

# The Geopolitics of Religious Performance in Twenty-First Century Taiwan

Written by Fang-long Shih

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FANG-LONG SHIH, NOV 3 2015

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Taiwan's status began to evolve from merely a geographical area into a geopolitical entity in the seventeenth century, when the island came under Dutch colonial control and was thus incorporated into regional and global geopolitics. However, Taiwan's position has always been marginal: on the periphery of the Chinese and then the Japanese empires, and now on the edges of the USA's current sphere of influence. This chapter examines the issues around how marginal Taiwan has been represented culturally and symbolically in the twenty-first century's new geopolitical climate. It explores the twin themes of 'religion and politics; religion and nationalism' in the Taiwanisation movement, focusing on how the god Nazha represents the struggle of Taiwanese identity in an attempt to open new political spaces for itself in the international world.

### **Taiwan's Liminality: Neither a State nor a Nation-State**

This geopolitical marginality has intensified in recent years, with the rise of China as a global superpower. 'Marginality' has a negative connotation, and Corcuff has suggested a more positive and creative perspective by using the term 'liminality'.<sup>[1]</sup> The concept of 'liminality' was first articulated by a French anthropologist, Arnold Van Gennep, who defined rituals as 'rites of passage' made up of three stages— separation, liminality and incorporation—with liminality referring to 'an in-between period during which an individual is in transition between a state of life that (s)he has not yet fully left, and a new stage into which s(he) has not fully entered'.<sup>[2]</sup> Corcuff's application of the concept of liminality to the sociological study of Taiwan's geopolitics and international relations requires analytical attention be directed to Taiwan's temporal isolation in a Cold War bubble and also the spatial connectivities at play in a given time frame.

Taiwan is indeed in a state of liminality, being neither a state nor a non-state. Between 1947 and 1949, the then-ruling government in China—the Kuomintang (KMT, Chinese Nationalist Party)—retreated to Taiwan following the defeat of its forces on Mainland China at the end of the civil war with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The decision to give Taiwan to the KMT had been made by the Allies at the Cairo Conference of 1943, on the condition that the three nations (the Republic of China, the US and the UK) would fight alongside one another until Japan's surrender. However, although the Treaty of San Francisco, which Japan signed in 1951, stated that Japan renounced all right, title and claim to Formosa and the Pescadores, it did not specify what Taiwan's legal status actually was. Taiwan's status remained liminal: for the CCP's newly founded People's Republic of China, Taiwan was a place still to be brought under its control, while the KMT continued to assert its Republic of China was the sole legitimate government of all China. The KMT regarded itself as in temporary exile on Taiwan, and the island was imagined as a mere province of an imagined territory of China that was even larger than that of the PRC; it even included Outer Mongolia, which the PRC had recognised as independent in 1949.<sup>[3]</sup>

The KMT at first enjoyed international recognition but, with the Sino-Soviet split in the late 1960s, ideological

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opposition to communism in the West lost ground to pragmatic political calculation. The US, along with many other Western countries, used relations with China strategically against the Soviet Union. The CCP's PRC began to replace the KMT's ROC as the internationally recognised government of China. In 1971, the ROC lost its seat in the General Assembly of the Security Council of the United Nations, and this was followed by the loss of diplomatic recognition by the UK in 1972 and by the USA in 1979. [4] The ROC/Taiwan has since become even more politically isolated, with the PRC undergoing a process of neo-liberal capitalist transition from the 1980s and increasing its interaction with the rest of the world from the 1990s. It is indeed from such a socio-economic perspective, as Sung-sheng Chang points out, that 'greater penetration of global capitalism in the post-Cold War era has hiked the stakes of symbolic wars ... these factors have come increasingly to determine the condition of possibility for culturally representing Taiwan.' [5]

## God Nazha and Taiwan's Visibility

Religion in Taiwan since the 1980s has reflected the transformation of politics; a shift from local rivalries of territorial deities to island-wide Mazu pilgrimages 'constituting a ritual of pan-Taiwanese-ness' [6] and further linked to a growing sense of Taiwanisation. Taiwanisation in the new mobile digital era has further evolved into an imagined relation between people who might never meet, mediated by social media. In particular, the god Nazha has become an actor for the formation of a new Taiwanisation discourse, seeking to connect Taiwan with the rest of the world and thus to create a political space for Taiwan. No other deity generates as much enthusiasm among young Taiwanese as Nazha. This is perhaps because of Nazha's unruly nature: many young people in Taiwan today identify with him, an unruly god, in contrast to other gods/goddesses, who are upright but distant—especially when they feel frustrated at being unjustly treated.

