

The Soft Power of a Goddess

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Cover photo: “We must certainly complete the great task of unifying the mother country,” poster by Zhou Butian (周补田), Zhang Dawei (张大畏) and Shao Guoxing (邵国兴), 1978, Landsberger Collection. Used with permission from the International Institute of Social History, The Netherlands.

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Key Findings

The worship of Mazu, a goddess originating from tenth century southern China is now deeply embedded within Taiwanese culture, with nearly 60% of the population practicing the faith today. Over 3,000 temples throughout Taiwan serve not only as religious sites, but also form hubs of local political, economic, and community influence. In recent years, however, Mazu has begun to take on a complex role within wider geopolitical dynamics.

In 2009, the Communist Party of China (CPC), through its United Front Work Department (UFWD), rebranded Mazu as the "Goddess of Peace in the Taiwan Strait." This recasts Mazu as an icon of cross-strait harmony and unity, aiming to transform her into a symbolic bridge between Taiwan and China. In doing so, the CPC has attempted to co-opt Mazu's cultural significance, positioning her as an ambassador for reunification. To further this strategy, the CPC relies on an arsenal of cultural exchanges, economic incentives, and religious associations that promote a shared "Chinese cultural identity."

One notable strategy within the CPC's United Front initiative is the "Five Affinities" approach, which prioritizes "religious affinity" as a method for fostering closer ties across the strait. Pilgrimages to Mazu's ancestral temple are encouraged as a symbolic act akin to returning home to pay ancestral respects — a powerful invocation of traditional Chinese customs. These rituals are then co-opted by the CPC to deepen cross-strait connections under a shared cultural and spiritual heritage.

Meanwhile, a different facet of the Mazu temple network has evolved in Taiwan, where criminal organizations have, in many cases, established influence over temple operations. With minimal government oversight, a number of Mazu temples have become vulnerable to gang control, their finances used for illegal activities and resources leveraged for political purposes. This, in turn, creates additional

opportunities for the CPC, which works to capitalize on these criminal ties to establish alliances with influential figures and channel funds into Taiwan to further pro-China agendas.

The Dajia Jenn Lann Temple, one of Taiwan's largest Mazu temples, is a leading example of this intersection of religious devotion, organized crime, and political power. The temple's chairman, Yen Ching-piao, a figure with ties to organized crime, has transformed the temple into a focal point of gang influence, commerce, and cross-strait exchange. Notably, the temple has developed a profitable cultural park in Tianjin, China, that serves both financial and diplomatic interests for those involved.

Another key player in these efforts is the Bamboo Union, Taiwan's largest gang. Led by Chang An Lo, also known as "White Wolf," the organization has openly supported reunification and actively recruited Taiwanese gang members to support Beijing's interests. Chang's China Unification Promotion Party (CUPP) has proved particularly resourceful, infiltrating temples across Taiwan and using temple funds for money laundering, and engaging in electoral interference.

This report, produced by Religioscope after a year-long investigation, provides insight into how the CPC's United Front is working to influence pro-unification sentiment within Taiwanese religious institutions. Drawing from interviews with temple

officials, organized crime figures, local security forces, journalists and scholars, this analysis highlights the intricate ways in which Mazu worship has become entangled with cross-strait political influence and organized crime.



01

From Sea Goddess to Queen of Heaven

The origins of the Mazu faith trace back to Fujian Province in southern China around AD 1000, during the Song Dynasty, as documented in the Records of the Holy Deeds of the Heavenly Princess 《天妃顯聖錄》.¹ Mazu, known as the “Goddess of the Sea,” was believed to protect coastal communities, especially sailors and fishermen, by ensuring safe passage on treacherous waters. Folklore suggested that Mazu could predict weather changes and often rescue those in danger during storms, earning her the title “Dragon Maiden.”

By the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD), advancements in maritime technology had spurred more extensive sea travel and trade, helping to spread Mazu worship beyond Fujian and into Taiwan by around 1600. Immigrants crossing the perilous Taiwan Strait began to view Mazu as the Goddess of the Sea, and once settled and cultivating land in Taiwan, expanded Mazu’s role to include plague relief, quelling rebellions, preventing pirate attacks, earthquake rescue, healing the sick, coastal patrol, aiding rainfall, helping soldiers, exorcising demons and defusing bombs. Over time, Mazu has become the most widespread folk belief in Taiwan and a vital source of spiritual support.

Mazu is today Taiwan’s most widespread folk deity, with scholars estimating that around 61% of Taiwan’s population, or roughly 14 million people, identify as her followers.² A vast network of over 3,000 temples dedicated to Mazu can be found across the island, ranging from small, locally managed shrines to grand institutions like the Meizhou Mazu Temple in



Binhai Mazu Cultural Park, Binhai, China, 2024.
(Photo by Miles Ching)

1 Records of the Holy Deeds of the Heavenly Princess (天妃顯聖錄), <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=614954>, p.85.

2 Chiu, K.P. (2010, June). 台灣媽祖信仰傳承之個案研究 - 以 2009 台北縣媽祖文化節為例 (The study of the Passage of Matsu Belief in Taiwan: Case of 2009 Taipei County Matsu Cultural Festival). Airiti Library, <https://www.airitilibrary.com/Article/Detail/a0000246-201006-201209120017-201209120017-131-139>

China and the Dajia Jenn Lann Temple in Taiwan, and are often located in the heart of communities. These temples act not only as centers for spiritual worship, but also as hubs for political, economic, and community life, a system known in Taiwan as “Religious Spheres” (祭祀圈 Jìsì quān).

Widespread devotion to Mazu in Taiwan is likely due to the seamless integration of folk religion into everyday life, which contrasts with more structured faiths like Christianity or Islam that often require formal initiation and exclusive allegiance. For most worshippers, a visit to a Mazu temple involves lighting incense, offering prayers for blessings or seeking protection — particularly for those in professions linked to the sea, such as sailors and fishermen. These visits are characterized by vibrant

altars, detailed statues of Mazu and the ceremonial music that often accompanies major festivals like Mazu’s birthday. Mazu worship is inherently inclusive, allowing devotees to venerate other folk gods alongside her without conflict. This flexibility, combined with the emphasis on communal rituals and festivals, strengthens social ties and reinforces cultural identity, making the faith a deeply embedded part of Taiwanese life.

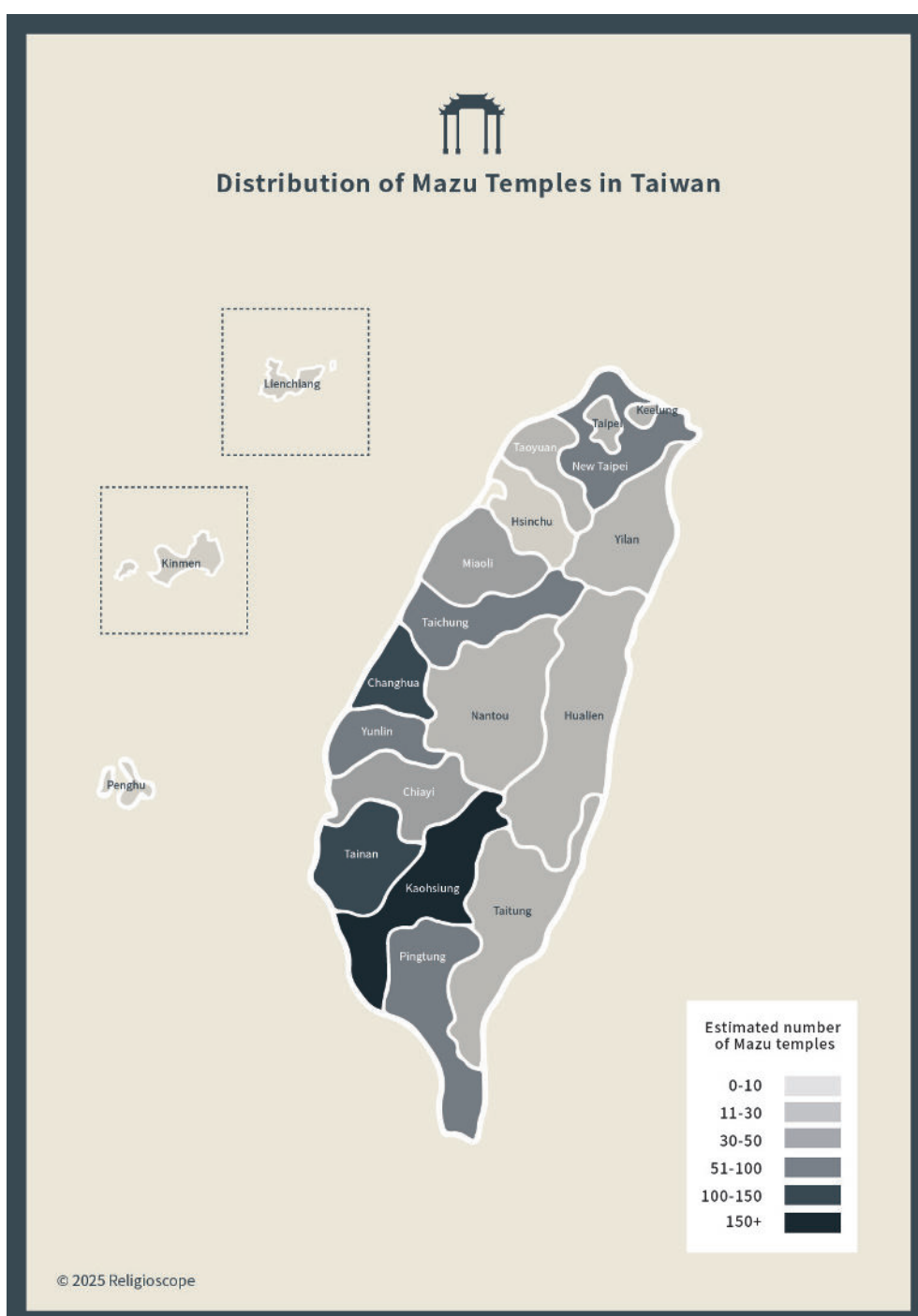
The Mazu faith does not have a permanent clergy. Temple affairs are often led by management committees or boards of directors, which are composed of representatives elected by local believers. These committees oversee temple operations, festivals and maintenance, ensuring that the organizational direction



Burning Temple Amulets Over Incense at Lugang Mazu Temple (Photo by Zeng Chengxun)

reflects the collective will of the community. While each temple is generally autonomous, more prominent temples may provide guidance to smaller ones in their orbit, such as instruction in ceremonial practices or opportunities to partake in shared religious activities like incense exchange or pilgrimages.

In modern Taiwanese society, Mazu now holds the revered title of "Queen of Heaven" (天后 Tiānhòu), and is regarded as the highest-ranking female deity. In recent years, however, the Chinese government has given her an additional title: the "Goddess of Peace in the Taiwan Strait" (海峡和平女神).



02

Goddess of Peace in the Taiwan Strait

Mazu as a Political Symbol in China

In 2023, the China News Service, an entity directly under the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, published multiple articles portraying Mazu as the “Goddess of Peace in the Taiwan Strait.”³ In the same year, similar projections were made by the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council of China.

