Chapter 5

The transcendent power of the pilgrimage odyssey: an analysis of the palanquin performance and the pilgrim experience of walking

Apart from its destination, the pilgrimage journey has no fixed route or scheduled timetable. Pilgrims usually walk into an “unknown” situation, where they are completely in the dark about the path to be taken, and the when and where of taking a rest. Clarification is provided by the palanquin performance or “giang giau”, which indicates the direction and gives signs as to where a rest can be taken on the journey. Presented by the carriers, the palanquin performance is considered the result of divine intervention, understood by the fact that the goddess Mazu “descends to” or “pulls” the palanquin and makes the carriers move.

The present chapter will focus on the palanquin performance and the walking experience of the pilgrims. Both illustrate the pilgrim’s embodied practice of religious belief. I will first explain the conceptual tools used in my analysis: performance, experience, and the meaning of ritual. The enactment of the palanquin performance will then be introduced, including its origin, skills, and alterations. According to its different forms and functions, the palanquin performance will be divided into two categories. The last section will discuss the pilgrim’s physical experience on the journey. I will explore the transcendent power of the pilgrimage in the concluding part of this chapter by highlighting the pilgrim’s physical experience both of the palanquin performance and the process of walking.

5.1 Conceptual tools: performance, experience, and the meaning of ritual

Before I come to the concrete topic of this chapter, the concepts used in my analysis should be clarified. The first deals with “performance”. Schechner (1988:6, 30, n.10) points out that the definition of performance can vary with different theoretical concerns. For him, performance presupposes a live theatre context, in which interaction between the performers and the audience is indispensable. Goffman (1967) regards all social interaction as staged, asserting that “people prepare their social roles ‘backstage’ and then enter the

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1 “Giang giau” is a Minnanese term. “Giang” literally means to walk or move, and “giau” means palanquin.
‘main stage’ areas in order to play out key social interaction and routines” (cited from Schechner 1988:166). With reference to the analogy between theatre and ritual, I suggest that the Baishatun pilgrimage is also staged in the sense that each pilgrim plays a different role. Some pilgrims become more prominent because of their auxiliary pilgrimage tasks (e.g., they may be members of pilgrimage brigades) or their asceticism on the journey (e.g., undertaking the entire journey on foot). Thus, the dichotomy between performer and audience is not clear-cut, and the switching between them depends on the specific situation. Further, the audience is not confined to pilgrims. Local residents, Mazu devotees, and other spectators en route are involved in the pilgrimage, which makes the interaction between performer and audience more complicated.

Moreover, the pilgrimage as ritual action is in itself performative. I will focus on the palanquin performance in this chapter to explain the performative features of ritual action. According to Atkinson (1989:14), the “liturgy-centred” ritual is “dominated by orderly sets of ritual procedures which coordinate the action of practitioners and congregants”, whereas the “performer-centred” ritual is “governed less by liturgy and more by the action and inclinations of individual practitioners”. However, Gaenszle (2000:41-42) questions the effectiveness of making a distinction between the two sorts of rituals. For him, all rituals are performative, and it is this that constitutes the crucial nature of ritual action. He defines performance as action with a certain characteristic frame that renders it different from ordinary activities. In this sense, all ritual can be seen as formalisation (or ritualisation) to varying degrees. I will follow Gaenszle’s definition of performance, where the active role of the performer in transforming tradition and the social setting cannot be ignored.

Tambiah (1985: 123-166, especially 128) proposes a performative concept with regard to the ritual’s constitutive features, such as the semantic meaning of ritual, the application of multiple media in ritual, and articulating the relationship between “this world” and the “other world” through the usage of symbols and icons (cf. Köpping and Rao 2000:8). Turner (1985:180) defines ritual as “the performance of a complex sequence of symbolic acts”. From the social processual perspective, he argues that ritual and pilgrimage, with their “liminality” characteristic, contain a transformative function. Developing Dilthey’s concept of “Erlebnis” and “Weltanschauung”, Turner focuses on the lived experience of “social drama”,2 which plays an important role in his analysis of cultural performance.

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2 According to Turner (1974:23-58; 1985:197-204, 215-221,230-33), “social drama” refers to the disharmonic social process arising from conflict or a crisis situation. He separates it into four stages: breach, crisis, redress and restoration. Coming from the Manchester school of British social anthropology, Turner’s theoretical concern focuses on the social process (cf. Kuper 1996:143-47). Because “social drama” contains the “liminal” or “threshold” characteristic, Turner claims that this anti-structural conflicting stage could either result in the
genres, such as ritual, theatre and film:

The force of a social drama consists in its being an experience or sequence of experiences which significantly influences the form and function of cultural performative genres. Such genres partly “imitate” (by mimesis) the processual form of the social drama, and they partly, through reflection, assign “meaning” to it (Turner 1985: 201).

Due to the significance of experience in ritual action, I will focus here on the physical experience of pilgrimage. The pilgrim’s physical experience, either of journeying on foot or performing the palanquin performance, is rooted in religious loyalty to the goddess. In spite of the role differentiation, this common physical experience can allow the pilgrim to enter a state of “communitas” in Turner’s sense (1969, 1974). Nonetheless, a similar physical experience does not necessarily imply a similar understanding or interpretation of the palanquin performance or the pilgrimage. Although the transformative function of ritual is based on common experience or emotion, the result of performative ritual depends on negotiation between culturally standardised sentiment and the actor’s personal feeling (Kapferer 1979a, 1979b, 1979c, cf. Köpping and Rao 2000:8). According to Köpping and Rao (2000), ritual can be seen as a transformative performance that contains the negotiability of sense (Sinn) and meaning. Hence, the agent plays an active role in ritual. Although palanquin performers and walking pilgrims share the common physical experience of the journey, the represented meanings of the palanquin performance are not always shared by them, since these can vary with different concerns. In particular, the process of the palanquin performance and its represented meaning can be negotiated (see below).

At this point I would like to address the question of ritual “meaning”, which is closely related to how ritual is defined. First of all, Staal (1979) argues that ritual lacks meaning because it is pure activity governed by rules. For him, repetitive and formalised ritual exists purely for its own sake and, since it has no function or goal, is therefore meaningless. Following Staal’s argument, Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) explore the character of ritual action by focusing on people’s intentions and reactions with regard to the ritualised act. Their main concern is the model of ritualised action that emphasises constituent rules and the actor’s ritual commitment. They argue that ritual, devoid of a core meaning, lacks discursive meaning or implied information. However, Michaels (1999) refutes the argument re-integration or irreparable schism of society.

As Köpping and Rao (2000:8) point out, both Tambiah and Turner fail to see the conflicting situations in the ritual. Similarly, Geertz’s “deep play” (1973) does not question the unity of meaning.
that ritual is meaningless, although he agrees with “le rituel pour le rituel” that originates from Staal. Examining the content of ritual, he suggests that religio is the crucial point in defining ritual, whose meaning, sense (Sinn), aim, and function depend on its unchanging nature.\(^4\) Because ritual resists alteration, it becomes rigid, stereotyped, unchanging and even unchangeable. In this sense, ritual is certainly not meaningless (ibid: 40-45). Gaenszle (2000) suggests examining the context of ritual, which is considered to be a continuous spectrum between the context-dependent performance and the relatively fixed formalised action. He (ibid: 42) states that it would in fact be misleading to define ritual as an “empty” action, intent only on correct enactment, and not meaningful content, actively constructed meaning.

