

# NEW SOUTHBOUND POLICY PORTAL

## The Taiwanese Camino: Mazu Pilgrimages

From Taiwan Panorama 2024-04-01



Each year on the 19th and 20th days of the third lunar month, Chaotian Temple holds its “Welcoming Mazu” ceremony. It is known among Beigang residents as “little new year.”

**The activities that take place in Taiwan each March to celebrate the goddess Mazu are the island's most boisterous folk culture events. For seven to nine days and nights, people follow Mazu—Taiwan's "number-one goddess"—on pilgrimages and "tours of inspection." Walking in these processions provides an opportunity for dialogue between people and deities and between people and their own souls, and these are also good times to experience folks' selfless devotion and mutual support.**

**These Taiwanese counterparts to Western "camino" pilgrimages can go on for 300 or 400 kilometers, and every step holds the secret code to spiritual healing.**

After the Lunar New Year, a major religious event takes place in Taiwan: The Mazu from Gongtian Temple in Baishatun, riding in her palanquin, leads over 100,000 devotees in a pilgrimage to Chaotian Temple in Beigang. Mazu herself decides the route, which is not predetermined, and there are often surprises. Along the way she ventures deep into the countryside, and she hears the appeals of the people and gives them solace. It's very heartwarming.

Meanwhile, the Mazu from Jenn Lann Temple in Dajia goes on a pilgrimage that takes her to Fengtian Temple in Xingang. The event combines religion and performance troupes, and is accompanied by the strident sounds of musical instruments and a continuous barrage of firecrackers. It is an extremely raucous example of temple culture.

Ordinary people also mobilize for these events: Along the routes, kindhearted individuals provide food, beverages, and towels, and even set up massage stations. "If you're tired, get aboard," say some, allowing footsore participants to ride in a

vehicle to rest their legs. Some people living next to the pilgrimage routes provide free accommodation, while hospitals along the coast form a healthcare alliance.... The selfless contributions that people make are all done to enable Mazu and her followers to complete the pilgrimage.

### Mazu belief in Taiwan

Lin Mei-rong, an adjunct research fellow at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, explains that Taiwan is an island country and Mazu, goddess of the sea, followed the early migrants from Meizhou in China to Taiwan. As these pioneers began opening up the land for cultivation, Mazu gradually transformed from being a sea goddess to being a water deity or irrigation deity and then a goddess of agriculture. Mazu took on a variety of special religious characteristics based on people's various needs, and became Taiwan's most widely worshipped deity.

Mazu's reputation for answering prayers spread far and wide, and many devotees took to "fetching incense" from old-established temples to worship her in daughter temples or at home. Lin says that the deities in daughter temples would go back to the mother temple from which their divine power originated to pay their respects there. Some temples began the practice of taking their Mazu statues on pilgrimages to other Mazu temples with long histories or which were popular with worshippers in order to draw on the authority of these temples to replenish or reinvigorate the repute and power of the Mazu deities in their home temples. Upon returning from these pilgrimages, Mazu would go on a "tour of inspection" of the area under her jurisdiction to bestow blessings on the community.

The 23rd day of the third lunar month is Mazu's birthday, and temples and believers celebrate the

occasion with activities such as pilgrimages, tours of inspection, and worship rituals. In recent years there has been a steady increase in the number of people taking part in pilgrimages and inspection tours. The most spectacular of these events include the Dajia Mazu Pilgrimage, the Baishatun Mazu Pilgrimage, and the “Welcoming Mazu” celebration at Chaotian Temple in Beigang, which have all been designated as intangible cultural heritage of national importance by the Ministry of Culture. These events attract participants from home and abroad, and civic groups have even voluntarily developed smartphone apps and stream activities online so that people can “walk with the gods” whenever they wish.



Mazu’s tours of inspection bring her into close contact with her devotees.

## The Dajia Mazu Pilgrimage

The Discovery Channel has listed the pilgrimage of the Dajia Mazu from Jenn Lann Temple in Taichung's Dajia District to Fengtian Temple in Xingang, Chiayi County as one of the world's three largest religious events. The 2023 pilgrimage, which lasted nine days, had an average of 200,000 participants per day.

The route of the Dajia Mazu Pilgrimage covers about 300 kilometers out and back, and its most remarkable feature is that it preserves traditional religious procession culture. Zheng Mingkun, deputy chairman of the board at Jenn Lann Temple, says that the event comes complete with religious performance troupes such as the Shaojiao Team (a group that blows shaojiao brass horns to announce the deity's arrival), the Zhuangyi Team (the all-seeing Qianliyan and all-hearing Shunfeng'er, temple guardians who lead the procession as an escort), the 36 Zhishi Team (Mazu's guard of honor), and the Jiaoqiancui (a group of musicians playing suona horns and percussion instruments). Each time Mazu arrives at a new location, the local temples will mobilize performance troupes to greet her, and wherever she stays overnight, on arriving Mazu's palanquin bearers will execute a special series of steps known as ta daxiao li to interact with the host temple deities, and when she leaves the local temple troupes will see her off. These rituals are all expressions of mutual respect between the deities.