In doing so, Chinese authorities appear to have recast traditional folk belief in Mazu as playing a key role in thawing cross-strait relations. The strategic use of cultural symbols aligns with the “Regulations on United Front Work,” the political and strategic framework for the CPC.⁴ The ultimate goal of United Front is to unify public sentiment and consolidate power, serving as a vital tool for building a modern socialist nation and achieving the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

The Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council of China emphasized Mazu’s mission to “seek peace” across the Taiwan Strait in February 2023. This office, which directly reports to the Central Committee of the CPC, is responsible for analyzing

Taiwanese dynamics and trends in cross-strait relations. It also coordinates various departments to develop policies concerning Taiwan, making it one of the most important Chinese institutions for planning and executing policies related to Taiwan.

During a meeting in Beijing with representatives from Taiwan’s Mazu temples, the office’s director Song Tao stated:

“Mazu culture is an important part of traditional Chinese culture and a typical representative of Chinese culture flourishing in Taiwan. Chinese culture is the common root of compatriots on both sides of the strait and a crucial bond that maintains the emotional ties between them. We must jointly protect, inherit, and promote it. Our determination and will to seek peace for the Taiwan Strait, benefit for our compatriots, and revival of the nation remain unchanged. Thus, the 'Taiwan independence' forces' efforts to 'de-sinicize' (去中國化 qù zhōng guó huà) are ungrateful and unpopular.”⁵

Song Tao’s anti-independence rhetoric represents the official stance of the Chinese government. Today, Taiwan is a democratic island nation of 23.5 million residents who enjoy a range of political, religious and civil freedoms. For decades, the CPC in Beijing has claimed sovereignty over Taiwan, and

3 China News. (2023, November 29). “海峡和平女神”何以融化两岸坚冰？[How can the "Goddess of Peace of the Strait" melt the cross-strait ice?]. China News. <https://m.chinanews.com/wap/detail/cht/zw/ft10119519.shtml>

4 People's Daily. (2021, January 6). 中共中央印发《中国共产党统一战线工作条例》[The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issues the "Regulations on the Work of the United Front of the Communist Party of China"]. People's Daily. https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-01/05/content_5577289.htm

5 Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council. (2023, February 16). 宋涛在京会见台湾妈祖宫庙代表 [Song Tao meets with representatives of Taiwan's Mazu temples in Beijing]. Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council. http://big5.gwytb.gov.cn/xwdt/zw/yw/202302/t20230216_12510997.htm

has continually intervened in Taiwanese society and politics through military intimidation, political influence, economic pressure and other soft power strategies. The goal has been to achieve the annexation and unification of Taiwan through United Front work.

Taiwanese think tank research shows that the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, the same council that received Taiwanese Mazu temple representatives in 2023, is at the heart of this long-term strategy.⁶ The aforementioned statement by the State Council is just one of the few public affirmations of Mazu's role as the "Goddess of Peace in the Taiwan Strait."

Hong Ying-fa, a researcher at the Center for Chinese Religious Studies at National Chengchi University, has studied Mazu culture for many years. In an interview with Religioscope, he noted that many temple boards of directors, temple management committees and Taiwan Affairs Offices within the Chinese official system now pay lip service to Mazu as the goddess of both sides of the Taiwan Strait. This reinterpretation aims to use Mazu's influence to promote unification based on her status and significant following within Taiwan.⁷

6 Gong, X.S., 年度報告 [2021 Annual Report], Institute for National Defense and Security Research (INDSR), <https://indsr.org.tw/respublicationcon?uid=16&resid=838&pid=1293>

7 Hong, Y.F. (2017, April 27). 對台「五緣」策略中的「神緣」：跨海峽媽祖信仰下的宗教統戰 [The "Divine Connection" in the "Five Relations" strategy towards Taiwan: Religious unification under the cross-strait Mazu belief]. The News Lens. <https://www.thenewslens.com/article/66774>.

Research by Associate Professor Gu Ming Chun at Tsinghua University also underscores the CPC's practice of "instrumentalizing" religion to serve its regime.⁸ After the CPC issued the "Plan for Deepening the Reform of Party and State Institutions" in 2018, the State Administration for Religious Affairs, which oversees religious matters, was placed under the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee.⁹ This restructuring clearly integrates religion into the governance model of United Front work.

In the same way, current CPC policy documents openly position religious work as part of a broader political mission: "Communist Party members may form anti-imperialist alliances with certain idealists and even religious groups, but they must never agree with their idealism and doctrines."¹⁰ This strategy encourages the formation of patriotic religious groups under CPC guidance, employing infiltration and co-optation methods against non-compliant religious leaders and networks while cultivating alliances, or a "United Front," with friendly circles.

8 Gu, M.C. 作為中共發揮海外影響力工具的媽祖文化 [Mazu culture: An instrument of the Chinese Communist Party expanding offshore influences]. *China Mainland Studies*, 62(4), pp. 103-132. <https://www.airitilibrary.com/Article/Detail/10132716-201912-202001080001-202001080001-103-132>

9 Xinhua News Agency. (2018, March 21). 中共中央印发《深化党和国家机构改革方案》 [The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issues the "Plan for Deepening the Reform of Party and State Institutions"]. Xinhua News Agency. https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2018-03/21/content_5276191.htm#1

10 Party Literature Research Center of the CPC Central Committee. (2015, January 21). 毛泽东对马克思主义宗教理论的丰富和发展 [Mao Zedong's enrichment and development of Marxist religious theory]. Party Literature Research Center of the CPC Central Committee. <https://www.dswxyjy.org.cn/BIG5/n1/2019/0228/c423725-30923136.html>



One of Taiwan's Three Major Mazu Deities: Baishatun Mazu (Photo by 梁朝安)

Maternal Symbolism and the United Front

Mazu's role as a tool for promoting cross-strait unification arguably arises from her symbolic representation as a "mother." Unlike other creator deities, Mazu is often referred to in Taiwan as the "Heavenly Mother" (天上聖母 *Tiānshàng shèngmǔ*). Folklorist Lin Mao-xian notes that Mazu embodies maternal qualities, such as offering care, guidance, and protection, creating a "Goddess of Motherhood" image that resonates deeply with her followers, who can then project their dependence on maternal figures onto their devotion to Mazu.¹¹ This nurturing image provides comfort to those feeling anxious or distressed, transforming Mazu worship into a familial bond. Followers often refer to themselves as "Mazu's children."

The CPC then exploits this very same maternal imagery for its unification strategy. A report from the Institute for National Defense and Security Research (INDSR), a Taiwanese government-affiliated think tank, reveals that Beijing addresses cross-strait issues through a familial lens, aiming to strengthen ties by portraying China as Taiwan's motherland.¹² Mazu's cultural significance is leveraged to bridge the cross-strait divide, with Chinese state-

run media stating in 2023 that "Mazu's children" are present in loving households on both sides of the strait.¹³

This familial approach aligns with the underlying logic of Chinese communities worldwide: the concept of family. In folk belief, Mazu symbolizes the extension of familial relationships. Research by Lin Qitian from the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences describes the "Five Relations Culture" (五緣文化 *Wǔ yuán wénhuà*), which comprises kinship ties, geographic ties, religious ties, occupational ties and material ties.¹⁴ This culture is fundamental to the way Chinese society operates.

In detail, "Five Relations Culture" includes:

1. Kinship: Blood relations and marital connections.
2. Geographic Ties: Neighborhood and hometown associations, such as local hometown societies.
3. Religious Ties: Shared religious beliefs, such as worshiping Mazu or Guan Gong (關公, the god of justice, worshiped by both police and gangs), which unite people through common deities.
4. Occupational Ties: Relationships

11 Lin, M. (2020, June 12). 臺灣人的「神明媽媽」：媽祖信仰背後隱含的母親意象 [Taiwanese people's "Mother Deity": The maternal imagery inherent in Mazu belief]. UDN Opinion. <https://opinion.udn.com/opinion/story/11373/4631801>

12 Lin, C.J. (2022). 百年中國共產黨的意義對於對台統戰 [The meaning of the centenary of the CPC for the united front against Taiwan]. Institute for National Policy Research. <https://indsr.org.tw/uploads/indsr/files/202204/1e4fe1d2-7838-417d-bdfe-3e7cc2a365ad.pdf>

13 Hua Xia. (2023, June 9). 媽祖的团仔 [Mazu's children]. Hua Xia Jing Wei Wang. <https://big5.huaxia.com/c/2023/06/09/1705060.shtml>

14 Lin, Q. q. (2003) 五缘文化说与福建旅游业的开发 The Five Fate Culture Theory and the Development of Fujian Tourism, Northern Economics and Trade, No. 9.

Culturalization Strategy: The Emergence of “Mazu Culture” Under the CPC

Creation of the China Mazu Culture Exchange Association

2004

Registered as a civil organization but led by a senior CPPCC official. The association’s mission is to unite Chinese descendants, foster cooperation, and promote Mazu culture.

China applies for UNESCO recognition of Mazu beliefs

2009

Chinese authorities successfully apply to include Mazu beliefs as intangible cultural heritage, encompassing Taiwan, symbolizing cross-strait unity under China.

Proposal to adopt Mazu into United Front strategy

2018

Fujian government proposal during the Two Sessions recommends establishing a national-level leadership organization for Mazu culture promotion, and links Mazu initiatives with countering Taiwanese independence and advancing national reunification.

Mazu culture features in the 13th Five-Year Plan Outline

2016

The outline integrates cultural exchanges involving government and civil participation, including festivals, expos, and folk cultural exchanges, into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) strategy.

Mazu-themed media productions by the Chinese Mazu Cultural Exchange Association

2018–Present

CCTV-televised dramas “The Legend of Meizhou Island” and “Mazu,” as well as the documentary “Mazu Returns Home,” celebrate the cultural significance of Mazu and promote cross-strait unity.

between classmates, colleagues and business partners, formed through shared experiences and interests, leading to the creation of groups such as alumni associations, professional societies and trade unions.

5. Material Ties: Relationships arising from common interests in specific objects, such as occupational unions and associations.

This cultural framework has been integrated into the CPC's United Front approach, forming a reunification plan based on "relations".¹⁵ Mazu worship aligns with religious ties (神緣 Shén yuán) within this strategy. For example, an important ritual in Mazu worship, "Returning Incense to the Ancestral Temple," (刈香謁祖 Yì xiāng yè zǔ) embodies this concept of "Five Relations Culture." Temples of lower status must return to the ancestral temple to draw power from the original deity and report local conditions, mirroring the Chinese tradition of younger generations in regularly returning home to honor their ancestors.

The CPC capitalizes on both this tradition and the widespread worship of Mazu in Taiwan as part of United Front work. A Mazu temple official from central Taiwan shared with Religioscope that temples in Taiwan generally return to the Mazu temple on Meizhou Island, in Fujian Province, China,

every two years for pilgrimage. This journey represents a "going home" to visit one's parents: it not only replenishes spiritual energy and fosters exchanges, but also allows Taiwanese temples to affirm their status as authentic Mazu temples.

Originally worshiped as a protector of the people, Mazu has been reinterpreted under CPC directives to symbolize cross-strait peace and capitalize on Chinese community values in Taiwan to reinforce reunification ideals. This transformation highlights how religious beliefs in Taiwan can be readily leveraged for political purposes.