The palanquin performance with its conventional rules can be seen as a sort of performance ritual. Because pilgrims perceive the performance as the result of divine intervention (see below), I contend that it is indeed meaningful to them (cf. Michaels 1999). In particular, pilgrims consider the outcome of the performance as the goddess’s decision and the irrevocable means of guiding them on their religious odyssey. In this sense, I stress that the palanquin performance possesses meaning for the pilgrim. Similar to the performance-oriented ritual, the main concern of performance is its effectiveness or success (cf. Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 11, Gaenszle 2000, Schieffelin 1996). In other word, whether the performance convinces the audience. The following analysis will show that the success of the palanquin performance depends on audience assessment.

5.2 The enactment of palanquin performance

5.2.1 The palanquin performance embedded in Baishatun’s ritual custom

Baishatun people constantly claim that the palanquin performance is their pilgrimage “tradition”. As the most conspicuous target on the journey, the Mazu palanquin bears the goddess’s image and is thus believed to contain her magical power. The goddess’s ling (divine efficacy or magical power) is asserted by the pilgrims during the palanquin performance, where it is acknowledged that Mazu descends to or pulls the palanquin and makes the carriers move. The palanquin carriers, who are also pilgrims, are obliged to avoid falling into trance during the performance.

\(^{4}\) According to Michaels (1999: 29-39), ritual contains five components:

(1) ursächlich Veränderung (causa transitionis); (2) förmlicher Beschuß (solemnis intentio); (3) formale Handlungskriterien (actiones formaliter ritorum)—Formlichkeit, Öffentlichkeit, Unwiderrufbarkeit, Liminalität; (4) Modal-Handlungskriterien (actiones modaliter ritorum)—Vergemeinschaftung (societas), Tranzendenz (religio), subjektive Wirkung (impressio); (5) Veränderungen von Identität, Rolle, Status, Kompetenz (novae classificationes, transitio vitae).
Nevertheless, why do Baishatun people perform the *gianggiau* and regard its outcome as Mazu’s verdict for pilgrims to follow on the journey? What is the cultural mechanism that makes them believe that the palanquin performance involves divine intervention or theophany (*xianling*)? Also, in what way do the Baishatun people claim the palanquin performance as their pilgrimage tradition?

The *gianggiau* performance presented on the occasion of the pilgrimage is indeed a rarity in Taiwanese folk religion. Generally speaking, the goddess Mazu, in possession of high celestial status, rarely possesses a spirit medium, and her palanquin is hardly ever used to present this kind of “possessed” performance. I view the palanquin performance as embedded in Baishatun’s ritual custom, such as carrying divination chairs with distinctive josses during the festive activities. In particular, there are similarities between carrying Mazu’s palanquin in the performance and carrying divination chairs at the séance ritual in Wuyun Gong temple in Baishatun (cf. 3.2.2.3). Not unlike how the Mazu palanquin is supported, four carriers stand in a line holding the divination chair during the séance ritual. When carriers make the divination chair move violently, it is said to be a sign of the god’s descent to the divination chair. Although the physical movements involved in carrying Mazu’s palanquin differ from those attached to plague god divination chairs, there is no great difference in how both are carried, a fact that was also confirmed by several local residents. While the divination chair does not bear the icon of a deity or a joss at the séance, the Mazu palanquin contains her image on the pilgrimage journey. During the séance ritual the gods are requested to solve the various problems of believers through instruction or direction, whereas Mazu’s decision is revealed in the palanquin performance.

Most carriers of the Mazu palanquin, however, reject the analogy drawn between carrying the goddess’s palanquin and the plague god’s divination chair. According to them, Mazu and the plague gods are different divine categories. The goddess, devoid of a spirit medium, seldom descends to the séance ritual in Baishatun. Instead, her theophany is believed to appear mostly on the occasion of the palanquin performance. Thus, carriers perform the *gianggiau* in the hope that their Mazu will descend to the palanquin, on the one hand, and believe that the *gianggiau* performance will result in the goddess’s appearance to pull the palanquin, on the other.

Moreover, many Baishatun people insist that the palanquin performance is the only way of requesting Mazu’s preference on the journey, which explains why the latter is carried out in

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5 Baishatun Mazu is said to have attended the séance rite in Wuyun Gong temple, although not very often. The spirit medium of Mude Gong temple claimed that he had been possessed by Baishatun Mazu in a trance. However, many local residents reject this claim.
the sense of being led by the goddess. The palanquin performance in the name of Mazu is the best resolution of the difference in opinion as to where rests should be taken on the trail. Hence, Baishatun people assert that the palanquin performance is their pilgrimage “tradition”, extending as far back as living memory.

5.2.2 The palanquin performance and its protagonists

The palanquin brigade was introduced in 1983. Whereas in the past the palanquin performance was conducted by voluntary pilgrim-carriers, today it is monopolised by members of the palanquin brigade. In this sub-section I will illustrate from the performer perspective how the palanquin performance is enacted. The accounts by these protagonists include technical cooperation, Mazu belief, brotherhood sentiments, physical experience, and personal feelings.

Convention has it that the palanquin performance is the result of Mazu’s “pulling”. Warned not to fall into a trance, the carriers are claimed to be guided by the goddess’s pulling force. Two pairs of carriers stand in line to carry the Mazu palanquin. The first two stand directly in front of the palanquin, while the other two remain at the back. The four carriers swing the palanquin by pushing the rods to the right and left of the palanquin. Both rods are bound by ropes to the carrying rods resting on the shoulders of the carriers. Each pair of carriers shares a carrying rod. Because the palanquin rods are pushed simultaneously, the movement of each carrier affects that of the others. A-ding, who has served as a Mazu palanquin carrier for over 17 years, explained the technical cooperation between the carriers:

“All four carriers are important. People tend to agree that tauntiu [the first carrier at the front of the palanquin] is the most important one, because his movements they can see clearly. In my view, he represents the leader of the carriers, similar to the captain of a ship. In fact, I would say that litiu [the second carrier at the front of the palanquin] is the most important person, since he is the one who feels Mazu’s [pulling] force directly. If you have ever carried the divination chair, you will know how important litiu’s role is. Litiu is the real technical conductor in the team. Because these two share the same carrying rod, they have to keep pace with each other. Otherwise, it cannot work. Of course, the most important thing in the gianggiau is to obey Mazu’s [direction]. The two carriers at the back of the palanquin are also important. Don’t forget, the carriers have to turn around and perform the san jin san tui li while running [the palanquin’s three forth-and-back etiquette performed before and after each rest period]. On this occasion, vetiu [the fourth carrier at the back of the palanquin] becomes the first carrier in the running. Actually, samtiu [the third carrier at the back] plays the same role as the other carriers, but his is mostly overlooked, since it is difficult to get a glimpse of his face. These two carriers behind the palanquin play a significant role in balancing the palanquin. In a word, all four carriers must be in tune with each other” (A-ding).
During the palanquin performance, a gong, sounded by a female brigade member, works to adjust each carrier’s movement. The rhythm of the gonging sounds should synchronise with the swinging speed of the palanquin. A female gong player, who has no relatives in Baishatun, has carried out this pilgrimage task since 1994. She talked about the skill of sounding the gong in the palanquin performance:

“Actually, the gong player and the four carriers should be seen as a unit. In my opinion, the gong’s sound can induce the carriers’ movements. ...When I beat the gong, I have to pay attention to the movement of the front carriers. How heavily or how fast I beat the gong depends on the speed of the palanquin’s swinging. Actually, I not only need to adjust the speed of my beating to that of the carriers’ movements, but I can also remind them to increase or decrease their speed” (Wen-wen).