Nazha is also known as the Third Prince, in reference to the third son of General Li Jing. The Third Prince Nazha has the position of Marshal in the Centre of the Heavenly Altar, also known as 'Marshal of the Centre of the Altar', commanding the five 'camps': of the North, of the South, of the East, of the West, and of the Centre. [7] This is signified by the five flags carried behind Nazha while on tour. In religious processional troupes, Nazha takes the lead when deities of higher rank go on inspection tours in their own territory or visiting tours to other temples. Along with dancing, performances normally involve singing, martial arts and trances or spirit-possession, and the whole ensemble is known as 'troupe culture'. The young performers, like other young people, often go to discotheques and nightclubs, and they have incorporated elements from the nightclubs they love into the Nazha performance for which they are trained. The Nazha act has therefore undergone a transformation: while bearing giant Nazha body puppets and retaining certain rigid gestures associated with the god, the young performers now dress in modern fashions, wearing sun glasses as they dance to techno music and follow disco beats. This adaptation is known as 'the Techno Nazha the Third Prince'.

The turning point in Nazha's popularity was a performance at the opening ceremony of the 2009 World Games in Kaohsiung. About twenty giant Nazha body puppets roared into the stadium on motorcycles and proceeded to dazzle the audience. Since then, Techno Nazha the Third Prince troupes with body puppets have frequently been invited to perform at international events such as the 2009 Deaf Olympics in Taipei, the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai and the 2010 International Flower Expo in Taipei. Moreover, in January 2010, a performance in the USA was awarded first prize in an international competition at the Pasadena Rose Parade. In August 2010, 11 members of Taiwan's marathon team took turns running a super marathon through the Sahara Desert dressed in Nazha body puppets. They did so to publicise Taiwan during the week-long event. And in July 2012, while attending a cross-Strait exchange programme, China's leader Jintao Hu accepted an invitation to join in an act dancing with Nazha body puppets. [8]

From February 2011 to the end of 2013, Chien-Heng Wu, a Taiwanese student in his early twenties who was studying Sports Management at National Taipei University, performed in a Nazha giant body puppet weighing 14 kilograms in over sixty countries, including India, Egypt, Kenya, Peru, Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil, the USA and the UK. During his performances he played techno music and danced to a disco beat. However, he also replaced the five flags representing the five directions with ROC national flags decorated with LED lights. Publicity around Nazha reached a high point during the period of the London Olympic Games in summer 2012. Wu, within his giant Nazha

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body puppet, participated in a demonstration in which 300 overseas Taiwanese (most of them studying in the UK) carried Taiwan's ROC flag through central London. The highlight of the event was street dancing in Regent Street, where for a few days Taiwan's ROC flag hung alongside the flags of the 206 other participating countries. Unfortunately, after a week, Taiwan's national flag was removed at the PRC's insistence and replaced by the Chinese Taipei Olympic flag.[9] However, together with campaigners, Wu's performance of the unruly Nazha brought Taiwan's national flag back to Regent Street, albeit in a temporary action.

Photos of Wu's performance dancing in a Nazha body puppet decked out with ROC national flags while on his global tour have been posted on social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube. The images show him surrounded by groups of local people of different cultural backgrounds in various foreign cities, towns and villages. According to an article posted to the website *Taiwan Insights*, which is run by the Press Division of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) in San Francisco, Wu explained that 'people from many parts of the world have no idea what Taiwan is, and therefore he chose this way to present Taiwan'. He also said that 'those local residents and international tourists in each country would never have dreamt of meeting the Third Prince god Nazha from Taiwan during their life journey'. [10] According to a comment posted under the story:

Like many in Taiwan, Wu feels frustrated with the island's diplomatic isolation; however, his creative thinking has helped the national flag to be seen on the international arena once again. Nazha the Third Prince, a mythical teenage hero, represents a symbol of youth, bravery, agility and freedom from conventional bondage, a perfect mascot for grassroots diplomacy engaged by Wu.[11]

It is understandable that young people desire and seek global recognition for their country, Taiwan. In the age of social media, the younger generation expects equal access to communication and equal visibility. However, Taiwan's rights to visibility and to recognition in international relations have been restricted. At the same time, young Taiwanese *individually* have global civic rights and exercise their freedom to travel, to demonstrate and to communicate with other global citizens, as well as use social media. The global tour of the techno Nazha performance was thus conducted in a spirit of civic freedom and mobility, elaborating and extending the capabilities of communication, visibility and connection—young actors hoped that global citizens even living at a distance could 'see' and 'touch' Taiwan as represented by the Techno Nazha and thus give recognition to the existence of Taiwan.