Culturalization Strategy

Scholar Gu Ming Chun describes the CPC's process of transforming belief into a strategic tool as a "culturalization" strategy, which has led to the emergence of the concept of "Mazu culture."¹⁶ As a result, Mazu is no longer merely a deity or belief but also represents a broader community and national culture. This shift creates a de-religionized identity that prioritizes cultural dissemination over religious development, enabling cultural exchanges to be leveraged by Chinese authorities as instruments of influence abroad.

In 2004, the CPC established the China Mazu Culture Exchange Association. Although registered as a civil organization, the

15 Song, X.R., & Zhao, G.X. (Eds.). (2013, April 8). 五缘文化与对台网络宣传 [The "Five Connections" culture and online propaganda towards Taiwan]. People's Daily - Jin Media. <http://media.people.com.cn/BIG5/n/2013/0408/c360577-21056390.html>

16 Gu, M.C. (2019). 作為中共發揮海外影響力工具的媽祖文化 [Mazu culture: An instrument of the Chinese Communist Party expanding offshore influences]. 中國大陸研究 [China Mainland Studies], 62(4), <https://www.airitilibrary.com/Article/Detail/10132716-201912-202001080001-202001080001-103-132>

association is led by the vice chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), indicating strong ties with government authorities.¹⁷ The association's stated mission is to unite Chinese descendants, promote cooperation and exchanges, and propagate Mazu culture.

Then, in 2009, the Chinese government applied to UNESCO to list Mazu beliefs as "intangible cultural heritage" including Taiwan in its scope, thereby making Mazu culture a symbolic representation of cross-strait unity under China.

The term "Mazu culture" later gained prominence in China's 13th Five-Year Plan Outline, released in 2016.¹⁸ This plan is a key national development strategy that addresses China's industrial, economic, trade, and social governance, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In the chapter dedicated to promoting BRI, the outline states: "Establish mechanisms for cultural exchanges involving both government and civil participation, host cultural years, art festivals, film festivals, expos, and encourage diverse folk cultural exchanges to leverage the positive role of folk cultures such as Mazu culture."

17 According to the Chinese Constitution, the CPPCC serves as a broadly representative patriotic united front organization, playing a vital role in socialist modernization and in maintaining national unity and solidarity.

18 State Council of the People's Republic of China. (2016, March 17). 中华人民共和国国民经济和社会发展第十三个五年规划纲要 [The 13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China]. Xinhua News Agency. https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-03/17/content_5054992.htm

During the 2018 Two Sessions (兩會 liǎng huì), the annual meetings of the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), the Fujian provincial government submitted a proposal to enhance Mazu's value within United Front strategy.¹⁹ The document recommended "the establishment of a national-level leadership organization for promoting Mazu culture, jointly formed by the United Front Work Department of the CPC Central Committee, the Taiwan Affairs Office, cultural departments, the Fujian Provincial Party Committee, the provincial government, and the Putian Municipal Party Committee and government."

Additionally, the recommendation explicitly linked efforts to counter the Taiwanese independence movement with Mazu projects:

"This organization should formulate short-term and medium-to-long-term development plans. It should also coordinate resources from the private sector, universities, and overseas to launch influential Mazu culture development projects in stages, promoting multidimensional development and harmonious resonance, ensuring Mazu culture plays a greater role in

19 Han, Y.T. (2018, March 12). 福建代表建议：让妈祖文化发挥建设海上丝绸之路重要作用 [Fujian representatives suggest: Let Mazu culture play an important role in constructing the Maritime Silk Road]. The Paper. https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_2026325

constructing the '21st Century Maritime Silk Road,' resisting Taiwan independence, and advancing the cause of national reunification."²⁰

At the same time, the Chinese Mazu Cultural Exchange Association has produced various Mazu-themed media products, such as the CCTV-televised dramas "The Legend of Meizhou Island" and "Mazu," and the documentary "Mazu Returns Home" featuring Peng Li Yuan, wife of Chinese President Xi Jinping.²¹ These productions serve not only to celebrate Mazu's cultural significance, but also promote cross-strait unity by framing Mazu as a shared heritage between China and Taiwan.

In this way, promoting Mazu culture becomes a means by which the CPC aims to create a sense of shared identity and loyalty among Chinese communities, particularly in response to growing pro-Taiwanese independence sentiment.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Radio Free Asia. (2024, January 8). 共产党型塑下的妈祖 从海边女巫成为多变女神 | 【两岸的妈祖 台湾的政治 - 2】 [Mazu under the molding of the Communist Party: From seaside witch to versatile goddess | Cross-strait Mazu, Taiwan's politics - 2]. 自由亞洲電台 . <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/gangtai/taiwan-xuanju/mz2-01082024163648.html>



Pilgrims make preparations for the 2022 Baishatun Mazu Pilgrimage.
(Photo by Yu Ling Teng, via Wikimedia)

03

The Iron Triangle: Taiwanese Gangs,
Mazu Temples, and the CPC

The relationship between Mazu temples, Taiwanese gangs, and the CPC forms a complex network that the Taiwanese government has labeled the “Iron Triangle” of religious United Front operations.²² This network plays a key role in the CPC’s efforts to exert influence over Taiwan through both religious and criminal channels. The next section of this report will illustrate how Taiwanese gangs are integral to this network.

How Organized Crime Took Hold of Mazu Temples in Taiwan

It is widely recognized in Taiwan that many individuals with criminal backgrounds also hold positions as temple managers. Notable examples include Huang Cheng Guo, a member of the “Thento Union” (天道盟), one of Taiwan’s three major gangs, who serves as chairman of the management committee at Muzha Shengmu Temple (木柵聖母宮). Similarly, Tsai Yung-chang, a gang leader, chairs the historic Beigang Chaotian Temple (北港朝天宮). The Thento Union itself is based at Yaoshan Temple (瑤山宮), where gang members reportedly use the temple’s back meeting room for organizational discussions.

A chairman of a Tainan Mazu temple, who wished to remain anonymous, explained that gang involvement in temple management is

not a new phenomenon. Temples in Taiwan are not strictly regulated, and financial flows often lack transparency. This environment enables illegal activities such as money laundering, where even incense donations from believers can become revenue streams for gangs. Rituals and festivals can also be subcontracted for kickbacks, with temple funds occasionally funneled into political contributions.

The connection between organized crime and temples largely stems from Taiwan’s social history. For centuries, Taiwanese temples have been microcosms of collective society, with each village centering around a temple for worship, entertainment, dispute mediation, and defense. Moreover, traditional community groups, known as “Gatau” (角頭), were made up of mixed social statuses and are now considered one of the precursors to modern gangs.

In the past, temples were governed by a “consensus system,” such as the traditional “Luzhu system” (爐主制), where community members would select a leader for annual worship activities by casting divination blocks. This leader would collect “head money” (丁口錢 Dīng kǒu qián) from each household in the village to fund events and organize temple fairs, taking on the responsibility of gathering manpower and resources for temple activities, as well as managing the allocation of tasks and sensitive interpersonal relationships. In this way, early Gatau resembled a local leadership structure, and did not necessarily engage in criminal activities.

22 Ministry of the Interior, Republic of China (Taiwan). (2024, August 10). 內政部：兩岸宗教交流要小心，勿落入統戰陷阱，年輕人「別被中國拐去」！ [Ministry of the Interior: Cross-strait religious exchanges must be cautious to avoid falling into the united front trap; young people should "not be abducted by China"!]. Ministry of the Interior. https://www.moi.gov.tw/News_Content.aspx?n=4&s=318807

However, starting in the 1980s, the lifting of martial law in Taiwan and the advent of frequent local elections created new avenues for profit and influence. This, combined with rapid economic development and the proliferation of various activities, led Gataou to gradually expand into illegal industries such as gambling, the sex industry and violence, ultimately evolving into organized gangs.²³ Gangs exert substantial influence at the local level within these networks, participating in elections to protect industry interests and leverage political ties, ultimately creating a tight-knit relationship between gangs, temples, and politics.

At the same time, the Taiwanese government has allowed temples to become “corporatized” over the past few decades, with regulatory changes aimed at modernizing temple management leading to organizational control being taken over by management committees or boards of directors.²⁴ This has dismantled the traditional consensus-based system that involved local residents, replacing it with a more centralized structure. As a result, temples have become oligarchic in structure, providing opportunities for gangs to take over operations in order to gain commercial and political influence.

Wen Zong Han, a scholar of religion and former executive director of the Taiwan Research Center at Providence University, corroborated Religioscope’s findings through his own interviews with Mazu temples dating back to 2016. During these visits, he discovered that the chairman of a prominent Mazu temple in southern Taiwan had ties to gang activity, including murder and heroin smuggling. Drawing on his gang background, the chairman informed Wen that upon entering the temple management system, he recruited others with similar backgrounds, such as introducing a former violent gang member to oversee cross-strait exchange activities.

How Gangs Leverage Cross-Strait Religious Exchanges for Financial Gain

The control of Taiwanese temples by criminal gangs has progressively opened up opportunities for financial exploitation by the CPC. Under the pretext of cross-strait religious exchanges, the CPC is able to offer financial incentives to participating Taiwanese gangs. At the same time, commercial opportunities presented by the CPC serve as a strong motivation for gangs to play a significant role in the United Front’s religious strategies. In this way, the exchange of Mazu worshipers between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait is not only religious and cultural in nature, but also forms a network of social and commercial capital.

23 The Thento Union, for example, is a large gang formed by uniting various local Gataou, retaining close connections with local temples and establishing extensive grassroots networks.

24 Xu, Y.L. (2002, November 1) 宗教立法必要性與立法方向研析 [Analysis on the Necessity and Legislative Direction of Religious Legislation]. Legislative Yuan Taiwan, <https://www.ly.gov.tw/Pages/Detail.aspx?nodeid=6586&pid=83334>

Financial Inflows from Pilgrimages and Cultural Festivals

The primary motivation for gang involvement in temple management is undoubtedly the substantial profit derived from participating in religious activities. Han, who had participated in cross-strait pilgrimage groups in 2018 and interacted with a medium-sized Mazu temple managed by gangs, observed that the temple in central Taiwan was highly enthusiastic about engaging in cross-strait religious exchanges as an income generating activity.

According to Han, each pilgrimage trip could generate millions of New Taiwan Dollars (NTD) in profit.²⁵ This profit stemmed from the hundreds of believers participating in the pilgrimage, with the temple collecting travel funds of around NTD20,000 to 30,000 (USD600 to 900) per person for airfare and accommodation. Once in China, the hosting Chinese organizations cover all costs for food, accommodation and travel, allowing the gang to pocket the travel subsidies collected.

Additionally, with many Taiwanese businesses still operating in China, Taiwanese businesspeople are often mobilized by local governments in China to participate in events when a Taiwanese Mazu temple group visits the country. This is meant to showcase Mazu as a symbol of promoting peace across the Taiwan Strait.

These businesspeople typically donate tens of thousands of dollars (NTD) as offerings, which also end up in the coffers of the gangs controlling the temples.