By and large, the pilgrim march can roughly be divided into normal and eventful occasions. According to several carriers, Mazu does not always “descend to” the palanquin. Her theophany only occurs on “eventful” occasions, such as at the palanquin performance. These carriers define a march devoid of divine intervention or possession as a normal occasion. In contrast, they maintain that the occasion is eventful when they are pulled by Mazu’s force, in accordance with the belief that the goddess descends to (or pulls) the palanquin and makes them move. The question of whether the descent of the goddess to the palanquin is believed or not depends on how successfully the performance is carried out. In fact, this is a debatable question among performers, pilgrims, and other spectators en route. However, the distinction between normal and eventful occasions seems obvious to the performers, as one carrier said:

“Of course, it is we (the human beings) who carry the Mazu palanquin on normal walking occasions. But whenever Mazu comes, it depends wholly on her” (Da-ming).

For many brigade members, serving the goddess in the brigade is religious devotion. I was informed that a palanquin brigade member should act as “Mazu’s brave bodyguard”, and even “die for the sacred task”. Following Mazu’s pulling force is the guiding principle of the performance, where belief in the goddess is considered indispensable. In other words, performers must act as the goddess’s receptacle (*Gefäß*),6 as the female gong-player above described her experience of the performance:

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6 To illustrate the difference between asceticism and mysticism, Weber describes the ascetic’s active striving to be the God’s instrument (*Werkzeug*) and the mystic’s contemplation that focuses on the state of being the God’s receptacle (*Gefäß*) (Zwischenbetrachtung 1988/20:538-9; Religionssoziologie 1956). I use the term “receptacle” here as a metaphor.
“To be a palanquin brigade member, you have to be in both situations: “youwuo” (the existence of “I”) and “wuwuo” (the absence of “I”). Youwuo means that we should be aware of our role as brigade members in serving Mazu. And, we should do our best. Wuwuo means we have to forget ourselves and dedicate ourselves totally to Mazu, and leave out our personal feelings, thinking or will. In the gianggiau, Mazu’s power guides us in our work. …I can actually feel the existence of Mazu’s overwhelming power. It is like a huge sense of energy” (Wen-wen).

Although the palanquin brigade is organised each year through voluntary registration, the annual composition of its members does not display much variety. Some carriers have taken part in this brigade since 1980, and in 1993 formed a brotherhood-like “palanquin association” (“dajiaozu”). This informal association of around 20 individuals⁷ is indeed an important sub-group of the “palanquin brigade” (“dajiaoban”). Not only because it constitutes the majority of this brigade, but also because its members are involved in reforming the brigade and the pilgrimage culture. Participants of the association are mainly emigrants and local residents from the domain of this Mazu cult. Serving in the brigade together, the members of this association, who are between the ages of 25 and 50, maintain strong brotherhood ties. According to them, previous voluntary carriers lacked discipline and therefore did not behave appropriately during the service. With due consideration for Baishatun’s reputation, they implemented their reformatory ideas to reshape the brigade. One carrier told me that the reform began with their own ambition to be competent brigade members and follow Mazu’s guidance without being influenced by others:

“When we put on our brigade uniform, we are supposed to be Mazu’s brave bodyguards. When we carry Mazu, we should stop smoking, chewing betel nuts or talking to others. …Especially when unfriendly people try to take over our Mazu palanquin, such as those young people from Xianxi in 1996. We must not allow that to happen. Our task is to protect our Mazu. …Many pilgrims say: “relying on Mazu, we have food to eat and a place to sleep” [Mazu’s devotees always proffer food or lodging to entertain the pilgrims]. But, we as brigade members cannot accept devotee entertainment. We usually buy food for ourselves and book in somewhere to sleep. Generally, each of us spends over 10 000 NT dollars for the pilgrimage each year. The reason is very simple. If we accept devotee hospitality, how can we perform gianggiau when we come to their place the next time? Do we have to carry Mazu’s palanquin to their houses in return to thank them for their hospitality? As you know, believers always want to receive a visit from Mazu. But we cannot violate Mazu’s will, and we cannot promise believers that Mazu will visit their houses. So we decided against accepting hospitality from believers” (A-fu).

Because members of the palanquin brigade are the main protagonists in the gianggiau

⁷ This number is a rough estimate. The dajiaozu is an informal organisation that focuses on discussing and sharing the pilgrimage experience. It can thus include the wives or families of these carriers or their friends, who have an interest in the pilgrimage.
performance, their uniform has become the most conspicuous manifestation in the pilgrimage array. No matter what their task is (e.g., carrying the palanquin, gonging or walking beside the palanquin), they are a permanent focus for journalists and photographers. Some pilgrims even refer to them as “superstars”. One carrier from the association talked about his feelings after having served in this brigade for 11 years:

“I always tell myself, don’t think too much, just do it. I concentrate completely on what I am doing when I carry Mazu’s palanquin. Actually, being a brigade member is the same as being a pilgrim. ... I felt at peace after joining the brigade. In the beginning, I was always excited when I carried Mazu’s palanquin. I was occasionally even moved to tears by the pious praying of the devotees. But it changed. When we waded across Zhuoshui River this year [see chapter 7], I felt at ease in my mind, with no particular feelings. I don’t know how to express it. … But I do know that I’m a Mazu believer, and I will follow Mazu wherever she leads us. … I would even die for my religious task” (Da-ming).

Lacking special training in advance, all members of this brigade learn their tasks simply by doing them. Enduring bodily pain is an indispensible requirement to becoming a qualified carrier. Although they can get on the brigade truck for a rest, they are encouraged to accomplish the entire journey on foot, similar to normal pilgrims. In spite of the hardship, a carrier from the southern village talked about his enthusiasm for the brigade:

“I first took part in the pilgrimage in 1992. Because I wanted to become a carrier, I enrolled in the brigade in 1993. In the beginning, my arm went numb after five minutes of carrying. I had serious abrasions on my shoulder too. But now it’s much better. I have become used to walking with blistered feet and bleeding shoulders. …Having served Mazu on the journey, I have no desire to carry the lengiau-a (divination chair), because it still seems to be human intervention. …I am very pleased that I joined this brigade. I found my identity here and feel happy all the time. Especially since I can serve Mazu and work with my brigade brothers. I cherish the opportunity very much. I can even say: I feel I would die if I could not go on the journey” (Zhi-qiang).

