

Assembling the sacred space in the Taiwanese countryside: Endogenous development projects, temple festivals and unruly material objects[☆]



Chi-Mao Wang

Department of Sociology, Fu Jen Catholic University, No. 510 Zhongzheng Rd, Xinzhuang Dist., New Taipei City, 24205, Taiwan, ROC

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ABSTRACT

Until the 1990s the Taiwanese government deemed peasant folk religious activities such as temple festivals to be superstitious. Nowadays, inspired by the rural endogenous development paradigm, these activities are no longer a sign of backwardness but are a means for improving rural socio-economic wellbeing and sustainability. In some commentators' view, the arrival of endogenous development project is more democratic than centralized forms of political government. Inspired by a Foucauldian take on power, the alternative account argues that the project should be understood as a new mode of exercise of political power or neoliberal *dispositif*. Although Foucault's notion of governmentality has been employed by critical analysts to examine the neoliberal *dispositif* or the ongoing process through which durable orderings emerge, little attention has been paid to the contingency of associations, the fissiparous nature of affiliations, and the agency of material objects. To bridge this theoretical gap, this paper argues that we should think of *dispositif* and assemblage together. Assemblage thinking, which places more emphasis on the agency of material objects and the ephemeral nature of heterogeneous association, offers valuable insight into the government of rural culture in the neoliberal era. With reference to an ethnographical fieldwork conducted in a Taiwanese village, Zhulin village, I argue that Chinese religious practices involving diverse material actants, such as divination blocks, god statues, and spirit mediums, have a contradictory impact on the neoliberal *dispositif*. By drawing attention to the performance of local actants, this paper also expands the understanding of rural governance under neoliberalism.

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1. Introduction

Offering flowers, incense and tea in folk sacrifice, instead of animals....do not attend a banquet on the day of temple ceremony.

Guides for Improving Frugality in Folk Sacrifices (*gai shan min-jian jidian jieyue banfa*) (Ministry of the Interior, 1968)

Let us look at our history in retrospect. How did our society evolve? How did the traditional villages, towns and communities consolidate their common identity through various folk art and cultural

activities before the cultural centres and the government's cultural administrative systems came on to the scene? What bonded them to a system of mutual ethical beliefs, rituals and rules of order? A unique and united society was created ... under the auspices of temples and through various cultural and artistic temple activities ...

(Shen, 1993 quoted by Katz, 2003, p. 404)

An official regulation enacted by the Taiwanese government in 1968, as quoted at the outset of the article, implicitly deemed peasant folk religion to be not only superstitious but also wastefully unproductive. However, in 1993 a speech made by the former minister of the Council for Cultural Affairs in the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, or KMT) conference, Shen Xueyong, indicated a shift in government policy toward peasant religions in Taiwan. According to the speech quoted above, the state

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E-mail address: chimaowang@gmail.com.

increasingly appreciated the constructive role that the local temples had been playing since the 1990s. Since then new government agencies have been formed to collaborate with rural temple organizations at a local level, in an attempt to promote rural sustainability. This significant change has led some scholars to conclude that local temple festivals are a symbol of new arrangements of governing, in which rural citizens have more opportunities to participate in decisionmaking processes. In this narrative, the resurgence of local temple festivals in Taiwan is more democratic than centralized forms of government. Such an account is compatible with new discourses of rural development, which aim to incorporate new strategies for the sustainability of the social, cultural and economic spheres of peasant life. These new discourses of rural development are based on such ideas as community responsibility, partnership, and empowerment, largely inspired by the initiatives of the 1970s and 1980s in the UK, the US and Japan (Cheshire, 2006; Cheshire et al., 2007; Edwards et al., 2001; Herbert-Cheshire, 2000; Stoker, 1997). These ideas are encapsulated in endogenous development strategies, in which the link between culture and territory is essential to economic sustainable development. In this vision, local rural culture could be used to reformulate economic activity in resistance to neoliberal globalization (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Ray, 1998, 2006; Woods, 2011).