A Mazu temple chairman in Taichung described temple operators as “brokers” navigating activities between the two sides of the Strait. He noted that gang-controlled temples are financially incentivized to play this role, with religious exchanges closely tied to economic exchanges and business opportunities. Members of the Dajia Jenn Lann Temple, Taiwan’s largest Mazu temple, for example, have construction businesses that greatly benefit from Chinese support, both in terms of finances and government policy.²⁶

In June 2024, Religioscope interviewed a member of the “Bamboo Union,” one of Taiwan’s largest gangs involved in various criminal activities. In addition to his gang affiliation, River is a businessman and a member of the management committee of a small Mazu temple in northern Taiwan. He participates in the annual Dajia Mazu (大甲媽祖) pilgrimage, and was once invited by a senior figure in Taiwan’s financial industry to attend a Mazu cultural festival on the mainland. After traveling to Fujian, he was hosted by the local Taiwan Affairs Office and attended several banquets.

25 One million New Taiwan Dollars is roughly equivalent to USD30,000.

26 The Dajia Jenn Lann Temple, located in Taichung, is discussed in greater detail in part four of this report.

During these social events, a Chinese businessman invited River to join a Taiwanese business organization in Fujian and invest money in local construction projects. In return, the businessman offered to donate funds to help renovate his temple in Taiwan, and promised more business opportunities if the collaboration succeeded. In this scenario, a gang member in the capacity of temple manager became a “religious broker,” securing special permissions from the Chinese government under the guise of religious exchanges. This arrangement allows Taiwanese individuals to expand their business networks in China while also improving their financial standing in Taiwan, thus accumulating personal and commercial capital on both sides of the Strait.

“Rent-Seeking” as a Strategy for Political and Economic Expansion

The CPC has historically employed similar tactics in its dealings with businesspeople, particularly Taiwanese investors. Wu Jieh-min, a researcher at Academia Sinica who has studied China for over 30 years, explains that since the reform and opening up in 1978, China has used a combination of policy incentives and political influence to attract Taiwanese investment.²⁷ By offering access to cheap labor, land and other resources, Chinese authorities encouraged Taiwanese businesses to establish operations on the mainland. This not only facilitated Taiwan’s

role in China’s burgeoning export industry, but also contributed significantly to China’s rapid economic growth by leveraging Taiwanese capital, technology, and expertise.

Wu refers to this model of economic expansion as “rent-seeking,” a process where political power is used to regulate or monopolize industries for financial gain. In this context, the CPC’s methods include granting exclusive business rights, brokering political-business deals, offering incentives in exchange for influence, and enabling kickbacks, bribery, and backdoor arrangements. These strategies not only strengthened China’s economic position, but also created intricate economic ties that further entangled Taiwanese businesses in the CPC’s political agenda.

27 Wu, J. M. (2019). 尋租中國：台商、廣東模式與全球資本主義【平裝版】(二版) [Rent-Seeking Developmental State in China: Taishang, Guangdong Model and Global Capitalism]. National Taiwan University Press.

The Iron Triangle:

Taiwanese Gangs, Mazu Temples, and the CPC



1 Communist Party of China (CPC)

Offers financial and political incentives to Taiwanese religious leaders and gangs

2 Taiwanese Mazu Temples

Specific temples controlled by gangs, and act as intermediaries in cross-strait exchanges. Receive financial incentives from both Taiwanese and Chinese entities.

3 Chinese Mazu Temples

Host visiting groups of Taiwanese believers and act as sites of cross-strait religious exchanges

4 Chinese Industry

Benefits from Taiwanese investment capital funnelled through religious exchanges

5 Taiwanese Investors

Use religious exchanges as vehicles for expansion into China, with support from Chinese government connections

6 Taiwanese Politicians

Engage with temples and temple communities for political gain

Financial Loopholes

Taiwan's lack of regulatory oversight over temple finances has also created substantial opportunities for money laundering and political maneuvering through cross-strait religious exchanges. During a 2023 legislative inquiry, Taiwanese legislator Lin Shu-fen noted that temples are not required to disclose donation information or fund flows, allowing large religious organizations to repatriate funds from overseas without oversight.²⁸

Lin also cited a Bureau of Investigation study indicating that members of the boards of directors of Taiwan's larger Mazu temples have benefited politically and economically through "cross-strait Mazu belief practices." Indeed, many directors of Taiwan's major Mazu temples have utilized various Mazu-related exchanges to establish political and business networks across the Taiwan Strait, facilitating the expansion of their own businesses in China. At the same time, the CPC has provided financial support to a number of political figures in Taiwan in various forms under the guise of cross-strait religious exchanges.²⁹

At the same time, some leaders of major religious organizations have resisted calls for financial transparency, refusing to

voluntarily disclose the sources and flows of their funds. These financial inflows, repatriated from overseas via large domestic religious entities, present a major money laundering loophole for Taiwanese regulators.³⁰

How the CPC Leverages Cross-Strait Religious Exchanges for Political Gain

By accepting the financial incentives offered by cross-strait religious exchanges, gang members at the helm of Taiwan's Mazu temples also become agents in CPC efforts to exert political influence across the strait.

In April 2024, Religioscope met with a senior member of Taiwan's Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau, responsible for gathering intelligence on national security and cross-strait relations. He explained:

"In recent years, exchanges between Mazu temples across the strait have intensified, with Taiwanese Mazu temples frequently visiting the Meizhou Mazu Temple (湄洲媽祖) in Meizhou Island, Fujian Province, China. These interactions have created an entry point for United Front activities, as China has actively sought to cultivate ties with gangs by granting them formal recognition, special business permits, and financial support for their organizational development in Taiwan in order to enable them to act as internal agents."

28 Lin, S.F. (2023, September 26). 國安的漏洞，藉由宗教財團法人不用主動公佈捐款資訊以及資金流向這個是最大的漏洞 [The loophole in national security, where religious foundation law firms do not need to proactively disclose donation information and the flow of funds is the biggest loophole]. Facebook. <https://tinyurl.com/5ys8avxd>

29 Central News Agency. (July 3, 2024) 中美關係最新發展 [Latest Developments in U.S.-China Relations], Central News Agency, <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aip/202407030159.aspx>

30 Lin, S.F. (2023, September 26). 洗錢防制的漏洞，難保台灣部分大型宗教財團法人不被中國濫用，淪為洗錢犯罪管道 [The loophole in national security, where religious foundation law firms do not need to proactively disclose donation information and the flow of funds is the biggest loophole]. Facebook. <https://tinyurl.com/5ys8avxd>

He further elaborated, "Given that gangs have long been involved in temple operations, China leverages the channel of incense donations to sponsor specific temples. This allows them to collaborate on China's propaganda efforts and establish agents within Taiwan."

Gang members, acting as temple managers, often engage with Taiwan government officials to monitor policy trends, becoming key players in local political and economic networks. The Investigation Bureau detailed how Taiwanese Mazu temples funded by China are assigned "tasks" in return for financial kickbacks. These tasks include assisting in propaganda efforts against various Taiwanese policies, interfering in elections, aiding specific political parties in their anti-independence campaigns, and promoting ideas of cross-strait unification. During religious exchanges with China, these same gang leaders can leverage their temples' influence in Taiwan as a bargaining chip to negotiate for policy advantages, land deals, and commercial benefits in China.

Scholar Wen Zong Han corroborated this phenomenon in an interview with Religioscope in May 2024. He explained that the corporatization of temples has not only allowed gangs to infiltrate temple operations, but also provided an opportunity for United Front efforts in Taiwan. As long as the CPC can buy enough seats on the management committee (or board of directors), Han said, it can win temple support and change their political stance. This influence is not always visible: within their closed organizational structures,

temples and their resource networks can be involved in local politics without ever advertising it.

Religioscope found that Taiwanese criminal organizations have increasingly integrated their own political and commercial interests, particularly through their control of temples. By leveraging temples for both social and commercial gain, these groups now exert greater political influence than before. Moreover, Taiwanese Mazu temples, crucial to the CPC's United Front operations since the 1990s, serve as a cultural vehicle for propagating the unification narrative in exchange for financial benefits. This strategic exploitation of the connection between gangs and temples ultimately furthers the CPC's reunification agenda. A prime example of this can be seen in the Dajia Jenn Lann Temple (大甲鎮瀾宮), the largest Mazu temple in central Taiwan.

04

The Dajia Jenn Lann Temple



The Dajia Jenn Lann Temple, which enshrines the Dajia Mazu and Meizhou Mazu of China. (Photo by MiNe, via Wikimedia)

The Black Faction Gang and Cross-Strait Collaboration

During interviews with Religioscope, Taiwan's Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau disclosed that it has uncovered evidence of CPC infiltration in local temple operations, facilitated by organized crime. This influence is notably present among high-profile temple leaders, many of whom have ties to criminal organizations.

According to the Investigation Bureau, the CPC frequently sponsors these temple leaders on all-expenses-paid trips to China, where they are invited to participate in

cultural exchange events. In recent years, provincial Chinese governments have also encouraged Taiwanese temples to establish exchange bases and cultural parks on the mainland. By facilitating the establishment of branch temples in China, the CPC has been able to foster cross-strait networks that blend religious exchanges with business and political goals.

A prime example of this strategy of institutional capture is the Dajia Jenn Lann Temple (大甲鎮瀾宮) in Taiwan. According to the Investigation Bureau, representatives from the temple recently participated in a

cross-strait Mazu event in Tianjin, China, organized with the goal of emphasizing the “shared roots” of people on both sides of the strait. The event’s rhetoric focused on fostering a sense of kinship under the banner of “One Family Across the Strait” (兩岸一家親 Liǎng'àn yījiā qīn).

Currently the seventh-largest city in China, Tianjin is also the site where the Taiwanese Dajia Jenn Lann Temple helped finance a cultural park. This setup highlights the temple’s deep involvement in cross-strait exchanges, a position facilitated by its leader Chairman Yen Ching-piao, a figure with extensive political and criminal connections.

Yen’s leadership over the temple has been unchallenged for the past 25 years, and he has also served as Taichung County Councilor, Council Speaker, and a four-term Legislator. His family is active in a number of lucrative industries, including gravel, asphalt, and land development, industries that have long been associated with organized crime in Taiwan.

In fact, Yen himself is the leader of the “Black Faction” (黑派) gang in central Taiwan. His criminal record includes convictions for corruption, firearms possession, attempted murder, aggravated robbery, incitement to perjury and other serious offenses, leading to his imprisonment on Green Island in 1987 during Taiwan’s “Anti-Crime Campaign” (一清專案 Yī qīng zhuān'àn).³¹ Yen’s background in both legitimate and illicit domains enabled him to consolidate control over the Dajia Jenn Lann Temple, one of Taiwan’s most important Mazu sites. His management of the temple not only solidifies his political power and



Yen Ching-piao, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Dajia Jenn Lann Temple (Photo by Taitung City Government, via Wikimedia)

31 The island was used to imprison both political prisoners and gang members at the time.

public legitimacy, but also facilitates the Dajia Jenn Lann Temple's participation in lucrative cross-strait exchanges.

Black Faction Rule of the Dajia Jenn Lann Temple

Dajia Jenn Lann Temple has not always enjoyed the stability it holds today. In 1998, the Dajia Jenn Lann Temple's sixth chairman election became a battleground, with intense rivalry between Wang Jin-lu, the incumbent chairman, and Zheng Ming-kun. Both men were members of the Black Faction gang.