Generally speaking, each performer can acquire the necessary skills quickly by copying experienced brigade members. Most of them share a common identity and strong solidarity, all of which contributes to their teamwork in the performance. The belief in Mazu (or following her pulling force) is the guiding principle in the palanquin performance, and is regarded as more important than a performer’s technical skill or physical condition. From the point of view of the performers, their physically enacted performance displays their
5.2.3 Carriers and the palanquin performance on journeys in the past

How was the pilgrimage carried out in the past when there was no palanquin brigade organisation? Who carried Mazu’s palanquin? Did they perform the palanquin performance on the trail? And, who was eligible to perform it? The present sub-section will compare the differences between journeys of the past and those of today with regard to the palanquin performance and the respective carriers. In tracing the palanquin performance back to the past, I will attempt to find out whether changes have been introduced.

According to several senior informants in Baishatun, the total number of pilgrims was no more than 50 before 1950, when the pilgrimage was re-introduced after its prohibition during the colonial period. Due to poverty and the inconvenience of travelling in the past, only male pilgrims participated in the journey. There were no vehicles available in those days, so that pilgrims had to carry out the journey on foot, including wading across rivers. Apart from walking, pilgrims carried their own rucksacks containing personal belongings, and in rotation carried Mazu’s palanquin, held the head-flag, and sounded the gongs. With improved economic conditions and the introduction of cars to the pilgrimage in the 1960s, the number of pilgrims gradually increased, and more and more women took part in the journey. At that time, any pilgrim who was able for the task was expected to carry the Mazu palanquin. In comparison to the present palanquin brigade, voluntary pilgrim-carriers of the past are said to have shown less consistency and harmony in carrying Mazu’s palanquin.

A 50-year old Baishatun resident related his experience of carrying Mazu’s palanquin on the journey in 1976:

“There was no rule about carrying Mazu’s palanquin in the past. At that time, both tall and small people could carry the palanquin at the same time. As you know, this is not allowed today. Indeed, we just carried Mazu’s palanquin without paying much attention to coordination with other carriers. …Generally, every hiunn-ding-ka (pilgrims) has the opportunity of carrying Mazu if he or she wishes. Younger men carry the palanquin most of the time, because gnggior [carrying the palanquin] is not an easy thing at all. … I carried Mazu’s palanquin, and I can still remember the feeling clearly. It was really strange. When I carried it, I had a strong feeling that I was being pulled by a force of some kind. It’s true, Mazu’s palanquin has a certain force. That is the reason why many women, weary from walking, usually grasp the palanquin rods to ask Mazu to help them to move. But, you know, the palanquin was heavy enough for us [carriers], so the women who clung to it were an extra burden” (Fa-cai).
As Fa-cai mentioned above, the goddess’s palanquin is claimed to have a divine power (force) that can make carriers move and help weary pilgrims to continue walking. Several female informants who joined the pilgrimage before 1980 felt greatly encouraged by holding Mazu’s palanquin rods on journeys in the past. Similarly, carrying the goddess’s palanquin is said to have the same function, i.e., to make pilgrims feel closer to Mazu. For this reason, pilgrims constantly try to circle Mazu’s palanquin, and have sought the opportunity of carrying it on recent journeys. One female pilgrim, a Xinpu woman in her late thirties, talked about her experience of carrying the palanquin:

“I don’t know why, I just wanted to carry Mazu’s palanquin every time I joined the pilgrimage. The first time I carried the palanquin was due to other women’s encouragement. …I had changed my job at the time. I prayed to Mazu for success in my new career. Apart from walking on the journey, I also carried her palanquin. My job went very well after that year’s journey. From then on, I took part in the journey regularly. This is the sixth year. … I always try to get the chance to carry Mazu. Actually, Mazu’s palanquin is too heavy to me, but I don’t feel any pain at all when I carry it. It is really strange, but it’s true. As people say, walking beside Mazu’s palanquin makes the pain disappear. Or, you just don’t feel tired at all” (Mei-li).

Nowadays, the opportunity for pilgrims to approach Mazu’s palanquin has declined to a large extent, since the palanquin is mostly carried and surrounded by brigade members. Nevertheless, other pilgrims can still carry the palanquin by negotiating with members of the brigade. The most appropriate opportunity for these pilgrims to carry the palanquin en route is on normal occasions devoid of events such as Mazu descending for the gianggiau and worship by the devotees.

In the course of tracing the history of the palanquin performance, I was informed that Mazu’s gianggiau used to be performed by voluntary pilgrim-carriers. While current performers impress their audiences by their harmonious movements during the performance, former pilgrim-carriers displayed competition. One Baishatun resident of about 50 years of age compared the performances as follows:

“Just looking at the movements of the carriers, the gianggiau of the past was different to what you see in today’s journey. I asked the old carriers how they used to carry Mazu’s palanquin in the gianggiau. They said they never made the palanquin swing, but just endeavoured to pull it. It is more like a competition between the two pairs of carriers [the front pair against the back pair]. It seems that carriers with more strength were able to pull the palanquin in the direction they intended to go. …The present carrier movements are very impressive. Each carrier movement is consistent with the other, conveying a natural and beautiful feeling. In my view, today’s gianggiau is perfect” (A-cheng).
In spite of the possibility of human intervention (see below), almost all carriers asserted that they had experienced the goddess’s pulling force in palanquin performances. A former carrier (now 67 years old) spoke of Mazu’s irresistible power in the performance:

“When we carried the Mazu dua-giau (palanquin) in the past, we all had to strain our nerves. It was definitely not easy. It’s true. When Mazu comes, she pulls the dua-giau violently, and there is no way of controlling it” (Tie-ji).

Moreover, the frequency of the palanquin performance has increased immensely in the last 30 years according to informant memories. Prior to 1970, the journey usually continued for six or seven days and with no more than 150 pilgrims, whereas recent journeys last for nine or ten days with approx. 2,000 registered walking pilgrims. Thus, the speed of the march on past journeys was faster than today’s. While in the past rest stops were mostly guesthouses (and occasionally houses of devotees), in recent years they have been replaced by private houses and public buildings (such as schools, hospitals, police stations etc.). Meanwhile, the “short excursion” led by the goddess’s palanquin occurs frequently on recent journeys. On the whole, journeys in the past focused on accomplishing the ritual purpose of the pilgrimage within a short period, whereas recent journeys emphasise displaying the goddess’s palanquin performance along the journey, quite apart from the religious purpose. Briefly, with regard to palanquin carriers, the voluntary pilgrims of the past have become the pre-organised brigade members of the present. This brigade not only lessens the opportunities of other pilgrims to serve Mazu, but refines and monopolises the palanquin performance. Although how the performance is executed has varied over the years, following the goddess’s direction has remained an irreversible element of the performance.