Today it is common to see devotees along the route performing the ritual known as ling-kiō-kha: kneeling to allow the palanquin to pass overhead or crawling under it while it is stationary to seek the deity's blessings. Zheng Mingkun notes that this practice originated with the Dajia Mazu. Decades ago when the Dajia Mazu was on a pilgrimage, her palanquin bearers stopped to rest, and when nearby residents saw that the bearers

had only pastries and crackers to eat they took pity on them and brought out more substantial food for them. In return, the bearers allowed the people to perform lîng-kiō-kha, symbolizing - benediction and good fortune, and later many other temples followed this example.

Baishatun Mazu: The longest pilgrimage

Compared with the ebullient display of Taiwan temple culture that characterizes the Dajia Mazu Pilgrimage, the pilgrimage of the Baishatun Mazu from Gongtian Temple at Baishatun in Tongxiao, Miaoli County to Chaotian Temple in Beigang, Yunlin County is a journey rich in spiritual meaning.

With a lead banner, a “fire carrier” (xiangdan, a container for carrying back a burning flame from Chaotian Temple to the Baishatun Mazu’s home temple), and an “imperial palanquin,” the Baishatun Mazu travels light. After being joined in her palanquin by the Mazu from the nearby Shanbian Mazu Temple, she begins a 400--kilometer pilgrimage on foot, the longest such procession in all Taiwan. Although it is arduous to walk the route, the number of pilgrims has increased dramatically from 5,465 in 2011 to nearly 180,000 this year.

The most easily recognizable features of the Baishatun Mazu’s palanquin are the auspicious golden lion statue on top and the pink waterproof cloth covering the roof. The route of the pilgrimage is not predetermined, but is decided by Mazu along the way, and the moments when she chooses a direction at forks in the road are among the most exciting of the event. The unpredictable itinerary has attracted many fans.

How does Mazu choose a direction? Chen Bihong, a member of Gongtian Temple’s management committee, says: “For instance, when she arrives at a three-way fork in the road, if she wants to turn right there will be a slight pull on

the bearers' poles to the right, if she wants to go left there will be a slight pull to the left, and if she wants to go straight ahead the poles will pull forward. If at any time Mazu finds that the bearers have made a mistake, she will cause them to circle back. This is the expression of her divine will."

The main goal of the Baishatun Mazu Pilgrimage is to draw on the "eternal flame" that burns at Chaotian Temple, and the moment that attracts the greatest attention is when Mazu's palanquin reaches the entrance to Chaotian Temple and makes "three advances and three retreats" as a sign of respect for the temple deities. The bearers then carry the palanquin into the temple at a sprint while tens of thousands of believers yell "enter!" three times. It's an impressive sight.

The most important part of the visit is the yihuo ritual, when the presiding priest at Chaotian Temple uses a "fire ladle" to gather burning material from the eternal flame and transfer it into a "fire pot" from Gongtian Temple. The pot is then placed into a "fire carrier" to be carried back to Gongtian Temple by a special team. After Mazu returns to Gongtian Temple, she spends 12 days being enveloped in the smoke and divine power of the eternal flame, after which a ceremony is held to "open the pot," which marks the true end of the pilgrimage. The second day after Mazu's return to Gongtian Temple, the temple's second Mazu leads a tour of inspection around the community, bestowing the divine power Mazu has brought back with her on local residents.

Hung Chien-hua, director of the cultural section of the Gongtian Temple management committee, remarks that with the route and schedule of the Baishatun Mazu Pilgrimage all left up to the goddess herself, there is a great deal of uncertainty and mystery. The event, he says, is "second to none compared to famous religious

pilgrimages elsewhere in the world.”



The performance troupes (zhentou) at temple activities are well worth seeing.

#### Beigang welcomes Mazu

During the era of Japanese rule in Taiwan (1895–1945), Chaotian Temple in Beigang was known as the main center of Mazu faith in Taiwan. Tsai Hsiang-hui, a professor in the Department of Liberal Arts at National Open University, notes that a 1940 survey by the Office of the Governor--General found that at that time Chaotian Temple had 1.5 million devotees, accounting for 25% of Taiwan’s population and making it the most popular temple on the island.

Though today there are no official statistics on the number of believers, the Tourism Administration has announced that in 2023 there were over 6.81 million tourist visits to Chaotian Temple, the highest number of any religious venue in Taiwan.

Because Mazu has many “daughter deities,” each year there are more than 3,000 pilgrimages carrying these deities to Chaotian Temple to pay respects to their mother deity. These processions all preserve traditional forms, and the Ministry of Culture has designated these “Beigang pilgrimages” as folk cultural heritage of national

importance. The highlight of the year is the “Welcoming Mazu” event held in the third month of the lunar calendar.