The campaign saw significant gang-related violence and criminal activity. On the eve of the election, Zheng Ming-kun's brother, Zheng Ming-fu, kidnapped and shot one of Wang's supporters, Li Jia-chang, in both legs before fleeing to China, where he was able to escape capture by Taiwan's law enforcement.

Given the volatile situation, over 200 police officers were deployed to maintain order during the election, a striking display of the high stakes involved in temple leadership. In a July 2024 interview, a senior Taichung police officer explained that the position of chairman at the Dajia Jenn Lann Temple oversees millions of dollars (USD) in financial interests, largely due to gang influence.

The Dajia Jenn Lann Temple is indeed a financial powerhouse. Wang Chao-kun, a temple board member, revealed in media interviews that the temple could earn NT\$60 million (USD1.9 million) annually through "light of hope" (光明燈 Guāngmíng

dēng) blessings for its followers.³² Its assets, valued at over NT\$1.86 billion (USD 59.52 million) as of 2021, include land, cash, and gold. Despite these significant assets, however, the Dajia Jenn Lann Temple has only disclosed NT\$290 million in annual income over the past 40 years, raising obvious concerns about financial transparency.³³

To secure the chairmanship in 1999, Zheng Ming-kun collaborated with Yen, who was then the Taichung County Council Speaker.³⁴ This alliance led to Yen becoming chairman, and Zheng serving as vice-chairman.³⁵ Their victory led to substantial changes in the temple's governance, including a 2001 amendment to the temple's donation charter that expanded the number of electable board members from 93 to 133. These new board members were selected directly by Yen and Zheng, strengthening their control over temple operations.

A former temple follower representative alleged that many new board members

32 Sanli News Network. (2021, November 17). 鎮瀾宮點燈賺千萬 42年財報卻沒變 [Zhenlan Temple earns millions from lighting; 42 years of financial reports unchanged]. Yahoo News. <https://ynews.page.link/G86vk>

33 LTN Free Times. (2021, October 14). 大安媽祖文化園區媽祖雕像有譜？明早請示大甲媽 [Plans for the Mazu Statue at Daan Mazu Cultural Park? Consultation with Dajia Mazu Scheduled for Tomorrow Morning]. LTN Free Times. <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/life/breakingnews/3704450>

34 Kang, Y.L. (2021, November 14). 《歷史新新聞》1999年顏清標怎麼當上大甲鎮瀾宮董事長，成為「小教宗」 [How Yan Qing-biao became the chairman of Dajia Zhenlan Temple in 1999 and earned the title of "Little Pope"]. The Storm Media. <https://new7.storm.mg/article/4042522>

35 At the time, Yen was not a resident of Dajia, and was embroiled in a scandal for using public funds for personal expenses, resulting in a three-and-a-half year prison sentence.

have ties to the criminal world, thereby undermining the temple's integrity. He explained to Religioscope that although the 40 new representatives were nominally selected from local religious groups, they were, in fact, proxies controlled by Yen and Zheng.³⁶ He criticized the move, stating, "The new representatives include local unfamiliar faces, even boys from special industries and gang members, which is a great insult to Mazu."

Yen's monopolization of the chairman position after the 1999 election transformed

the Dajia Jenn Lann Temple from a traditional community-led religious society into a power-concentrated foundation, giving the board and supervisors greater control over temple operations, finances, and events. This restructuring allowed gangs to rapidly penetrate the core of temple power. A 2002 review of the temple's board members by Taiwanese media revealed that many had criminal records for offenses including drug-related crimes, fraud, theft, election law violations, attempted murder, perjury, and securities fraud.³⁷

36 Min Shi News Network. (2022, January 13). 鎮瀾宮董座爭議續燒 傳顏清標曾增信徒代表數 [The controversy over the chairmanship of Zhenlan Temple continues; it is rumored that Yan Qing-biao had previously increased the number of representative believers]. Yahoo News. <https://ynews.page.link/7dtPJ>.

37 Business Today. (2002, May 9). 總統府公佈兩岸關係條例部分條文修正案 [The Presidential Office Announces Partial Amendments to the Act Governing Relations between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area]. Business Today. <https://www.businesstoday.com.tw/article/category/80392/post/200205090017/>



Yen Ching-piao, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Dajia Jenn Lann Temple, pictured alongside then-Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen (Photo via Wang Yu Ching, Office of the President)

Dajia Jenn Lann Temple's Rise to Prominence in Cross-Strait Exchanges

To understand how Dajia Jenn Lann Temple rose to prominence among Taiwan's Mazu temples and came to spearhead cross-strait religious exchanges, it is useful to look back to the late 20th century.

In 1986, Taiwan was still under martial law under the Kuomintang government, and authorities prohibited all civilian connections with China. Even basic communications between the two sides faced hurdles, with letters undergoing inspections or routed through places like Hong Kong before reaching China. Against this backdrop, China's United Front Work Department and Ministry of Culture instructed cultural historians in Quanzhou (泉州) and Putian (莆田) in Fujian Province to conduct basic research on Mazu worship and plan related religious activities, such as inviting believers from home and abroad to participate, in a bid to bypass Taiwan's restrictions.³⁸

As part of this initiative, China rebuilt the Meizhou Mazu Temple in Putian, Fujian Province, hoping to use the thousandth anniversary of Mazu's ascension as a reason to extend invitations to Mazu temples across Taiwan. According to China's Mazu Magazine, senior officials from provincial Taiwan Affairs Offices and city-level consultative committees even held

meetings with Taiwanese temple officials in Hong Kong, formally inviting them to visit Meizhou, Mazu's ancestral temple.³⁹

In 1987, the leadership of Dajia Jenn Lann Temple seized this opportunity to build their own reputation. Despite legal constraints, they arranged a covert journey to China, taking a Mazu statue and 17 temple officials first to Japan, then to Hong Kong, and finally to Meizhou, where they completed their pilgrimage at the Meizhou Mazu Temple.

This delegation from Dajia Jenn Lann Temple became the first Taiwanese group to undertake a pilgrimage to China, and they returned with sacred items and incense from the ancestral temple. Their actions caused a stir in Taiwan, but due to mediation from local legislators, they avoided legal repercussions. This unprecedented pilgrimage not only drew significant media attention, but also helped Dajia Jenn Lann Temple position itself as the representative of "authentic Mazu" worship in Taiwan, elevating its status among Taiwanese Mazu temples and establishing itself as a pioneer in cross-strait religious exchanges.

According to some scholars, the Dajia Jenn Lann Temple's example demonstrated to the CPC that Mazu worship could serve as a channel for connecting Taiwan's grassroots

38 Hong, Y.F. (2017, March 22). 戰後大甲媽祖進香的路線與時間變化 [Changes in the route and schedule of the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage after the war]. 民俗亂彈 [Folkways]. https://trfc.tw/folkways/topic/column_hong/000003

39 Chang, P.F., & Chen, K.C. (2010, November). 權力、空間與象徵：大甲鎮瀾宮的進香路線 [Power, Space and Symbol: The Pilgrimage Route of Dajia Jhenlan Temple]. *Geographical Research*, 53, 49-70. <https://www.airitilibrary.com/Article/Detail/10196684-201011-201110240008-201110240008-49-70>

communities with China.⁴⁰ In turn, Chinese authorities began to see Mazu-related exchanges as a strategic way to foster influence in Taiwan. With this realization, China intensified efforts to structure these exchanges through organized networks. Taiwan Affairs Offices and United Front departments gradually built a formalized network linking Taiwan's local society and political figures around the worship of Mazu, increasing the intensity of these activities after 2000.

In 2001, under the leadership of Dajia Jenn Lann Temple, the "Taiwan Mazu Fellowship Association" (台灣媽祖聯誼會) was established. Today, the association counts 105 Mazu temples among its members, with coverage across the whole island. It has become the primary conduit for cross-strait Mazu cultural exchanges, with many Mazu temples requiring negotiations through the association to organize pilgrimages to China. At the same time, when officials from China's Taiwan Affairs Office or the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS) visit Taiwan, they are received by the Fellowship Association and Dajia Jenn Lann Temple.

Today, the Dajia Jenn Lann Temple is a focal point of gang, business, and political interests. Early initiative by the temple during Taiwan's period of martial law laid

the foundation for a powerful network of cross-strait religious exchanges, and Yen's capacity as a gang leader, businessman, and politician has positioned the resource-rich and well-connected Mazu temple as a key player within both Taiwan's Mazu worship community and China's United Front strategy.

40 CNA News. (2023, May 3) 學者：中共滲透台灣宮廟組織 媽祖文化也成統戰工具 [影] [Scholar: CCP Infiltrates Taiwanese Temple Organizations, Mazu Culture Becomes a United Front Tool]. CNA News. <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/acn/202305030424.aspx>



The 2023 Baishatun Mazu pilgrimage in Taiwan (Photo by Hsuan Chi Chang, via Wikimedia)

05

The Taiwan Mazu Fellowship Association

The Institutionalization of Cross-Strait Cultural Exchanges

The Da An Zhen An Temple (台中大安鎮安宮), located in the Taichung area, is also a member of the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship Association. Every two to three years, the temple organizes pilgrimages to the Meizhou Mazu Temple, with each trip involving 30 to 50 participants and costing millions of NTD. Despite the high costs, Zhen An Temple continues to make these pilgrimages regularly.

In an interview with Religioscope, the temple's Chief Director Chen Chun Fu described the pilgrimages as "like an investment." By participating, Taiwanese Mazu temples gain recognition as authentic Mazu worship centers and expand their influence. The trips also serve a broader commercial purpose: temples' participation in these events also helps them secure opportunities to invest in local construction projects.⁴¹

The Da An Zhen An Temple has also participated in pilgrimages organized by Dajia Jenn Lann Temple and, through these experiences, Fu has become acutely aware of the "strong United Front implications" of the Chinese government's approach. He told Religioscope that by establishing the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship Association, the Dajia Jenn Lann Temple has successfully united over 100 Mazu temples under its leadership. This affiliation grants the temple

high visibility, and allows it to be invited to China as a "representative of Taiwanese religion." As a result, Dajia Jenn Lann Temple has gained significant influence, and successfully facilitated substantial business opportunities for Taiwanese temples.

According to the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship Association's website,⁴² the organization has been invited multiple times to Beijing for private meetings with Chinese officials, including those from the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC),⁴³ the Taiwan Affairs Office, and the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARATS).⁴⁴ These meetings are part of broader Mazu cultural exchanges designed to foster cross-strait ties.⁴⁵

42 台灣媽祖文化網 [Taiwan Mazu Culture Network]. (n.d.). 關於我們 [About us]. https://www.taiwanmazu.org/aboutus.php?au_id=5.

43 中国人民政治协商会议 [Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference]. (n.d.). 概况 [Overview]. <http://en.cppcc.gov.cn/overview.html>

44 海峡两岸关系协会 [Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits, China]. (n.d.). 网站首页 [Homepage]. <http://www.arats.com.cn/>

45 Taiwanese government statistics show that between 2018 and 2020, more than 70 large-scale temple visits took place between Taiwan and China, involving at least 20,400 participants. The Chinese government partially funded at least nine of these trips. See Pomfret, J. & Lee, Y. (2023, December 21). China wields Mazu 'peace goddess' religion as weapon in Taiwan election. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-wields-peace-goddess-religion-weapon-taiwan-election-2023-12-21/>

41 Refer to part six of this report.



The logo for the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship Association (台灣媽祖聯誼會), its Chinese counterpart the China Mazu Cultural Exchange Association (中華媽祖文化交流協會), and local Chinese government off-shoots in Xiamen and Beijing.