5.3. The first palanquin performance category: the goddess’s palanquin oracle

Because the pilgrimage journey has no fixed route or timetable, choosing paths and rest stops relies solely on the result of the palanquin performance en route. Similar to Lewis’ (1980:11) notion of “ruling” referring to ritual devoid of precise rules, some conventional rules of the palanquin performance are indeed not fixed. However, Parkin (1992:14-15) reminds us that ritual always follows some “time-hallowed precedent”, and that “ritual ruling” is caused by the expectation that ritual must be rule-governed to be effective or proper, in spite of inconsistency and contestation. Drawing upon the notion of ritual “ruling”, I will analyse the palanquin performance according to its conventional forms and
the pilgrims’ general understandings.

I will divide the palanquin performance into two categories in terms of function. This section will discuss the first of these, which takes place on three different occasions. The conventional swinging palanquin movements that denote clearly represented meanings to the pilgrim are typical of this performance category. What therefore is its function? The rule of the performance and its represented meanings are, on the other hand, negotiable. What possibilities are there to influence the performance and afterwards negotiate its meaning?

**5.3.1 Three modes of palanquin performance to direct pilgrims on the journey**

The first palanquin performance category is used on three occasions, where the consequences of the performance can be immediately observed. Pilgrims interpret the outcome of the performance as Mazu’s decision, to be respected, on the path to be taken on the journey, where rests are to be held, and where each day’s journey should end. The performance is composed of distinctive and discernible forms of swinging palanquin movements. In the following analysis, I will illustrate the conventional rule of performance in terms of occasion and the social interaction involved. The representative meaning of the performance is examined from three dimensions: the temporal, the spatial and the social. With this I hope to show how the palanquin performance is generally understood by the pilgrims, what meaning it contains, and the effect it has. Meanwhile, I will explain how the palanquin performance can be affected in the process of display, and finally, in what situation and for what reason its conventionally represented meanings are negotiated.

**5.3.1.1 The palanquin performance to choose the path**

Firstly, the palanquin performance takes place when the march encounters the main intersections or borders of the different townships. Generally speaking, the gong sounding beside the palanquin maintains a regular rhythm during the march, i.e., eleven long sounds followed by two short sounds. When the palanquin performance begins, the gong player beats the gong rapidly with heavy strokes. This sound is the only signal to announce the performance, although it is not easily heard on the roadside where the performance is displayed. The performance itself can take from 3 to 15 minutes, depending on Mazu’s “pulling”. The four carriers holding the palanquin rods make the swinging movements. When the palanquin is carried (or pulled) in one particular direction the performance terminates quite suddenly. This situation is understood by the pilgrims as choosing the path, since the goddess makes her decision known by pulling the palanquin during the
Apart from the chief protagoni sts (4 carriers and 1 gong player), people with pilgrimage
tasks play secondary roles in the performance. Other members of the palanquin brigade
stand beside the palanquin to mark out the space for the performance. Members of the
traffic brigade control the traffic for safety. Meanwhile, one or more TAC members\textsuperscript{9} appear
on behalf of the pilgrim group once the performance has been carried out. Ordinary pilgrims
pay great attention to the result of the performance, the consequence of which is regarded as
a decision by the goddess they are obliged to obey. As the audience on this occasion, the
pilgrims usually stop marching and wait for Mazu’s decision, for fear of continuing in a
direction contrary to her wishes.

5.3.1.2 The palanquin performance to take a rest
Secondly, the carriers make the palanquin swing left and right when they arrive in front of a
private house, a shop, a company, a temple, or any public building or empty space. They
then turn the palanquin around and perform the “three forth-and-back etiquette” (\textit{san jin san
tui li}, cf. 4.2.2.1). Unlike the occasion for choosing the path, this performance requires a
larger stage. Here both the palanquin and traffic brigades are careful to preserve enough
space. The running distance of the palanquin etiquette depends on the spatial situation,
which is usually about five to six meters long. The carriers continue to make up-and-down
movements with the palanquin. Meanwhile, the carriers’ companions prepare two long
benches to rest the palanquin on.\textsuperscript{10} This performance is perceived as choosing a rest stop,\textsuperscript{11}
while the “three forth-and-back etiquette” signifies the formal greeting, all of which is
understood as Mazu’s decision to halt the march and visit the place where her palanquin
rests.
The frequency of this mode of performance depends on the speed of the pilgrimage march,
which is influenced by the predicted time of arrival at the destination and of the return to
Baishatun. In 2001, for example, the set time to approach the Beigang temple was the third
morning of the ten-day journey, so that the pilgrimage journey itself was harder than the
return trip. Pilgrims walked for almost thirteen hours and rested only once for less than an
hour on the first day.
From the pilgrim point of view, this mode of performance can occur wherever it is suitable

\textsuperscript{9} Because most of the TAC members over sixty years of age were unable to walk on the journey, most of them
took cars behind the palanquin. However, representatives of the TAC show up during the palanquin
performance.
\textsuperscript{10} I was informed that for fear of pollution it was taboo to place Mazu’s palanquin directly on the ground.
\textsuperscript{11} The rest here does not include staying overnight.
to take a rest. Apart from private buildings, Mazu’s palanquin also rests in front of public buildings, such as a temple, a police station or a market place. The rest stop offers pilgrims an opportunity to recuperate after the long march on foot. Many of them, for instance, have blisters on their feet and the rest gives them some relief from the pain. Indeed, when pilgrims are weary from walking, the performance denoting a rest comes as a blessing.

When the palanquin is placed on the two long benches, the chairperson or TAC representative announces the time for the next departure. In the past, the duration of the rest depended on the result of casting divination blocks to ask Mazu’s approval. Since 1994, however, it has been taken over by the TAC, which claims that this change is the result of a decision by Mazu, revealed through a shaman in a séance ritual in Baishatun. The legitimacy of this was declared as follows:

“I was told through a danggi (shaman). Mazu says she decides when her palanquin is carried on the journey, and we [TAC members] make the decisions when her palanquin rests. Mazu expressed this to the danggi several times” (A-huo).

TAC members make the decision on the duration of a rest, which needs to take the speed of the march into account and the reaction of local believers, from past journeying experience. If there is time pressure or very little worship by devotees the rest period might only be ten or fifteen minutes long and decline in frequency. One TAC member told me how they made the decision:

“A rest frequently lasts about 30 minutes. If we are in a hurry along the journey, it could be shorter, such as ten or fifteen minutes. Or, if no one comes to worship our Mazu, there is no reason to stay longer either. Of course we can stay longer at places where there are many Mazu believers. And, if it is time to take meals, the rest could even be one or two hours. … So it’s difficult to say how long a rest should be. Actually, it depends on the situation on the trail” (Li-cheng).

