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Religious "Modernization" and Challenges in Post-War Taiwan

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1. Introduction： Historical Background of Religious Development in Taiwan

Secularization represents a particular path of religious development in Western society. In the context of Western world, it indicates the development of differentiation between politics and religion. Taiwan had never, however, a period which could be characterized by an unified system of politics and religion. For this reason, in the strict sense of the notion, Taiwan did not experience the process of secularization. Notwithstanding, the various religions in Taiwan always keep reacting to their changing social environment and carry out the process of transformation in their own way. Without resorting to the concept of secularization, this article aims at examining the religious development in Taiwan and shows its characteristics.

According to the latest religious statistics "Taiwan Social Change Survey," which was carried out by the national research institute, Institute of Sociology at Academia Sinica in 2014 of the 1,938 respondents, 48.3% identified themselves as a follower of "folk religion"（民間宗教）; around 14.9% of the total respondents identified themselves as Buddhist and 15.6% as Daoist; Christians accounted for only 5.3%; and the all others are respectively less than 5%. These statistics clearly show a multi-religious landscape in Taiwan. This structure of religious pluralism has a long history.

Before Japanese colonization began in 1895, the population on the island of Taiwan mainly consisted of Chinese immigrants. The first significant wave of Chinese immigrants was the army led by *Zheng Chengong*（鄭成功）, a loyal general of Ming dynasty（1368–1644）, conquering Dutch outposts in Taiwan. This is the beginning of the later widespread of deity-worshipping rituals on the whole island of Taiwan. The army, consisted of those Han people mainly coming from the southeast coastal regions of China, primarily *Fujian* Province, who brought with them their local beliefs and rituals to Taiwan. After taking over the island in 1683, the *Qing* empire（1644–1912）, as an alien ruler, did not suppress local culture in Taiwan, including the belief and ritual practices of the common people, in alignment with its policy of cultural autonomy regarding the Han people's culture in China. The religious codes of the Han people continued to be implemented in different fields of Taiwan, including politics, economy, civil defense system, etc. At the same time, the culture and religion of Taiwanese aboriginals had been gradually marginalized and partly integrated into the Han people's everyday life. Folk religion, characterized by practicing deity worshipping based on local temples of Han people, expressed the religious mainstream in the period of imperial

Chinese rule, because these practices had become an essential part of the foundation in many different social fields. In addition, there also existed sporadically distributed groups of laity Buddhism in the Qing periode of Taiwan. Generally speaking , both the rituals of deity worshipping based on local temples and laity Buddhism depicted the whole picture of Taiwan's religious landscape before Japanese colonization.

During the Japanese colonial period (1895–1945), the folk religion immediately lost its multi-dimensional embeddedness in the ruling system. But folk religion was still able to continue its minimal development in local communities before the outbreak of the Pacific War in 1941. The policy of "Researching and Registering Taiwanese Temples" (寺廟整理運動) began in late 1930s and was forcibly implemented since the early 1940. Thousands deity statues were collectively burned and many temples were destroyed. In the last few years of the Japanese colonial period, the Japanese government also attempted to integrate Taiwanese Buddhism into its policy of nationalism in terms of Japanese Imperial Buddhism. After this short period of religious destruction, religions in Taiwan began a new chapter when the new government of the Republic of China took over Taiwan from the hand of Japan. In the post-war period, the religion in Taiwan began their new dynamics of development, which has determined the religious landscape nowadays.

2. Religious Growth in the Post-War Taiwan

Buddhism and Christianity had a rapid growth after World War II, due to the influx of Chinese monks and Christian missionaries from Mainland China. But this only represents the growth of the number of believers resulting from immigration. Regarding religious growth in terms of gaining local popularity and public support, there were three waves of religious growth in post-war Taiwan.

The growth of Christianity represents the first wave of religious growth in Taiwan. Many Western Christian missionaries came to Taiwan and were actively engaged in their missionary work supported by different foreign Christian denominations. At that time, Taiwan accepted a lot of aid from different Western countries. Going through Christian organizations was a common way to get international aid. Christian organizations in Taiwan organized a lot of social welfare programs since the 1950s, when the Taiwanese government's welfare system had not been established yet. In this way, Christians gained a positive social image and built up a model in terms of the social engagement of religious organizations in Taiwan.