Yet, inspired by a Foucauldian take on power, the alternative account offered by Foucauldian thinkers has argued that the government of rural culture is inextricably bound up with the expansion of neoliberal governmentality. Defining governmentality (or the art of government) as *the conduct of conduct*, governmentality-inspired scholars have argued that neoliberalism is a novel way of thinking about governing or a new way of seeking to shape the conduct of groups and individuals, in consistent with the rules of market (Cheshire, 2006; Foucault, 2008; Rose, 1999; Rose and Miller, 2008). Peasants, communities, and folk religious organizations in the Taiwanese countryside are nowadays urged to take responsibility for their own well-being and to be social entrepreneurs. They have increasingly become involved in the governing of socio-economic life. While neoliberal governmentality intends to reshape the nature of folk religious practices, this does not mean that the spread of neoliberal governmentality across time and space is without counter-movement or what Foucault (2008) termed 'counter-conduct'. Foucault's work has been frequently critiqued for paying less attention to human and non-human agency or for overemphasizing the omnipresence of power (Allen, 1998; O'Malley, 1996; Rose et al., 2006). In contrast to the concept *dispositif*, a notion which Foucault later developed governmentality to unmask, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) coined the term assemblage (*agencement*) that placed emphasis on "crossing borders, disassembling organs and bodies, tracing nomadic thought, lines of flight, and deterritorialization" (Legg, 2014, p. 5). Although some scholars may have drawn a clear distinction between *dispositif* and assemblage, in this essay I follow Legg's proposition that, "[N]either concept has a monopoly on power or resistance, scaling or de-scaling, stratifying or smoothing space." While *dispositif* or governmentality highlights the ordering, norms, scaling and reterritorialization, assemblage privileges disorder, emergence, de-scaling and deterritorialization (DeLanda, 2006; Legg, 2011, 2014). While both governmentality and assemblage thinking emphasize heterogeneous networks, assemblage thinking highlights the agency of object (see DeLanda, 2006). I use the relationship between governmentality and assemblage to examine the dialectics of religious government and religious practices. The neoliberal *dispositif* attempts to govern peasant folk religious festivals and communities in economic terms, but it also entails contestation and dissolution that unravel the assemblages. With reference to anthropological

fieldwork conducted in a Taiwanese rural community, Zhulin village (竹林, a pseudonym), I show how the ways in which peasants 'do religions' that involve interactions between human (soothsayers, peasants, and spirit mediums) and non-human actants (divination blocks (see Fig. 1) or *jiaobei*, fortune sticks (see Fig. 2), god statues) have unpredictable but contradictory effects on the neoliberal *dispositif* in the Taiwanese countryside.

While in the Anglophone world the governmentality approach has been widely employed to examine the shift in rural governance under neoliberalism, little attention has been paid to the agency of objects or materials. This paper intends to bridge this gap and advance our understanding of rural governance in terms of different forms of object agency. The article is organized as follows. The first part outlines the discussion on the shift in rural governance in Taiwan, and proposes that a governmentality approach could illuminate the exercise of power in the Taiwanese countryside. This paper then suggests that assemblage thinking, of which materiality or the agency of object is the central concern, offers crucial insight into the studies of neoliberal rural/cultural governance. Following a brief discussion on the Chinese religious *dispositif* and fieldwork, I offer an outline of endogenous development projects in Taiwan. In the next section, an annual temple festival dedicated to *Guanyin* (Bodhisattva) in Zhulin village is used as a case study to demonstrate the role of materiality in rural governance.

2. Governing through sacred spaces: the shift in rural governance

Rural popular religions have been subject to Chinese imperial state control through persuasive and coercive polices (Chau, 2006; Duara, 1988; Yang, 2008b). After being defeated by the Community Party of China, in Taiwan the KMT formed by Chinese Confucian elites continued to scale down peasant religious festivals, which were considered to be 'backwardness' (Katz, 2003; Weller, 1987; Yang, 2008a). All religious organizations were carefully monitored by the state at all levels and were required to register with the government, since peasant popular religion, deity cults and pilgrimages posed a challenge to the KMT's elite Confucianism (Madsen, 2008; Weller, 1987; Yang, 2008b). However, the government of rural popular religions in Taiwan gradually become much milder during the 1980s. Some analysts have noted that peasant religion is now undergoing a revival and is thriving, as Taiwan has developed into a democratic regime, in which people are able to undertake religious practices without fear of state suppression

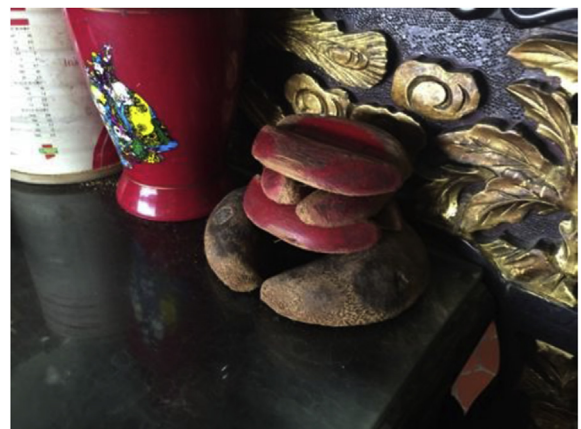


Fig. 1. Divination blocks.
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