

***Materializing Magic Power: Chinese Popular Religion in Villages and Cities.***  
**Wei-Ping Lin. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015. Pp 220.\***

Reviewed by Lijun Zhang

In *Materializing Magic Power*, the author tackles the very complicated and diverse phenomenon of Chinese popular religion from the innovative perspective of materialization. The significant dynamics in the study of the materialization of the abstract religious world should be tangibility and intangibility. The relationship between the tangible and the intangible are interactive and mutually constitutive. Material forms such as god statues, altars, and tablets are “concrete expressions” (32) of the intangible deities and spirit power. Inversely, deities and spirit power are embedded in statues and in the bodies of spirit mediums to realize their efficacy. Through the examination of interactions between the tangible and the intangible, as manifest in material objects and human bodies, the author identifies personification and localization as the cultural mechanisms that contribute to the efficacy of deity statues and spirit mediums.

Unlike many other studies of Chinese religion, this study explores the dynamics of popular religion in Taiwan and is not confined only to the rural or urban areas. Rather, the author traces the reconfiguration of popular religion when the social and cultural setting changes with rural population migration to the city. The author selected three ethnographic field sites to examine the influence of economic and social changes on social relationships and popular religious practices. Lin grounds her study of the efficacy of the deity and the process of materialization in a tangible statue and a spirit medium in different social-economic contexts. She provides detailed ethnographic accounts of two rural villages in Southern Taiwan and of one urban, industrial city in Northern Taiwan.

According to the different social settings for religious practice, the book is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the conceptualization of the magic power of deities in two rural villages, Wannian and Sanliaowan. The second part shows a different kind of social binding in popular religion when rural villagers migrate to the city of Bade.

The first part of the book consists of three chapters. The author first examines the materialization of deities and spirit powers in the village of Wannian, analyzing the statue-carving process, the rituals enacted after the carving, and the interactions between the statue and the villagers to show the stabilization of the god statue and how it gains its efficacy. Through field research on the consecration ritual of deity statues, the author claims that the carving process, the rituals, and the interactions enliven the statues and a deity is objectified as a live person in the process. The second chapter shows the significance of spirit mediums and the rituals that they perform in popular religious practice. Combining historical and ethnographic methods, the author examines the changes of popular religion in rural Taiwan in

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contemporary time and claims that the two mechanisms, namely personification and localization, for the current popular religion have likely been imbued since the time of the Southern Song Dynasty (960-1279 B.C.E.).

The second part of the book traces the continuity and reconfiguration of village religion in the urban context through the investigation of the Wanian migrants' life challenges as manual laborers working in "unstable and often dangerous" (110) jobs and how new social relationships and a different kind of popular religion was formed in the city with the construction of an urban shrine. The rural migrants make connection to their original living place by inviting statues of their village deities to their new home. Spirit mediums in Bade practice rituals in this new environment and they have to cope with the new urban situation and meet the needs of their more dispersed devotees living in urban space with fast life rhythms. The author argues that, without the concrete geographical boundary of their living space, spirit mediums in cities try to be more inclusive and incorporative as well as making more direct connections with higher transcendental divine powers. This breaks with traditional progressive space scale and hierarchical power orders. For the urban devotees, the importance of kinship is replaced by effective ties developed through the participation of activities of common interest (*yuan* [缘]), which also plays an important role in the regular shrine visitors' connection to the deity. The term *yuan* is often used by ordinary people and Buddhists to explain predestined relationship or some mysterious or unexplainable power that bring people together.

People may use different terms such as popular religion, popular belief, folk religion, folk belief, or diffused religion to refer to the phenomena that the author discusses in this book. Chinese popular religion (*minjian zongjiao*), as a distinct form of religion in China, is influenced by and sometimes even intermingled with the more institutionalized religions such as Daoism and Buddhism. Popular religion in China is rooted in local social and cultural traditions and involves belief and practice related to deities, ghosts, ancestors, legendary figures, and so on. The author slightly touches on the differences between Chinese popular religion and other forms of religion in the Chinese cultural sphere such as Daoism and Buddhism. For example, a spirit medium lives in the local society and has deep attachment to local people while Daoist priests usually do not stay in a given locality. A more detailed clarification of the author's use of popular religion would help the audience better understand the concept and scope of the book.

Given the significance of the impact of social, cultural, and economic factors on popular religion, the different social paths and social-economic situations in the past half century would have led to very different religious practices in Taiwan and Mainland China. The socialist ideology and social movements such as Marxist antitheism and the Cultural Revolution caused the political, social, and cultural environment for popular religion in Mainland China to be very different from those in Taiwan. Although popular religion in Taiwan and Mainland China have various connections, the readers should be aware that the author's research sites for the book are solely in Taiwan and should be careful not to over-generalize from Taiwan mainland China.

The author greatly contributes to the study of Chinese popular religion with an inspiring perspective and very detailed ethnographic account and in-depth analysis of religious practice in contemporary Taiwan. As the author states in the book, the study of the material forms can shed new light on our understanding of Chinese religion. God statues and spirit mediums as the material forms of religious power are significant in the study of Chinese popular religion as a distinct form of religion. The intangible supernatural world is mediated through tangible forms. This book deepens our understanding of material culture in religious study, the interactive relationship between the tangible and the intangible, the significant roles of the statues and spirit medium in Chinese popular religion, and the continuity and changes of religion practices in rural settings and in urban settings in contemporary Taiwan.

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