The second wave of religious growth was experienced in the field of folk religion since late 1970s. Taiwanese folk religion found their opportunity to recover after the government of Republic of China took over Taiwan in 1945. Its growth did not, nevertheless, really appear until the 1970s. Since the late 1970s when industrialization began to develop on a massive scale in Taiwan, the way of living of the common people has been drastically changed. People became richer and local communities were able to spend money to renovate their temples. Many new temples were built at that time, and many rituals were practiced in an extravagant way. Thus, folk religion experienced

its first flourishing growth in the late 1970s. However, the Taiwan government, following the rationality of state building, did not hold a very positive attitude toward folk religion. The traditional ritual practices of local temples were often criticized as making few contributions to the modernization of the country, as well as for the extravagance in their ritual activities. The public image of folk religion did not begin to improve until the 2000s, when the political mainstream discourse of localism（在地化論述）legitimized the religio-cultural elements of folk religion. The stereotyped view of folk religion was the impression of anti-modernization, but its elements have since became an integral part of Taiwanese culture and deemed worthy of being preserved. This changed many people's attitudes and made more people of different social status get involved in the traditional rituals now being characterized as Taiwanese cultural assets.

The third wave of religious growth is the expansion of Buddhism since the 1990s. Before World War II, Taiwan had only lay Buddhism, which consisted of laymen's groups practicing certain buddhist-like rituals, such as eating in the vegetarian way, doing Buddhist chanting and carrying out different rituals of worshipping Buddha. During the Japanese colonization, this kind of lay Buddhism turned to Japanese *Sotozen*（曹洞宗）for preventing Japanese suppression. After World War II, many Chinese Buddhist monks and masters came to Taiwan from China and built up Buddhist institutions, which mainly took the form of Buddhist monasteries. Some of them tried to disseminate Buddhist doctrines by producing Buddhist publications. This built up a new public image of Buddhism in Taiwan. Since the 1980s, a new wave of Buddhist movement started, the so-called the movement of "Buddhism for the secular world"（人間佛教）, also translated as "Humanistic Buddhism." This Buddhist reform with more engagement in the secular world attracted the attention of the public and its popularity rapidly increased since the 1990s. Nowadays, "Buddhism for the secular world" has become the mainstream Buddhism in Taiwan.

In addition to these three waves of religious growth, we also find in Taiwan other religious organizations coming from abroad since 2000. Western New Age organizations, Tibetan Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism coming from Southeast Asia have been imported and have become more popular since the late 1990s. This makes the religious landscape in Taiwan more diversified, which characterizes the phenomenon of religious pluralism.

3. "Modern" Characteristics of the Religious Development in Taiwan

Changes in the religious landscape speeded up, when the process of industrialization began since the late 1970s and political democratization since the 1990s. The changing social environment has had different impacts on different religions. Christianity has been, for example, facing a long-term stagnation for decades; the trend of "Buddhism for the secular world," mainly promoted by four Buddhist masters has produced a huge social impact; folk religion has regained its social-cultural legitimacy through the political discourse of localism and democratization, and is newly activated in the modern governmentality. In terms of the development of religious field in post-war

Taiwan, three trends can be identified as "religious modernization" in Taiwan.

（1）Religious Groups Are More Conscious of Managing Their Public Image

Facing the massive social change of the industrialization and the political reform, religious protagonists are forced to find their own way of surviving. Religious relief program is one common activity organized by religious groups that affects their public image. Particularly for the Buddhist organizations, various charity programs were massively adopted, because it is easy for them to be integrated into Buddhist doctrine. Some Buddhist organizations of the reform trend "Buddhism for the secular world", such *Tzu-Chi* and *Foguangshan*, are very active in encouraging people to take part in their charity programs. Charity has become a very positive and attractive term which can easily motivate more people to be their members and enhance the social visibility of these organizations. Before Buddhist organizations began with their own charity programs in their modern form, Christian organizations had been a representative model for a long time in Taiwan. However, nowadays, Christian organization do not have an advantage anymore in social engagement. This might be one of the reasons for the ongoing stagnation of Christian growth for the past three decades.

In contrast to modernized Buddhist organizations, folk religion has been able to maintain its growth without focusing on institutionalized charity. One reason is that the solidarity of their followers is basically dependent on territorial affinity and blood relationship. Local temples are, when organizing their ritual activities, mainly concerned with the needs of the local community and with enhancing the mutual relationships with other temples. Their charity programs are, hence, only targeted at solving the local problems and are often based on the traditional form of donating relief goods and materials. The charity in the form of modern institutionalized program is hard to find in folk religion. Besides, a local temples can, without involving programming charity, enhance their popularity by promoting the cultural value of their traditional rituals. Due to the political-cultural discourses of localism, local temple's religious rituals are valued as a part of Taiwanese cultural identity and legitimated as important cultural assets. Some representative ritual activities, like regular parading procession for making pilgrimage, easily gain public attention and even become tourist attractions for outsiders. Even though every temple may not own a authenticated cultural assets, more and more temples are developing and preserving their traditional rituals.