This major celebration in Beigang is also known as “Beigang’s little new year.” Special features of the procession include firecrackers being set off in the path of deities’ palanquins, performances by folk arts troupes, and a parade of yige decorated floats featuring real people dressed up as characters from folk tales and history. Participants include deities and their palanquin bearers, a Zhuangyi Team, century-old performance troupes, Beiguan music companies, and martial performance troupes. It’s an awe-inspiring scene.

The casting of firecrackers (known as “plowing firecrackers”) at the Beigang event is one of the three great fireworks activities in Taiwan, alongside the “Bombing of Lord Handan” in Taitung and the “Beehive Fireworks Festival” in Yanshui. To make the firecrackers explode rapidly, people in Beigang heat a metal plow blade over an open flame, then quickly wipe the fuses of packs of firecrackers across the plow blade to light them, and finally throw the firecrackers into the path of the deity’s palanquin. The explosions offer a cacophonous welcome to the deities, with firecrackers being set off as soon as the palanquins leave the temple courtyard.

Beigang’s Huye (Tiger God) is the deity who is most able to “eat firecrackers” (withstand a barrage of firecrackers) during the celebrations for welcoming Mazu. The members of the Huye Association wear “tiger armor” and are led by one individual holding a fan and blowing a whistle, while his palanquin bearers move with specified steps (known as qixing or “seven stars” steps) and the palanquin advances amidst the sound of drums and shouting of the phrase “the wind blows and the tiger roars.” Alternatively, association members encircle the palanquin and “eat firecrackers.” Their heroic image has even

attracted a foreigner to join the Huye Association. Edouard Roquette, a Frenchman who has been a bearer of the Huye palanquin since 2008 and has experienced “eating firecrackers,” says: “Taiwan culture is fascinating. This year we received new uniforms, but I prefer the old ones, which are filled with memories for me.”

The yige floats, meanwhile, have children on board dressed up as characters from folk tales or history. From time to time the children toss snacks or toys into the crowd. Described as “Taiwan’s answer to Disney float parades,” this event attracts many people out onto the streets to welcome the vehicles.

#### Lantern Festival at Fengtian Temple

At Fengtian Temple in Xingang, which is the destination for the Dajia Mazu Pilgrimage, the most important event of the year is the Mazu tour of inspection held on Lantern Festival. This eight-day event is held once every four years, and starts between 11 p.m. and 1 a.m. on Mazu’s birthday, the 23rd day of the third lunar month. The temple organizes the celebrations in accordance with age-old rites to extend birthday wishes to the goddess.

Lin Bo-chi, head of the World Mazu Culture Research and Document Center at Fengtian Temple, says that the most unique feature of the Lantern Festival tour is that shops and businesses in the town pool funds and hire theater companies to stage Taiwanese Opera performances as a way of thanking Mazu for her protection. Because the site for the temple was donated by someone named He, since the inception of the Lantern Festival event each year people surnamed He carry Mazu’s palanquin to a place in front of the stage at the nearby Mazu Building for a ritual to honor the performance, as a mark of gratitude to the He clan. When this ritual is over, Mazu’s palanquin returns to the front of Fengtian Temple

and formally sets off on the tour of inspection.



When Mazu goes on a tour of inspection from Chaotian Temple in Beigang, “plowing firecrackers” is one of the unique features of the event.

#### Fording a river at Nanyao Temple

Nanyao Temple in Changhua City is one of the most sacred places for Mazu faith in Central Taiwan. During the Qing Dynasty, a man surnamed Yang who lived in Bengang (between where Beigang in Yunlin County and Xingang in Chiayi County are located today) brought incense ash from Bengang’s Tianhou Temple to a tile kiln just outside the south gate of Changhua’s city wall to seek work there. Local residents noticed that at night there was often a mysterious light emanating from the workers’ shack where Yang was staying. Believing this to be the divinity showing her presence, they collected money to carve a statue of Mazu and build a temple.

Research by Nanyao Temple indicates that the Changhua County Gazetteer for 1836 mentions that there was an annual pilgrimage from Nanyao Temple to Bengang, but the researchers surmise that it may have begun as early as the middle part of the reign of the Emperor Qianlong (1735–1796). With more than 200 years of history behind it, this event was “Taiwan’s first Mazu pilgrimage.”

Once every three years, the procession wades across the Zhuoshui River on the return leg of the journey. The most unique aspect of the Nanyao Temple pilgrimage is that the participants always bring an imperial “dragon robe” as new attire for the “ancestral Mazu” in Bengang’s Tianhou Temple, thereby showing that they have not forgotten their origins.

Belief in Mazu is widespread in Taiwan from the coast to the mountains. The associated pilgrimages, tours of inspection, celebrations and rituals all manifest the goodness of Taiwan’s people and the charm of this island. By following a Mazu procession, one can get a taste of the power of courageously moving forward and of a positive orientation. These events offer some of the most moving experiences of the yearly cycle.

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