Cultural Exchange as Political Exchange

Researcher Hung Ying-fa from the Center for Chinese Religious Studies at National Chengchi University explained that, although the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship Association is a religious body, it maintains a pro-Kuomintang party (KMT) political stance.⁴⁶ The association has even organized rallies for KMT candidates and supported their political activities. Furthermore, the association has cultivated strong relationships with the CPC, frequently organizing groups to meet with Chinese officials and hosting various levels of Chinese officials.

While the CPC officially claims not to intervene in Taiwanese elections, Chinese officials, particularly from ARATS, often use the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship Association to arrange visits to major Mazu temples across Taiwan. These grassroots exchanges help gather information and build networks. For instance, during the 2016 Taiwanese presidential election, Chen Deming, the president of ARATS, visited Taiwan a month before the vote. He went directly to Dajia Jenn Lann Temple, where he held private meetings with 29 village chiefs from Dajia District, gatherings made possible with the coordinating support of the temple. He then visited Mazu temples in Nanfangao

46 Hong, Y.F. (2017, April 27). 對台「五緣」策略中的「神緣」：跨海峽媽祖信仰下的宗教統戰 [The "Divine Connection" in the "Five Relations" strategy towards Taiwan: Religious unification under the cross-strait Mazu belief]. The News Lens. <https://www.thenewslens.com/article/66774>

and Nantian in Yilan.⁴⁷ Although he did not directly endorse any candidate, he encouraged attendees to “consider cross-strait relations and make the best choice.”⁴⁸

In 2004, the Chinese government and Meizhou Mazu Temple co-founded the “China Mazu Cultural Exchange Association” (中华妈祖文化交流协会) as a counterpart to the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship Association. In its official congratulatory messages, it again emphasized the clear implications of its United Front strategy:

“Mazu culture is an important part of the excellent traditional Chinese culture. It serves as a bridge and bond for uniting Chinese people at home and abroad and promoting exchanges and cooperation across the Taiwan Strait. The Chinese Mazu Cultural Exchange Association ... has achieved new and greater successes in promoting traditional culture, expanding global influence, uniting Chinese people, and enhancing cross-strait exchanges.”⁴⁹

With the increasing organization of cross-strait religious exchange networks, the

frequency of interactions and the number of participants through Mazu temples has surged. In 2006, the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship Association led 49 Mazu temples, some 5,000 worshippers and nearly 200 Mazu statues to participate in the blessing ceremony held at the Meizhou Mazu Ancestral Temple. In 2009, the association organized a pilgrimage for over 40 Mazu temples and more than 500 followers to Meizhou Island and participated in the first Straits Forum (海峽論壇 Hǎixiá lùntán).

By 2014, the association had organized a “Mass Worship” (萬眾朝拜 Wànzhòng cháobài) event, assembling nearly 500 temples from across Taiwan to form a giant pilgrimage group of 12,000 people to attend the Meizhou festival.⁵⁰ This ceremony was integrated into the sixth Straits Forum’s “Mazu Cultural Week” with the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship Association, where the Dajia Jenn Lann Temple was listed as a co-organizer.

Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council, the official body responsible for Taiwan-China affairs, has repeatedly stated that the Straits Forum is a “platform for China’s United Front.”⁵¹ According to Mainland

47 Chen, Y.C., Li, Y.R., & Lai, Y.S. (2019, December 18). 有拜有選票？總統候選人的宮廟政治學 [Is there worship and ballots? The temple politics of presidential candidates]. Readr. https://www.readr.tw/post/2085#google_vignette

48 Gu, M.C and Hong, Y.F. (2017, April 27). 對台「五緣」策略中的「神緣」：跨海峽媽祖信仰下的宗教統戰 [The “Divine Connection” in the “Five Relations” strategy towards Taiwan: Religious unification under the cross-strait Mazu belief]. The News Lens. <https://www.thenewslens.com/article/66774>

49 Gu, M.C. (2019). 作為中共發揮海外影響力工具的媽祖文化 [Mazu culture: An instrument of the Chinese Communist Party expanding offshore influences]. China Mainland Studies, 62(4), pp. 103–132. <https://www.airitilibrary.com/Article/Detail/10132716-201912-202001080001-202001080001-103-132>

50 Zhao, L.Y., & Ma, R.J. (2014, June 10). 大甲媽登陸交流 萬眾朝拜：顏清標「請假」出境進香 遭駁回 [Dajia Mazu visits mainland for exchange, tens of thousands worship: Yen Ching-piao's request to go abroad for pilgrimage rejected]. China Times. <https://www.chinatimes.com/newspapers/20140610000573-260107?chdtv>

51 Central News Agency. (2024, June 13). 海峽論壇 15 日登場 陸委會重申是統戰活動 [Straits Forum to take place on June 15, Mainland Affairs Council reiterates it is a united front activity]. 中央通訊社. <https://www.cna.com.tw/news/acn/202406130363.aspx>

Affairs Council Deputy Chairman and spokesperson Liang Wen Jie, United Front activities differ from normal exchange activities in that normal exchanges do not have specific objectives and do not involve vested interests. In contrast, the activities of the Straits Forum aim to achieve political objectives through methods of co-optation, destabilization, and bribery.

The 11th Straits Forum in 2019, for example, stirred cross-strait tensions as it took place in Fujian Province, China.⁵² Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council barred government officials from attending, criticizing the forum's United Front agenda while encouraging civil organizations to stay away. In response, China's Taiwan Affairs Office dismissed the concerns, accusing Taiwan of obstructing cross-strait exchanges. Chinese authorities emphasized that the event's large scale merely reflected popular support for closer ties, and accused the Taiwanese government of harming bilateral relations.

As cross-strait religious exchanges have become more institutionalized, the initially simple religious pilgrimages have simultaneously evolved into mobilized "propaganda pilgrimages." These pilgrimages are organized by Taiwanese Mazu temples, with travel, customs clearance, and accommodation arranged by provincial and municipal Taiwan Affairs

Offices in China. This shift underscores the growing integration of cultural activities with political objectives, reflecting China's use of institutionalized religious exchanges as a United Front tool for influencing public opinion and strengthening cross-strait ties.

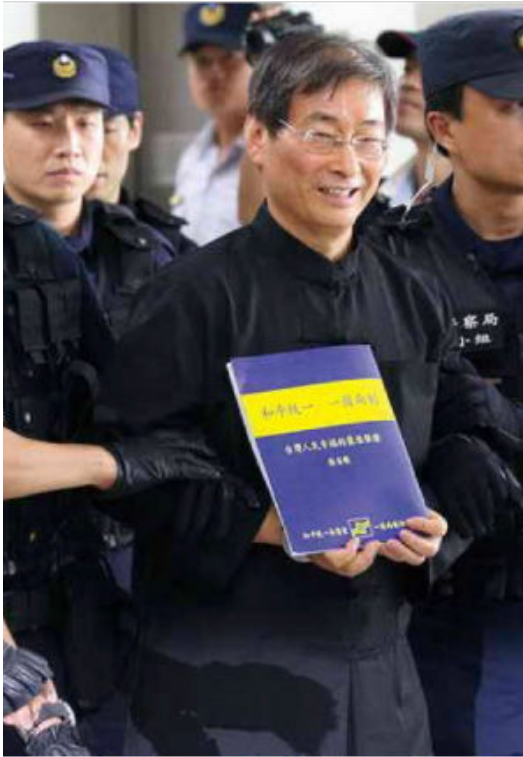
52 Y.Q. (2019, June 12). 陸委會阻台灣各界參加海峽論壇 國台辦：暴露懼怕兩岸交流心態 [The Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) has blocked various sectors in Taiwan from attending the upcoming Straits Forum]. Hong Kong News. https://www.hk01.com/article/339717?utm_source=01articlecopy&utm_medium=referral



The 2023 Baishatun Mazu pilgrimage in Taiwan (Photo by Stefsun318, via Wikimedia)

06

The Bamboo Union and Cross-Strait Influence



In 2013, Chang returned to Taiwan from China, holding a book promoting cross-strait unification. (Photo via Chang An Lo's Facebook Page).

The profits from cross-strait religious exchanges extend beyond major temple organizations like Dajia Jenn Lann Temple and the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship Association. Taiwan's largest gang, the Bamboo Union, has also capitalized on these exchanges, leveraging its resources to promote unification with China. The most prominent figure linking the Bamboo Union to these activities is Chang An Lo, also known as "White Wolf."

Gang Origins and Expansion

The Bamboo Union, founded in 1957, began as a youth organization formed during Taiwan's martial law period. Many members were descendants of 1949 immigrants from China, making them more inclined toward unification.⁵³ Under Chang An Lo's leadership in the 1970s, the gang developed a robust structure and rapidly expanded its ranks, eventually becoming a nationwide organization.

In 1984, Taiwan's intelligence agencies exploited the Bamboo Union's network, commissioning the gang to assassinate writer Henry Liu in the United States under the guise of patriotism.⁵⁴ The assassination sparked a diplomatic crisis with the U.S., and led to a significant crackdown on organized crime in Taiwan. In response, the Bamboo Union shifted its operations internationally, establishing branches in the U.S., Europe, and Asia while engaging in a wide range of illicit activities such as smuggling, drug and human trafficking, prostitution, and political assassinations.

53 The 1949 wave of immigration was made up of Nationalist government officials, soldiers, and civilians who fled to Taiwan from mainland China in 1949 after the Chinese Civil War. These individuals often retained strong ties to their mainland roots, and upheld the Nationalist ideology of eventual unification. This group was generally more receptive to unification rhetoric compared to the native Taiwanese population, who tended to identify more closely with Taiwan's distinct cultural and political identity.

54 Pan, J. (2020, June 25). Files show KMT links with gangs. Taipei Times. <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2020/06/25/2003738845>

This notoriety earned it the fourth spot on the Foreign Policy magazine's list of the most dangerous organizations globally.⁵⁵

Chang An Lo's Transition

Chang An Lo, who led the gang's U.S. branch in the 1980s, was imprisoned by US authorities in 1985 for drug trafficking and later became wanted by the Taiwanese government for organized crime. Forced into exile upon his release from prison, Chang found refuge in China in 1996, where he reinvented himself as a businessman.⁵⁶

Chang founded the Taolue Group (韜 略 集團) in Shenzhen, manufacturing helmets for global brands like Bell, Giro, Fox, Decathlon, and Cannondale, achieving great commercial success with a global market share exceeding 45%. He later expanded the business, establishing branches in Jiangmen, Nanchang and Dongguan, employing over 5,000 people, and producing various products such as IT equipment, sports gear, firefighting equipment, bicycle parts and LED lights.