（2）The Trend of Self-Spiritualization

Both in Buddhism and folk religion there exists the trend of self-spiritualization. In Buddhism, many new organizations mainly focusing on the ritual of self-cultivating method, which like "meditation" in a broader sense, is performed under a supervision of a master. Most of these kinds of Buddhist organizations do not belong to the system of traditional Buddhist institutions. They are, perhaps suprisingly, often identified as *pagan* from the viewpoint of Buddhist "orthodox" system. Also Tibetan Buddhism has gained popularity by providing the methods of self-spiritualization in

Taiwan since 2000.

One can also find the trend of self-spiritualization in the field of folk religion. Since the 1980s, new forms of folk religion have appeared and kept growing. For example, new temples worshipping *Xiwangmu*（Fairy Mother Goddess）, that come from the belief system of Chinese cosmology, appeared since the late 1970s and rapidly produced a lot of daughter-altars all over Taiwan within 30 years. The establishers of the daughter-altars claim to have the ability to directly communicate with the Goddess. They provide certain ritual services to the people who have problems that cannot be solved in ordinary ways of everyday life. In addition, there exist since the late 1980s one other kind of self-spiritualized group, which resorts to the self-ritual for seeking direct contact with the transcendental *ling*（spirits in nature）at some prescribed places, such as at certain temples or special sites in natural landscape.

Regarding Christian development, the groups of charismatic movement have achieved its growth in the last two decades in Taiwan. Most of them come from the Western world and emphasize self-spiritualization. An other representative one of the trend of self-spiritualization is New Age groups imported from the Western world since the late 1990s. They organized different courses for teaching the method of self-spiritualization.

Nowadays, individual religious needs are not determined by family or local social relations as much as in the past. Providing rituals for individual spiritual care has become an issue in many religious groups. This trend shows, however, different geographical distribution depending on different religions. The groups promoting self-spiritualized rituals in Buddhism and in the New Age movement are often widespread through the urban areas with higher grade of individualization. And the groups of self-spiritualization in folk religion are special cases which are less related to certain geographical characteristics. Its widespread distribution very much resultes from the weaker control of a local temple of people's ritual practices, so that they can be established and develop without the permission of public temples as it had ever been.

（3）Religious "Mediatization"

The term "media" is used to be understood as traditional tools of communication, such as newspaper and radios and television. However, the new media, the interactive APPs like *Blog*, *Facebook*, *Line*, which appeared in the 2000s, has fundamentally changed the religious communication. Some studies show the impact of media on the religious development and view media not only as a tool of communication,[1] but as constitutive moment of religious development. Regarding the religious development in Taiwan, the effects of new media are particular salient in the field of folk religion. Relying on communication via new media, many new forms of religious community appear since the 2010s. Their solidarity and operation are not based on the territorial

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[1]   See Stig Hjarvard（2008）"The mediatization of religion. A theory of the media as agents of religious change" in *Northern Light*, 6（2）, pp. 9-26. Stig Hjarvard（2011）"The mediatization of religion. Theorising Religion, Media and Social Change." in Culture and Religion 12（2）. pp. 119-135.

affinity or any link by blood relationship, but on the taste affinity which means the fan page followers' personal interests in certain ritual artefacts or activities. The fan page followers often meet each other for a ritual event, wherein they can have experience with certain ritual and have contact with ritual artefacts they are interested in. The interesting thing is, while taking part in the ritual event of folk religion, the fan page followers could, according to the empirical data of my interviews, eventually develop their personal link with religious belief, through emotional moment, bodily reaction or habitualized understanding in their real ritual experience.