Local devotees usually pray to Mazu in the hope that her palanquin will be carried to their houses or places, since it is believed that a visit by the goddess during the pilgrimage brings good fortune or a special blessing to the host family. Indeed, pilgrims tell numerous miraculous stories associated with Mazu palanquin visits in the course of the journey. Devotees set off firecrackers to welcome the arrival of the pilgrim group and pray to Mazu with offerings as her palanquin passes their front door. In fact, the reaction of local devotees plays a significant role in the palanquin performance display, in that the latter takes place more often in areas with a greater number of devotees. As soon as Mazu’s palanquin rests,
local believers begin to worship. They pray to Mazu with incense and make offerings in front of her palanquin, despite a brief resting period of maybe only ten or fifteen minutes. They also entertain pilgrims with food and beverages in reverence to the visiting goddess. If the rest period lasts 30 minutes or longer, a professional troupe is hired to chant Sutras or present other performances in celebration.

5.3.1.3 The palanquin performance to end the day’s journey
Thirdly, the performance gives a sign denoting an overnight stop, or in other words termination of the day’s journey. The performance on this occasion takes a similar course to that of choosing a rest stop. While the latter ends by resting the palanquin in front of a building, the former is terminated by placing Mazu’s palanquin inside a building. In this case the palanquin is immediately carried into the building after the performance of the “three forth-and-back etiquette”. This performance usually takes place in the evening, although it can also be performed in the afternoon. Entering a building is regarded as a sign, and denotes that the goddess has chosen this place to stay until next morning. Subsequently, the TAC announces the time of departure for the following morning. As on the second occasion mentioned above, the decision on the duration of the rest takes the tempo of the march and the reaction of local devotees into consideration. More significantly, pilgrims must perform individual rites in front of the palanquin at the end of their daily journey, before they leave to find lodging. Local devotees usually play the role of host, proffering food and beverages to pilgrims or inviting them to their houses to take a rest. Meanwhile, they present programmes to celebrate the arrival of Baishatun Mazu, such as chanting Buddhist Sutras, puppet theatres, or folk performance troupes. The belief that the deity on the pilgrimage route is more efficacious attracts believers from nearby areas to come and worship Mazu.

5.3.2 Negotiating the represented meaning of Mazu’s palanquin oracle
5.3.2.1 The goddess’s palanquin oracle
What is the function of the first palanquin performance category? Since the outcome of the performance is regarded as Mazu’s decision to be obeyed by the pilgrims on the journey, its function can be described as the goddess’s “palanquin oracle”. Aune (1987:81-87) defines oracle as follows: 12

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The palanquin oracle has the role of pointing out a selected path or resting place, so that it can transfer the hitherto unknown path of the journey into one of clear determination in the eyes of the pilgrim. As a rule, the oracle is made and interpreted by a ritual specialist who is not present at the palanquin performance. I was informed that a male Mazu servant and ritual specialist surnamed Chen from Wuyun Gong temple used to interpret the meaning of the gianggiau performance. As Baishatun shamans no longer enjoy public recognition, they participate in the journey as ordinary pilgrims. Although some shamans try to seize the opportunity of transmitting Mazu’s will or interpreting the performance (see below), they are excluded from all three occasions. Thus, how can a performance devoid of ritual specialist interpretation have represented meaning to the pilgrims? The answer lies in the pilgrimage precedents and its tradition. In this respect, the rule of the performance and its represented meaning were gradually shaped in the process of accumulated journeys. According to the convention of the performance, experienced male Baishatun pilgrims are well able to perform the gianggiau and aware of the meaning it represents. This becomes pilgrimage knowledge and is transmitted from experienced pilgrims to new participants. These conventional rules, however, are not fixed once and for all. In other words, the Mazu palanquin oracle is open to negotiation.

5.3.2.2 Negotiating the represented meaning of Mazu’s palanquin oracle

Not unlike the performance-oriented ritual (cf. Köpping and Rao 2000), the negotiation of the conventionally represented meaning of Mazu’s palanquin oracles does not take place without debate among the pilgrims. The struggle for the meaning of Mazu’s palanquin oracle is not, however, as fundamental as the contestation in the political ritual, which can affect an actor’s social status or even his ethnic relationships.13 Instead, the debate en route is more concerned with the diverse concerns of the various agents on the pilgrimage journey (cf. 8.1.2 on contestation). Negotiation will be illustrated by two examples, whereby TAC members and local devotees played significant roles in affecting or altering the outcome of the palanquin performance. Both cases led to dispute and disapproval among the participants of the pilgrimage. The first event occurred on the fifth day of the journey in 2001. Mazu’s palanquin was

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carried into a temple after performing the “three forth-and-back etiquette” at Ershui. This was the sign for an overnight stay and the end of the journey that day, in accordance with the conventional rule of the performance. However, several TAC members considered it too early to terminate the march, since it was only around three thirty in the afternoon. They quickly made a decision and announced a rest of a mere 20 minutes.\textsuperscript{14} Several palanquin brigade members subsequently argued with them about violating the convention. Some pilgrims even questioned the legitimacy of the decision. One Baishatun pilgrim expressed his anger, saying:

“How can those taulangs (leaders, here the TAC members) of our Mazu temple make such a decision? They even dared to change Mazu’s will! It was obvious that Mazu chose that temple to stay overnight, and they changed it. …I was so angry with them at Ershui that I even wanted to fight with them. But I thought about my role as Mazu’s pilgrim and gave up. I also got on the car after that happened. There is no sense in walking the whole journey [which is encouraged by the TAC] if those people can manipulate things like that! In my view, they will be punished by Mazu” (A-lang).

While some criticised the TAC, others considered this as nonsense. Supporting the TAC decision had some bearing on the reputation of the pilgrim group. Goddess believers in this area were small in number, so that resident indifference or the presence of relatively few worshippers could have been a problem for the TAC and possibly caused damage to Baishatun’s reputation. As this example shows, the outcome of the Mazu palanquin oracle is negotiable, although it may mean disobeying convention.

The second event occurred three days later on the same journey. This time the dispute was not confined to the pilgrim group, but involved two local devotee families as well. At the time I described the event as follows:

After the palanquin performance had halted for several minutes in front of the GM Company (GMC), the Mazu palanquin was carried away. It subsequently manifested the sign indicating a rest at the C Garage (CG) building, which was just beside the GMC. Instead of accepting the overnight stay, a TAC member announced a rest of thirty minutes after casting divination blocks in front of the palanquin. It was about five minutes to four in the afternoon. After the next departure, the palanquin was carried back to the GMC and entered the building of the family-run company. While a TAC member said something to Mazu beside the palanquin, the boss and his family knelt down to pray that Mazu would stay. The boss was even in tears when he asked Mazu to stay. All of a sudden, the first carrier was replaced by a more experienced brigade member. Some minutes later, the palanquin showed the sign that implied an overnight stay in this particular building, and at the same time denoted the end of the day’s

\textsuperscript{14} While two TAC members said that the decision was taken after gaining Mazu’s approval through casting divination blocks once, several pilgrims I talked to had not seen the TAC performing the divination rite.
journey. At four o’clock the next morning to the pilgrims’ great surprise, Mazu’s palanquin was once again carried to the front of the CG building. The host was woken up by the pilgrims. As soon as he opened the door, Mazu’s palanquin was carried into the building to the domestic altar, where twelve deity josses were enshrined. I followed the palanquin with some of the pilgrims, who were curious to find out the reason for returning to the garage. As the palanquin performance was displayed in front of the domestic altar, the pilgrims claimed that Mazu was paying a visit to the deities enshrined on the altar. I can still remember, however, that a few of the palanquin carriers I sat with in the garage the day before had talked about this altar.

