

Revisiting the Role of Folk Religions in Protests and Campaigns in Taiwan Environmental Movement Documentaries

Wen-chang Chi^{1*}

¹ Department of Communication Arts, Chaoyang University of Technology, Taichung City, Taiwan

*Corresponding author: email: scottchi6688@gmail.com

Introduction

Environmental activists employ multiple strategies to mobilize their movements. It is noteworthy that Taiwan's environmental documentaries often include scenes where folk religions play the role in moving local residents to action and launching a dialogue with government officials in environmental protests and campaigns. This paper aims to investigate the benefits and significance of enlisting folk religions as a force for environmental protection as captured in Taiwan environmental documentaries.

The Representation of Religious Dimensions of Protests and Campaigns in Taiwan Environmental Documentaries

Environmental activists in Taiwan have been endeavoring to advance their cause by filing appeals to the government units responsible for environmental affairs and taking to the street to call media and social attention to environmental protection issues. Both efforts, however, are of no avail. Their appeals have not been addressed satisfactorily and their campaigns have received scant media coverage. The disappointed advocates eventually turn to supernatural forces in the hope of having justice realized. In addition to being relied on to cope with frustration and maintain impetus, folk religions can even empower environmental protection initiatives by giving advocates the tools they need to confront the state machine.

Elements of local religions were drawn on to strengthen their cause of safeguarding the community. Sutton observes that the messages of Taiwan festival troupes are often about the moral order of the cosmos. The martial arts militia is especially meant to forge solidarity: "We are as one against enemies, and individual effort is placed at the service of the group". Many of the uprisings by Chinese plebeians have witnessed the participation of members of secret societies or religious communities. Folk religious rituals also implicitly contain a cultural defiance of the state hegemony. Ming-shou Ho notes that in the protests against the Fifth Naphtha Cracking Project, Houjin residents set an example when they pushed their cause by enlisting the resources of local communities of faith. Religious belief systems can play an important role in propelling civil resistance movements when the state disregards the well-being of local communities.

The so-called dominant reality has been dictated exactly by economic developmentalism that increasingly departs from nature. Chen-hsing Tsai identifies the following issue as he examines how the development of human civilization leads to a denaturalized world: "As civilization develops, 'nature,'

tantamount to 'savageness' or 'instinct,' comes to be regarded as 'the other' that needs to be 'suppressed,' 'sublimated,' or 'transcended.'" "Irrationality" and "savageness" define the grassroots environmental movements in which local residents employ religious elements in original pieces of activist art to counter the national ideology of developmentalism and raise awareness about the importance of protecting ecosystems and primary sectors. Citing Michel Serres' philosophy of communication, Tsai makes the following observation about the issue of environmental communication: "We should not limit our understanding of 'communication' to a human-centered conception of communicative rationality; an adequate theorization of communication needs to take into consideration life forms other than man. 'The call of the wild' from nature calls for a fair contract between humans and nature through its particular means of expression. Nature has every right to make all kinds of sounds, including 'noise' and 'chaos,' or the so-called 'irrational' means of expression".

Conclusion

People have been turning a blind eye to the beauty and danger of nature and over-exploiting natural resources in the name of economic development. Taiwan's environmentalists and the local residents they work with are aware of that when they try to connect to folk religion gods and goddesses. Their religious faith, captured in Taiwan environmental documentary films, serves as a reminder of the importance of staying humble in the face of nature. After all, nature can live without humans, but not vice versa.



Fig. 1 Nian read a "A Humble Prayer to Mazu", *The Poisoned Sky*, Wen-chang Chi.