By 2005, Chang re-emerged as a political figure, founding the Chinese Unification Promotion Party (CUPP, 中華統一促進黨). He openly recruited Taiwanese gang members through the party, and met regularly with Chinese officials to promote peaceful

unification between China and Taiwan.⁵⁷ At anti-China protests, Chang led party members in verbally abusing demonstrators and even attacking Hong Kong activist Joshua Wong and singer Denise Ho.⁵⁸

CUPP's Religious Infiltration

CUPP's influence extends deeply into Taiwan's religious and cultural institutions. A Taipei District Prosecutors Office investigation revealed the party has systematically infiltrated temples across Taiwan, including the establishment of a "Mazu Party Branch" in 2016.⁵⁹ Under this model, CUPP recruited temple staff as members or gained control over temple management. About 30 temples, including those in New Taipei City, Changhua County, Yunlin County, and Tainan City, have reportedly come under CUPP's influence in this way.⁶⁰

57 Chang, L. (2016, November 13). Alarm in Taiwan over triad ties to pro-China groups. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/b09de5d0-aa76-11e7-93c5-648314d2c72c>

58 LTN Free News. (2020, June 9). 對何韻詩潑漆 11 人被訴 統促黨 胡志偉還密謀對黃之鋒潑尿 [11 People Charged for Splashing Paint on Denise Ho; CUPP's Hu Chih-wei Also Plotted to Splash Urine on Joshua Wong]. LTN Free News. <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/society/breakingnews/3191951>

59 Mirror Weekly. (2019, October 22). 【白狼染紅宮廟 1】吸收北港朝天宮董事 統促黨滲透全台 30 宮廟 [White Wolf Turns Temples Red 1] Absorbs Directors of Beigang Chaotian Temple; CUPP Infiltrates 30 Temples Across Taiwan]. Mirror Weekly. <https://today.line.me/tw/v2/article/gLBPjm>

60 This approach is similar to how Yen Chin-piao controls the Dajia Jenn Lann Temple's board of directors, using party members to run for temple board positions to gain control over temple management and financial flows. Based on interviews with Religioscope, national security agencies suspect that the CUPP might also exploit the financial opacity of some temples to facilitate money laundering for Chinese capital entering Taiwan.

55 Foreign Policy. (2008, May 8). The list: The world's most dangerous gangs. Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2008/05/08/the-list-the-worlds-most-dangerous-gangs/>

56 J.R. (2014, September 4). The White Wolf. The Economist. <https://www.economist.com/banyan/2014/09/04/the-white-wolf>

For instance, Chang An Lo serves as the honorary chairman of the Wulu God of Wealth Temple (五路財神宮) in Douliu, Yunlin, and founded the Chinese Fuxi Association (中華伏羲協會) where he serves as president, with CUPP Chairman Chang Fu Tang as the director-general. The association organizes annual cross-strait religious exchange activities, such as religious ceremonies for the humanistic ancestor Fuxi.

Prominent Mazu temples have also seen their executives join CUPP or align with its initiatives. For example, Wu Dong He, an executive director of Beigang Chaotian Temple in Yunlin (雲林北港朝天宮), the oldest Mazu temple in Taiwan with a history of over 300 years, has now joined CUPP as a party member. Another temple director, Cai Shang Yuan, is also an honorary advisor for the CUPP's Qianlong Party Branch (統促黨乾隆黨部). Moreover, CUPP Central Committee member Lin Guo Qing, who holds honorary board positions in several temples, maintains close ties with Yen Chin-piao's Taiwan Mazu Fellowship Association.

In an interview with Taiwan media, Chang An Lo played down the CUPP's involvement in temple affairs by stating that temple leaders tend to lack strong ideological leanings.⁶¹ Mazu Temples like the Wenheng Temple in Tainan (台南文衡殿), the Shengwu Temple in

Taichung (台中聖武宮), the Feng Tian Temple in Xingang (新港奉天宮), and the Beigang Chaotian Temple (北港朝天宮), Chang said, merely invite him to celebrations or seek his assistance in managing cross-strait exchanges.

Illegal Operations and Influence Building

Chang An Lo has also leveraged his business connections to engage with Taiwanese civil society leaders via the CUPP. These connections have allowed him to create an extensive network that bridges both business and political interests.

According to an investigation by the Pingtung District Prosecutors Office, the deputy chairman of the Pingtung branch of the CUPP, a man named Ke (柯), was found to have repeatedly accepted commissions from Chinese officials. These commissions involved Ke recruiting village chiefs and residents in Pingtung to travel to China under the guise of the Taiwanese Business Association.⁶² During these trips, host CPC officials promoted "one family across the strait" (兩岸一家親 Liǎng'àn yījiā qīn) ideology, and encouraged support for specific political candidates in upcoming elections.

The CUPP's internal structure and its close ties with the Bamboo Union highlight the

61 Lin, C.H., & Huang, Y.M. (2019, October 27). 【全文】白狼自稱中共同路人 統促黨滲透30宮廟爆染紅危機 [Full text: The White Wolf claims to be a comrade of the CCP; the unification promotion party's infiltration of 30 temples reveals a red crisis]. Mirror Media. <https://www.mirrormedia.mg/story/20191022inv010>

62 Pingtung District Prosecutors Office (2024, January 6) 屏檢偵辦境外勢力資助赴陸招待旅遊介選案件向法院聲請羈押禁見被告2人獲准 ["The court has approved a request for the detention and prohibition of contact for two defendants in a case involving foreign forces funding travel to China for recruitment and intermediary activities]. Pingtung District Prosecutors Office Press Release. <https://tinyurl.com/3n36b75k>

depth of its influence within both Taiwan's political landscape and organized crime networks. In interviews with media, Chang confirmed that the CUPP holds weekly meetings at the party headquarters in New Taipei City, where unification pamphlets are distributed for members to study and read aloud. These members, or "cadres," not only include CUPP members but also high-ranking figures from the Bamboo Union. Taiwanese police have verified that 26 key CUPP members hold influential positions, such as branch leaders and chapter presidents, within the Bamboo Union.⁶³

In recent years, the CUPP has increasingly acted as an agent of China's United Front work in Taiwan, directly facilitating the illegal entry of Chinese United Front government officials and agents. In 2019, the Taipei District Prosecutors Office revealed that Chang An Lo's son, Chang Wei, had used his Huaxia Dadi Travel Agency (华夏大地) to forge travel documents, enabling thousands of Chinese nationals, including local government civil affairs officials and members of cross-strait exchange promotion associations, to enter Taiwan illegally, often meeting with Bamboo Union and CUPP members on these trips.⁶⁴ The list of illegal entrants to Taiwan included senior

United Front officials, such as Li Jiexian, Deputy Director of the United Front Work Department of Yantian District, Shenzhen, and Nian Peiguang, Director of the United Front Work Department of Gejiu City.

The CUPP's efforts to infiltrate religious institutions reflect a broader strategy to exert influence and promote unification with China through cultural and religious channels. By tapping into the historical and spiritual importance of these temples, this approach aims to foster a sense of both shared cultural identity and political alignment. The involvement of organized crime and potential money laundering further complicates the situation, raising concerns about the vulnerability of these religious institutions to external control and manipulation.

63 Liberty Times. (2017, September 27). 統促黨武力 出自竹聯幫「六堂一隊」 [The Unified Promotion Party's armed force comes from the Bamboo Union's "Six Halls and One Team"]. Liberty Times. <https://news.ltn.com.tw/news/focus/paper/1138761>

64 Today Line. (2021, November 20). 涉暗渡 1874 名中國官員來台 // 白狼之子、旅行社 10 人起訴 [Involvement in secretly transporting 1,874 Chinese officials to Taiwan: Son of the White Wolf and travel agency indicted]. Today Line. <https://today.line.me/tw/v2/article/9mzl6Mq>



The Chinese Unification Promotion Party (CUPP) established the Mazu Party Department in 2016
(Photo via the Chinese Unification Promotion Party Facebook Page)

07

The Tianjin Binhai Mazu Cultural Park



The Mazu Cultural Park in Tianjin, which opened in 2016. (Photo by CN Howey, via Wikimedia)

A Hub for Cross-Strait Religious and Cultural Exchange

In 2016, a 42-meter-tall statue of Mazu was erected within a newly constructed religious complex in Tianjin, China. With construction beginning in 2009, the Tianjin Binhai Mazu Cultural Park (天津濱海媽祖園區) includes 39,000 square meters of reclaimed land and features various Mazu-related structures, such as a mountain gate, bell and drum towers, a Mazu temple, pilgrim accommodation and a meditation hall, all overseen by Taiwan's Dajia Jenn Lann Temple.

According to Huang Chen Chun, secretary of the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship Association, the Mazu statue serves as a local landmark, drawing comparisons to the Statue of Liberty.⁶⁵ It not only helps guide nearby maritime vessels, but also symbolizes Mazu as a bridge to peace between Taiwan and China. With direct flights now available from Taiwan's Taoyuan International Airport to Tianjin, the site aims to attract Taiwanese Mazu followers to visit for pilgrimages, as well as increased tourism flows from Taiwan to Tianjin and the rest of China.

Zhou Ke Li, director of the Tianjin Taiwan Affairs Office, told Chinese media that the park's opening would create new opportunities for economic, tourism, and cultural exchanges between Tianjin and Taiwan.⁶⁶ The annual Tianjin Mazu Cultural Tourism Festival, a key initiative of the project, was expected to attract Mazu temple representatives from Taiwan and beyond, with plans for 800 guests from 15 countries and regions in its first year.

65 Merit Times. (2008, December 17). 大甲鎮瀾宮 將分靈天津 [Dajia Jenn Lann Temple will extend its spiritual influence to Tianjin]. <https://www.merit-times.com.tw/NewsPage.aspx?unid=107000>

66 Taiwan.cn. (2016, September 12). 弘揚媽祖精神 天津濱海媽祖文化園揭牌 [Promoting Mazu spirit: Tianjin Binhai Mazu Cultural Park unveiling ceremony]. http://big5.taiwan.cn/xwzx/la/201609/t20160911_11565871.htm

In keeping with Chinese officials' expectations, the park quickly became a hub for cross-strait religious exchanges, with the Cross-Strait Mazu Affinity (兩岸媽祖緣 Liǎng'àn mǎzǔ yuán) cultural exchange event held in 2021. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Taiwan was represented online by five Mazu temples, including Dajia Jenn Lann Temple, while Tianjin city was represented by Ji Guo Qiang, Tianjin Municipal Committee Standing Committee Member and Director of the United Front Work Department, and Yang Bing, Tianjin's Deputy Mayor.

These activities have continued with the easing of China's pandemic restrictions. In 2023, Zheng Ming Kun, president of the Taiwan Mazu Fellowship Association, led representatives from 13 Taiwanese Mazu temples to visit the park. During the visit, Zheng spoke of cross-strait religious exchange, emphasizing the need to continuously enhance the spread of Mazu culture between Tianjin and Taiwan, to inherit and promote Mazu's spirit, deepen mutual understanding, and foster trust and recognition to achieve spiritual harmony among people on both sides of the strait.

In contrast, Ji Guo Qiang's speech focused on the importance of cross-strait unity and the eventual reunification of the motherland:

"Mainland China and Taiwan share the same roots and origin, with Chinese culture being the spiritual foundation and belonging for compatriots on both sides of the strait. We hope that the vast number of Taiwanese compatriots, including those in the Mazu temple community, correctly view and

handle cross-strait relations, focus on the present, look to the future, recognize the trend of the times, and follow the tide of historical development.