In other words, the role of territorial solidarity and blood affinity which used to be the essential constitutive elements of religious community in folk religion, can now be replaced by the taste affinity mediated by new media communication. This phenomenon is possible particularly in the field of folk religion, because folk religion is characterized by its religious construction primarily based on ritual practice, rather than belief. In opposition to the new phenomenon of "believing without belonging", an idea proposed by Grace Davie in her examination of modern Christian development in modern Western society,[2] we can find a lot of cases indicating the contrary form - "belonging without believing" in the field of folk religion in Taiwan. For many people, this involves consciously taking part in ritual groups of temple, which focus on certain bodily techniques like playing music, performing different martial arts, etc. without necessarily identifying themselves as believers. There are also many of these participants I interviewed who (even regularly) take part in a religious procession, but view themselves as outsiders without any particular belief in the deity they accompany in procession. Some of them explain their participation as cultural experiencing or just as conventional particiaption. These cases are regarded by devout believers as being in the transient state and as a way to build their solidarity with deity. Although it is hard to prove empirically whether "belonging without believing" is the previous state of "believing" in the context of Taiwanese folk religion, this transformation from "belonging without believing" to "believing" is surely not of rare occurrence. Based on the religiosity of folk religion, new media creates now many new forms of religious community which were not possible without territorial solidarity in the past.

4. Social Condition of Religious Development

After examining the trends and characteristics of religious change in post-war Taiwan, three factors are found to be relevant to the religious development: the political agenda of modern state building, the secular trend of individualization, and flourishing new media.

The process of modern state building in Taiwan promotes the cultural discourses of localism and the discourses about social function of religion. Any local religio-cultural particularity can be manipulated by local temples as symbolic capital and be used to enhance their cultural value and

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[2] See Grace Davie (1990) 'Believing without Belonging: Is This the Future of Religion in Britain?' in *Social Compass*, 37, pp. 455-469.

eventually to gain social visibility and popularity. On the other hand, to Buddhist organizations, "charity" has become a symbolic term because of its positive social function in the framework of modern state building.

The second one is the trend of individualization, which can be traced to the economic modernization. The change of economic structure creates new ways of living in Taiwan. People's everyday life is now not as strongly linked to the local community as it once was. Individualization makes the religious grouping lose the territorial-bounded community base. That means the religious organizations have to produce programs targeting at individual need, like the activity of self-spiritualization, without referring to local community.

The third one is related to technological revolution. New media creates new forms of religious management. Internet connection replaces, to some extent, the role of the territorial solidarity and blood affinity which had been ever essential to religious grouping. Media is now not only a tool anymore, but has become a new constitutive part of religion in the development of folk religion.

The religious communication in the new media does not only promote the "religious deterritorialization." The new media also creates a new form of religious communication, that is mainly based on the encoded digitalized information. The experience of living together is thus not prerequest for this kind of communication. The solidarity of this kind of delocalized religious group is constructed on the base of their member's common interests in some ritual practices or because of having similar beliefs. Although this kind of new religious grouping is not very popular yet, it represents a new religious form and makes the Taiwanese religious landscape more pluralistic.

5. Conclusion: Challenges of Religious "Modernization" in Taiwan

Religions in Taiwan are facing different challenges on their way of "modernization." Programs sponsored by religious organization, targeting secular affairs in their social environment, are often difficult to distinguish from those promoted by non-religous organizations. The boundary between the programs of non-religious non-profit-organizations and those of religious organizations is, for example in terms of charity engagement, not easy to find. An associated problem is that the more religious organizations engage in secular affairs, the more likely they are to become involved in affairs in dispute. In 2015 *Tzu-Chi*, the pioneer of the movement of "Buddhism for the secular world," had foreign investments in stocks of weapon companies and cigarette companies. This news seriously damaged *Tzu-Chi's* public image. Due to its particular role as religious organization, its controversial social engagement will be examined in public with a stricter standard. That is to say, as religious organizations develop the discourse of secular engagement to build a positive social image for themselves, they are at the same time taking the risk of coming in for a lot of criticism that could harm the public trust in them. This is the dilemma religious organizations are facing in modern times.

In addition, the festival-like rituals of folk religion are easy viewed as cultural activities. And

the function of some self-spiritualizing exercises, including those of new Buddhist organizations and New Age, is very much like spiritual curing without necessarily being linked to religious redeem. Many phenomena show the boundary between religious and non-religious is getting vague. But this is actually not the problem. In fact, the blurring of boundaries is a necessary tendency resulting from modern individualization. The real problem is, religious organizations could "get lost" when engaging too much in secular activities, so that they overly put emphasis on the techniques of management with less religious concern. The internal debates regarding the way of management are often found in local temples as well as in the religious organization. The conflicts can only become more salient than ever when the social environment is on the way to the modernization.