN_Brief_Overview_of_the_Church_and_Celebrations_for_the_150th_Anniversary_of_the_Evangelization#.VjCT9t8SppQ. Accessed February 1, 2017.

Hsu, Francis L. 1967. *Under the Ancestors' Shadow: Kinship, Personality, and Social Mobility in Village China*. Garden City, N.Y: Anchor Books.

Jordan, D.K. 1972. *Gods, Ghosts, & Ancestors: Folk Religion in a Taiwan Village*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Katz, P. R. 2003. Religion and the State in Post-War Taiwan. *The China Quarterly* 154 (S.): 395–412.

Ku, W.Y., 2018. Catholic Church in Taiwan during the Japanese occupation. *In The Catholic Church in Taiwan: Birth, Growth and Development*, pp.39-67.

Lazzarotti, M. (2020). *Place, Alterity, and Narration in a Taiwanese Catholic Village*. Cham, Palgrave Macmillan.

—. (2023). *God, Jesus and the Ancestors. An Ethnography of the Ancestors' Rites in the Taiwanese Catholic Church*. Heidelberg: Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing.

Leung, B.K.F. (2018). The Introduction. In: So, F., Leung, B., Mylod, E. (eds) *The Catholic Church in Taiwan. Christianity in Modern China*. Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore.

Lozada, Eriberto P., Jr. 2001. *God Aboveground: Catholic Church, Postsocialist State, and Transnational Processes in a Chinese Village*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Lumen Gentium, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 1964,
https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

Madsen, Richard. 1998. *China's Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Morris Wu, Eleanor B. 2004. *From China to Taiwan. Historical, Anthropological, and Religious Perspectives*. Monumenta Serica Institute Sankt Augustin.



Naumann, Isabell M. 2017. "Mariology at the Beginning of the Third Millennium, in *Mariology at the Beginning of the Third Millennium* edited by K. Wagner, M. I. Naumann, P. J. McGregor and P. Morrissey, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, pp. 1-31.

Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*: Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World (24 November 2013), Vatican City, LEV, 2013. Retrieved from https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus*, February 2, 1974. Vatican City: LEV., 1974. https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19740202_marialis-cultus.html

Sangren, P. Steven. 1983. "Female Gender in Chinese Religious Symbols: Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and the 'Eternal Mother'," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1983), pp. 4-25.

Spadaro, A. (2020). La prima Intervista di papa Francesco | La Civiltà Cattolica. *La Civiltà Cattolica*. Retrieved from <https://www.laciviltacattolica.it/articolo/intervista-a-papa-francesco>

Tzeng, S. (2009). *From honto jin to bensheng ren, the origin and development of the Taiwanese national consciousness*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America.

Ucanews. 2013. Marian apparition site still popular with pilgrims - ucanews.com. (2023, April 28). Retrieved from https://www.ucanews.com/story-archive/?post_name=/1991/05/29/marian-apparition-site-still-popular-with-pilgrims&post_id=39218

Wolf, E.R. (1958). The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol. *Journal of American Folklore*, 71, 34.

Yu, Chun-fang (2001). *Kuan-yin, The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.