By deepening, solidifying, and extending cross-strait exchanges, bringing people on both sides closer and fostering goodwill, we can further promote exchanges and cooperation in all fields between Tianjin and Taiwan, deepen the peaceful and integrated development of cross-strait relations, and make greater contributions to the process of peaceful reunification of the motherland through integration via communication, benefits, and emotions."⁶⁷

In addition to serving as a venue for cross-strait Mazu cultural exchanges, the park also brings in significant profits to its organizers. According to Yi Jin Long, a representative of Dajia Jenn Lann Temple's followers, China provided NT\$70 million (USD2.1 million) in royalties to Dajia Jenn Lann Temple for the construction project.⁶⁸ It follows, then, that upon the completion of the cultural park, Dajia Jenn Lann Temple announced its plan to expand its spiritual influence throughout Tianjin. This will include not only the establishment of a new temple and influence expansion activities, but also encompasses the land on which the temple is built and the

67 Sun, L.L., & Zhou, Y.Q. (2023, December 22). 媽祖文化情牽兩岸 再聚天津共話中華文明 [Mazu culture ties the two sides of the Taiwan Strait together: Gathering again in Tianjin to discuss Chinese civilization]. Huaxia.com. <https://big5.huaxia.com/c/2023/12/22/1858594.shtml>

68 新台灣加油 [New Taiwan Jiayou]. (2020, November 25). 媽祖文化與台灣選舉 [Mazu culture and Taiwanese elections]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmSrsB-9yds>

substantial commercial interests related to the development around the temple.⁶⁹

The Tianjin Binhai Mazu Cultural Park exemplifies how religious sites can become focal points for broader political, cultural, and economic goals. In addition to hosting cross-strait religious events, the park facilitates business deals, with

Taiwanese temple authorities participating in construction projects while their Chinese counterparts leverage these exchanges to promote reunification policies.⁷⁰ This complex interaction underscores the growing importance of religious institutions in China's United Front strategies.

69 Zheng Mingkun, Vice Chairman of Dajia Zhenlan Temple, stated: "The total area is 750 acres, with 100 acres allocated for the Mazu Temple, and 650 acres for the development of related facilities. Real estate developers will also construct buildings." Dajia Jenn Lann Temple stated that the entire project, funded by Taiwanese and Hong Kong businesspeople with a combined investment of NTD\$20 billion (USD\$645 million), aims to develop a land reclamation and trade park in Tianjin. The temple has entrusted Dajia Temple to manage the project. See Zhang, Z.M. (2009, March 11). 台商斥資 200 億 打造天津媽祖園區 [Taiwanese Investors Invest 20 Billion to Develop the Tianjin Mazu Park]. TVBS News. <https://news.tvbs.com.tw/politics/123704>

70 Gu, M.C. (2019). 作為中共發揮海外影響力工具的媽祖文化 [Mazu culture: An instrument of the Chinese Communist Party expanding offshore influences]. *China Mainland Studies*, 62(4), pp. 103–132. <https://www.airitilibrary.com/Article/Detail/10132716-201912-202001080001-202001080001-103-132>



08

The Political Impact of Cross-Strait Religious Exchanges

The Taiwanese government has identified frequent cross-strait religious exchanges as a primary target of China's United Front initiatives in recent years. Through its engagement with gangs and the network of Mazu temples, the CPC can infiltrate and build relationships with not only political and economic actors, but also with grassroots community structures in Taiwan, creating an interconnected system that furthers United Front objectives.

Mazu Temples as Sites of Political Interference

In an interview with Religioscope, scholar Wen Zong Han explained that the CPC's use of folk beliefs, such as those centered around Mazu, is intended not only to shape Taiwanese views on unification but also to cultivate influence with key figures within Taiwanese society.⁷¹ For instance, Mazu pilgrimages across the strait involve entire villages, with local leaders often joining and securing sponsorship to fund these trips. Sponsors generally include Taiwanese businesspeople or political representatives who then greet and send off pilgrims, enhancing their own political influence and voter recognition in turn.

In this way, Mazu temples serve not only as centers of faith for diverse segments of Taiwanese society, but also as social venues

that attract political actors, especially during election periods. In Taiwan, election candidates, from local officials to presidential candidates, frequently visit temples during their campaigns to connect with extensive temple networks and local contacts. President William Lai, for instance, visited temples 184 times during his seven-month campaign.⁷² Similarly, former President Tsai Ing-wen, known for her firm stance against Chinese influence in Taiwan, actively visited temples across various counties and cities during her tenure, praying for national prosperity and public safety.

At the same time, temples' perceived alignment with political agendas can spark strong reactions within Taiwanese society. In 2019, the Tainan Houbi Tianhou Temple (台南後壁天后宮) dedicated to Mazu, became a focal point of controversy when it displayed the Chinese national flag and simplified Chinese script (Taiwan commonly uses traditional script), and was seen to promote CPC ideals.⁷³ Legislator Wang Ding-yu highlighted this incident as an example of religious infiltration aimed at transforming the temple into a small-scale unification base. The Tainan city

71 Prior to 2017, Wen was invited to China three to four times a year as a scholar to share his Mazu research, and was even questioned about his stance on Taiwan independence and unification by organizers. Wen believes the true goal of the CPC is not to control temples, but instead expand its espionage network through gangs affiliated with these religious sites.

72 CommonWealth Magazine. (n.d.). 神明與選票，他們為什麼瘋狂拜廟 [Gods and ballots: Why are they crazy about temple worship?]. CommonWealth Magazine. <https://www.cw.com.tw/graphics/2024-elections-temple-strategies/>

73 Yahoo News (2019, September 3) 又見染紅共產廟！台南後壁天后宮五星旗飄揚 [Once again, a communist temple is seen with a red hue! The Five-Star Flag flies at the Tainan Houbi Tianhou Temple]. Yahoo News. <https://ynews.page.link/TvMV>

government identified the temple as an illegal structure and began its demolition in the same year.⁷⁴

Mazu temples can also be used to facilitate Chinese authorities' attempts to directly influence Taiwanese democratic processes. In an interview with Religioscope, a senior

Taiwanese government official noted that China uses faith as a pretext to bypass formal diplomatic channels and establish direct contact with influential Taiwanese actors. Local gangs managing these temples act as intermediaries, infiltrating the religious system to disseminate messages among believers advocating for "peace between the two sides, without military arms or war." This strategy enables the CPC to influence the voting intentions of believers and local community members, ultimately assisting Taiwanese political candidates favored by China in winning elections and interfering with Taiwan's democratic processes.

74 A similar incident took place at the Buddhist Biyun Chan Temple (碧雲禪寺), which was converted into a shrine to the CPC by the controversial Taiwanese businessman Wei Ming-jen. The temple was demolished in 2018. See Chung, L. (2018, September 26). Taiwan bulldozes illegal communist shrine at Buddhist temple. SCMP.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/2165843/taiwan-bulldozes-illegal-communist-shrine-buddhist-temple>



Former President Tsai Ing-wen visits the Baishatun Mazu Temple for a worship ceremony (Photo via Tsai's Facebook page)

Professors She Jian-yuan, from Sun Yat-sen University's Business Administration Department, and Liu Yu-xi, from Shih Hsin University's Communication Management Department, have provided quantitative evidence of Chinese electoral interference through religious networks.⁷⁵ Their study analyzed voting data from the 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020 presidential and mayoral elections, focusing on Kaohsiung City in southern Taiwan.

Their findings showed that newly established Mazu temples with high turnover among followers are more likely to influence election outcomes. Specifically, these temples can sway votes from the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) toward the opposition Kuomintang (KMT), which has a pro-China stance and supports the signing of a Cross-Strait Peace Agreement to create conditions for "reunification" with China.

According to the study, the CPC's methodological approach of regular outreach to temple leaders, akin to "dripping water wears away stone," gradually shifts the political stance of specific temples and translates into a shift in voting pattern among the followers. She and Liu estimate that a single Mazu temple can affect close to 1,000 votes.

It is important to note that the study finds that not all Mazu temples are influenced

by this pro-unification agenda, with a distinction between older temples and newer ones established by urban migrants. The latter, with less stable followings, are more susceptible to Chinese religious outreach. The attitude of temple leaders and their engagement in organizing pilgrimages to China also play a significant role in shaping the voting behavior of their followers.

75 She, J.Y., & Liu, Y.X. (2024, June 17). 國防安全政治社會以媽祖之名——中國介選的量化影響 [In the name of Mazu: The quantitative impact of China's intervention in elections]. Voice Tank. <https://voicetank.org/20240617-3/>

Conclusion



Pilgrims make offerings during the 2022 Baiшатun Mazu pilgrimage in Taiwan
(Photo by Yu Ling Teng, via Wikimedia)

A significant part of Taiwanese folk religion, Mazu worship has become an increasingly important tool in China's United Front strategy toward Taiwan. By supporting select temples, co-opting local organizations and organizing religious exchanges, the CPC has sought to position Mazu as the "Goddess of Cross-Strait Peace." Moreover, it appears that the CPC primarily targets the most influential and resource-rich temples and, in some cases, local gangs, not only because of the vast resources and networks they control, but also because of the influence these large temples have on Taiwanese society and local political systems. This strategy no doubt aims to influence Taiwan's political landscape and advance China's unification goals over the long-term.

This study by Religioscope sheds light on the CPC's use of soft power to subtly influence Taiwan's political processes. While military conflict has historically been seen as the primary threat in cross-strait relations, this report demonstrates how China uses widespread belief in Mazu on both sides of the strait to gradually alter public perceptions and democratic foundations within Taiwan.

It must also be noted that the CPC has deployed various tools to exert cultural and political influence over both the general population and elite groups in Taiwan. Mazu may be the most prominent example, but other religious organizations are increasingly being incorporated into

the United Front effort.⁷⁶ One dimension not elaborated on in this report, but no less worthy of further research, is the relationship between Taiwanese laypeople and the temples they frequent — specifically, their awareness of institutional capture by gangs or the politicization of the Mazu figure. Further research into the political capture and instrumentalization of religious organizations by the CPC are needed to measure the full extent of this strategy.

76 Xie, W.Z. (2024, July 4). 【宮廟滲透戰 1】防對岸滲透宮廟 國安人士揭 5 大統戰樣態 [Temple Infiltration War 1: To Prevent Cross-Strait Infiltration of Temples, National Security Officials Reveal 5 Major United Front Tactics], Mirror Media, <https://www.mirrormedia.mg/story/20240704inv001>

The Soft Power of a Goddess

Mazu worship, deeply embedded in Taiwanese culture, has become a strategic tool in China's cognitive warfare campaign across the strait.

This report by Religioscope examines how the Communist Party of China (CPC) has sought to reposition Mazu as a symbol of cross-strait unity, leveraging religious networks, cultural exchanges, and economic incentives to advance its reunification agenda. At the same time, the influence of organized crime within Taiwan's Mazu temples has created further opportunities for external political intervention.

Drawing from interviews with temple officials, organized crime figures, local security forces, journalists and scholars, this study provides a critical analysis of how local religious institutions have become entangled with political influence, organized crime, and cross-strait dynamics, with real implications for Taiwan's social and political fabric.