The development of the Nazha tour, both nationally and internationally, has created significant opportunities to mark the presence of Taiwan (as symbolised by the national flag) more prominently in the international world and thus to express Taiwan's right to visibility; by the end of 2013 the number of countries visited by Wu was greater than the number exposed to Taiwanese diplomacy. In addition, videos of the Techno Nazha performance have attracted the attention of hundreds of thousands of internet users. *Want China Times* reported that Chien-Heng Wu 'has earned himself a reputation as a cultural ambassador for Taiwan, as he always dances with the ROC flag'. [12]

## Concluding Remarks: Religious Actor and International Recognition

The increasing global nature of Nazha performance tours has intensified the reach of Nazha as a new vehicle for Taiwan's identity. If we want to understand this new form of Taiwanisation, we need to understand the desire for independence and subjectivity as manifested in the myth of Nazha and the solution of his conflict with his father. The mythology of Nazha has been an important constitutive element of the Chinese family system within which a Chinese subjectivity has traditionally been produced.[13] It has always been an issue in the Chinese family, in which fathers have strong patriarchal authority: is a Chinese son to be his own agent or subject, or the instrument or object of his father? The Nazha story embodies the struggle of a young Chinese man to produce and define his own subjectivity while facing his father's authority.

By approaching geopolitics from a perspective of liminality, I have shown that Taiwan's relation to China is not, or not only and not always, that of a periphery dominated by a centre, and further I have also demonstrated how Taiwan has been turned into a site invested in by human cultural and social projects via the vehicle of religion in a twenty-first century context of geopolitical flows. Via the case study of Techno Nazha performances we see that in Taiwan, identity does not mean a fixed or stable geopolitical identity but rather a plurality of identities formed through symbolic

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struggle. Nazha's attempt to establish his autonomy is drawn as analogous with Taiwan's sovereignty in relation to China. The unruly god Nazha is thus identified as unruly Taiwan, and Nazha's conflict with his father is an analogy of the conflict of Taiwan with its 'fatherland', China. The Nazha performances suggest that the Taiwanese are simply not interested in voluntary unification with China; instead they are interested in a symbolic exploration of a conflict between Taiwan and China, which they have come to see as inevitable. The performance of Nazha revives local cultural knowledge at a time when all knowledge seem inadequate in the face of complex global problems. Through a local symbol of resistance, Taiwanese people can feel themselves capable of 'resisting' Chinese domination: a parallel with Nazha's resistance to his father's authority. The problem is not conflict and resistance as such, but rather how to ensure that the energies of conflict and resistance do not spill out into actual violence but are constructively contained and directed towards the production of symbolic capital in the post-Cold War era's culture wars.

## Notes

[1] Stephane Corcuff, 'The Liminality of Taiwan: A Case-Study in Geopolitics', *Taiwan in Comparative Perspective*, 4 (2012) 42.

[2] Corcuff, *The Liminality of Taiwan*, 53.

[3] Fang-long Shih, 'Introduction to Taiwan and Hong Kong in Comparative Perspective: Centres-Peripheries, Colonialism, and the Politics of Representation', *Taiwan in Comparative Perspective* 5 (2014) 8.

[4] Shelley Rigger, *Politics in Taiwan* (London: Routledge, 1999), 221.

[5] Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang, 'Representing Taiwan: Shifting Geopolitical Frameworks', *Writing Taiwan: A New Literary History* (London: Duke University Press, 2007), 17.

[6] Steven Sangren, 'Power and Transcendence in the Ma Tsu Pilgrimages of Taiwan', *American Ethnologist* 20(3) (1993), 576.

[7] De-chung Wa, *Daojiao Zhushen Shuo* [?] [?] [?] [?] *Daoist Deities* (Taipei: Yiqun, 1992), 248–251.

[8] Chien-Heng Wu, 'Third Prince God, from Temple Fairs to International Stage', *Taiwan Insights*. (Mar 1, 2013).

[9] *Want China Times*, 'Taiwanese Students Rally in London to Defend ROC Flag' (Mar 1, 2013).

[10] Wu, *Third Prince God*.

[11] Wu, *Third Prince God*.

[12] *Want China Times*, 'South America Awaits for Prince Nezha and the Tao of Techno' (Mar 1, 2013).

[13] Steven Sangren, *Chinese Sociologics: An Anthropological Account of the Role of Alienation in Social Reproduction* (London: Berg, 2000).

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