Numerous pilgrims criticised the TAC’s decision after the palanquin had rested in GMC. Even a few female pilgrims were found arguing with a TAC member against the decision. Some points about the event are debatable. Firstly, the question as to why the performances took place at the GMC and the CG several times was widely discussed. Secondly, how was it possible for the TAC to negotiate the outcome of Mazu’s palanquin oracle in the CG? In the opinion of many pilgrims, TAC members should not alter the goddess’s decision by casting divination blocks. Thirdly, the palanquin performance seems to entail human manipulation. How come TAC members appeared beside the palanquin during the performance? Why was the carrier substituted in the performance display? And, why did the palanquin performance finally end up at the GMC? In fact, public comment plays a central role in affecting the palanquin performance. Many pilgrims said that the CG should have been the place chosen by Mazu to stay overnight, as the palanquin oracle had already indicated. The serious criticism expressed by pilgrims the previous day was probably the reason for the second visit to the CG early the next day.

However, public indignation is only one side of the story. As a devotee of the goddess, the boss of the GMC had often visited Baishatun’s Mazu temple to pray, despite the fact that he lived in Dajia, which has its own Mazu temple of renown. He complained about human manipulation during the palanquin performance with reference to the TAC’s intervention:

“I am well aware of how the palanquin is carried, although I’m not from Baishatun. … Actually, it is possible for people to manipulate the gianggiau. Did you notice how the first carrier was replaced during the gianggiau? …When Mazu’s palanquin first came to my place and performed the gianggiau, a wei-yuan [TAC member] said: “not here, not here”! Mazu’s palanquin was then whisked away to my neighbour’s house. When Mazu came back into my place, the same person was holding the palanquin rod again, and said to Mazu: “It is still early…” How could he do that? Since he had dared to utter such things to Mazu, I dared to pray to Mazu to stay. That was why I brought my family to pray with me, and I even couldn’t help bursting into tears. If I hadn’t cried, Mazu would not have stayed” (Zhi-ming).

The second visit to the CG seems to have compensated the host for his loss the previous day.
According to a brigade member, they had already marched ahead early that morning, but were “pulled” back to the CG. In the opinion of one TAC member, the main consideration should be to maintain relations with both families. For this reason, he regarded the TAC decision as correct:

“Without arguing about Mazu’s arrangement, I still think the way (that) we dealt with this event was right. You know, these two families didn’t get on with each other. The people from the CG were also Mazu’s believers, but they didn’t come to worship Mazu when we rested in the GMC. We didn’t want to cause them any trouble. Our visit was at least not supposed to increase their discord, so Mazu’s palanquin was carried to both families. …We decided not to stay in the garage because it was still early in the day. When Mazu arrived at the GMC, it was time to stay overnight. It was definitely better to rest at the GMC. Otherwise people would have complained. Especially since they prayed so piously. If we had carried Mazu’s palanquin away in that situation, we would certainly have been criticised” (Ji-lang)

It is evident that both devotee prayers and TAC intervention can impact on the palanquin performance and sway the outcome to their benefit. Although the carriers perform the palanquin oracles as protagonists, TAC members and devotees are instrumental in directing the performance. As this event has shown, the negotiating process of the performance must account for human relations and the agent’s knowledge of the performance, as well as the interaction between the performer and the audience.

5.4 The second palanquin performance category: interpretations and functions

The second palanquin performance category discussed here contains neither direct observable effects nor conventional represented meanings relevant to the journey. After the display of the performance in this category, the Mazu palanquin is carried away. Unlike the first performance category, the function of which is to point out the path to be taken and to indicate resting places, the second category has no such function. On the contrary, its meaning is indeed ambiguous and can be freely interpreted by the pilgrims. Following Gerholm (1988), who argued in his essay that ritual consists of disparate interpretations, the outcome of this second performance category can mean different things to people with different concerns. Thus, how do pilgrims perceive this palanquin performance category? What function does it serve on the pilgrimage?
5.4.1 Popular interpretations of the second performance category and the ambiguity of its represented meaning

Due to the absence of observable consequences of the performance and a lack of fixed interpretation, the represented meanings of this palanquin performance category remain ambiguous. Pilgrim interpretations of the performance do not show consensus, but vary according to concerns. Nevertheless, three popular interpretations of this performance category are found in pilgrim accounts. The theme of these interpretations focuses on depicting the goddess’s efficacious power and her divine character.

The first occasion is when the Mazu palanquin is carried away after the palanquin performance in or in front of a temple. Pilgrims regard this situation as a form of greeting, where the palanquin performance represents Baishatun Mazu greeting the temple’s deity. This interpretation reflects how visitor’s greet in accordance with the etiquette of Taiwanese society. In this sense, Baishatun Mazu is depicted as a goddess of great virtue who greets the host deity on her pilgrimage journey, albeit she cannot pay the latter a formal visit. Moreover, the palanquin performance on behalf of the goddess mirrors or implies the relationship between the pilgrim group and those visited. On the one hand, the palanquin performance is said to be the goddess’s instruction, whereby Mazu indicates that her pilgrims pay reverence to the host god. In addition, it means that pilgrims should be polite and pray to the god of the temple before they leave. On the other hand, the palanquin performance can also be understood as the intention of establishing or reinforcing relations between the pilgrim group and those visited. Consequently, some pilgrims or representatives of the TAC give incense money to the temple and greet local residents (cf. 6.2.2).

Secondly, Mazu’s palanquin is carried away after displaying the palanquin performance in or in front of a private building, such as a house, a shop, a factory, or a company. It is claimed that the host of the building and his family receive the goddess’s special blessing on this occasion. Although the Mazu palanquin does not rest inside the building, the palanquin performance still has the function of bringing good fortune to the host family. The situation can also be understood the other way round. It is believed that the goddess’s *gianggiau* performance can release the host family from potential disaster or bad luck. Both interpretations are associated with divine protection of the visited, albeit Mazu’s palanquin does not rest at their place. In this way, the goddess is perceived as a patron deity with great mercy because she takes care of people even on her pilgrimage. Meanwhile, experienced pilgrims tell countless stories of Mazu’s protection associated with this particular palanquin
performance on past journeys (cf. 6.2.2.2). Stories related to Mazu’s efficacy are usually the topic of conversation with pilgrims on the journey. They are produced and re-produced by the pilgrims especially when Mazu’s palanquin is carried to one of those places again. Lastly, the palanquin performances classified in this category are also presented in places devoid of temples or buildings, such as on roadsides or riverbanks, after which the Mazu palanquin is carried away. These places are culturally defined as “unclean” because of their association with violent death. Nonetheless, pilgrims have an explanation as to why the palanquin performance takes place there regardless of the pilgrimage taboo against pollution. The popular interpretation is that the goddess in her great mercy saves dangerous ghost spirits trapped in unclean places, where they once suffered death by drowning or in a traffic accident. On the one hand, the idea of salvation derives from the influence of Buddhism, and the goddess Mazu is depicted as a merciful Buddha. On the other hand, Baishatun pilgrims call this kind of palanquin performance “Mazu bandaizi” (Mazu dealing with things), meaning that the goddess with omnipotent power can annihilate potentially harmful influence on her pilgrimage path. The palanquin performance is thus said to have the function of exorcising the potentially malicious power of the ghost spirits. The three interpretations mentioned above crop up frequently in pilgrim conversations. However, other explanations of the performance are possible. When I first joined the journey in 1997, I observed a palanquin performance displayed in front of a four-door saloon car for fifty minutes. Although non-pilgrims and non-believers might generally regard this performance as nonsense, pilgrim interpretations are widespread. My description of the situation is as follows:

It was ten minutes to eight in the morning. The Mazu palanquin led the pilgrims to a residential area of Macuo Li in Xihu. Suddenly, the palanquin stopped in front of a white Mercedes Benz parked in an empty space in front of some houses. To the pilgrims’ surprise, carriers displayed the palanquin performance around this car, and hung around it to repeat the palanquin’s swinging movements. Several pilgrims asked residents to find out the owner of the car. The palanquin was then carried to the front of the owner’s house, where the performance continued. Following the suggestion of the pilgrims, the hostess, accompanied by her daughter-in-law, came out to pray to Mazu in front of the palanquin. But the Mazu palanquin made no sign of taking a rest. On the contrary, it returned to the parked car and

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15 According to Taiwanese folk belief, places where violent deaths have occurred are regarded as “unclean”, such as the location of a traffic accident or a river where someone drowned.
16 In the pilgrimage custom of Dajia, the pilgrim puts a bundle of paper spirit money on the bridge in order to bribe the spirits and pass the brook safely (see also Huang 1994). The pilgrimage group from Taipei reported by Sung (1971) maintains another custom. Pilgrims spread spirit money to Place Gods and wandering ghosts when they pass the brook. Neither custom is practiced in the Baishatun pilgrimage. However, a truck is used to shield Mazu’s palanquin and the head-flag when they pass a funeral location (culturally defined as unclean), in order to avoid “pollution”.

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repeated the *gianggiau* performance around it. I heard some pilgrims comment on the daughter-in-law. One said: “She is a Christian and seems unwilling to pray with incense to our Mazu”. Another responded: “Don’t criticise her behind her back! She is sick, she is pregnant. At least her mother-in-law worships our Mazu!” The palanquin performance continued and swung violently beside the boot of the car. At the request of the pilgrims, the car owner was woken up and asked to open the boot before the palanquin. The hostess explained that her son (the car owner) managed a company in Taipei and had just driven home around four o’clock that morning. While the palanquin performance continued, the car owner prayed to Mazu and promised to visit her temple in Baishatun. After about fifty minutes, the palanquin performance was terminated and pilgrims led out of the area (cf. Lue 1998:16-17).

Because the palanquin performance took place around the car, pilgrim interpretations of the performance concentrated on the problem of the car. Some suggested, for instance, that the object of the goddess’s *gianggiau* was to exorcise a potentially harmful influence connected to the car, which could cause traffic accidents. However, some of the Baishatun pilgrims insisted on the good fortune of this family, as the performance lingered around the location for a long time. It was said that the members of this family possessed the goddess’s protection against potential disaster. Pilgrims repeatedly mentioned this event when I participated in the journeys in 2000 and 2001. One male pilgrim gave his own explanation in 2001. In his overstated narrative, the owner of the car, who had once spent time in prison, was involved in murder and the sale of drugs. In his opinion, the palanquin performance represented the goddess warning the car owner about committing further crime, and that Mazu had saved him and rescued his intended murder victim. Indeed, the meaning of the palanquin performance on this occasion is ambiguous, and pilgrim reproductions and exaggerated interpretations can lead to various versions. My purpose here is not to discuss the different interpretations. Instead, I want to emphasise that this event, devoid of a “correct” interpretation, offers pilgrims an opportunity to give their own explanation of this palanquin performance category. Each pilgrim is entitled to give his or her own interpretation, if he or she can attract an audience.

### 5.4.2 The function of the second palanquin performance category

The meaning of the second palanquin performance category is ambiguous and has not been conventionalised, irrespective of such popular interpretations. Its successful enactment is therefore crucial to persuading the audience.\(^\text{17}\) Since there are no conventional rules attached to this palanquin performance category, the practice itself is vital, i.e., executing the performance in the name of Mazu’s direction. In this sense, how the *gianggiau* is

\(^{17}\) According to the comments of some pilgrims, the palanquin performance conducted by unskilled carriers in 1999 was not as natural or successful as that performed by skilled carriers from the palanquin association.
performed or its correctness is not the main concern. In fact, since it is impossible to establish the correct enactment of the palanquin performance of following the goddess’s direction (her “pulling” force) has been correctly enacted, as performers claim, the success of this performance category depends entirely on audience comment and recognition (cf. Rao 2000).

By examining the social interaction involved and its possible effect, I will classify four functions of the second palanquin performance category in the following.

Firstly, this palanquin performance category serves to maintain social relations between the pilgrim group and the visited group. The palanquin performance is considered a means of presenting the etiquette to temple deities or of showing Mazu’s mercy in protecting local believers on the journey. Carrying the palanquin away after the performance denotes the pilgrim group’s intention of maintaining relations with those visited. If the performance to express greeting is a failure, it risks the loss of existing pilgrimage bonds between Baishatun and the areas visited.18

Secondly, and similar to the first performance category, this palanquin performance category involves social relations. When local devotees pray piously for Mazu’s visit, TAC members can help them to influence the palanquin performance in the direction of a positive outcome, albeit expectations are not always fulfilled. Believers and TAC members both play a role in affecting the performance, thus blurring the boundary between performers and audience. The palanquin performance can also become a field of contestation, such as for TAC members and palanquin carriers, and will be discussed in the eighth chapter (cf. 8.1.2.1).

Thirdly, the second palanquin performance category provides a ritual stage for shamans from Baishatun. Because there is no conventional interpretation of the performance, Baishatun shamans seize the opportunity of exhibiting their interpretation or of communicating with Mazu, albeit they are unable to gain public recognition as the goddess’s spirit medium in the pilgrimage. For instance, when the Mazu palanquin lingered on the roadside during the palanquin performance display on the journey in 1997, the previous shaman of Wuyun Gong temple exhibited his special status by appearing beside the palanquin and speaking to the goddess. Similarly, the shaman of Tiande Gong temple

18 Although the Mazu palanquin cannot rest in the temple where the performance is carried out, many pilgrims still pray to the gods and give incense money to the host temple. I was informed that Baishatun pilgrims were supposed to enter some of the temples en route and worship, despite the fact that resting there was not permitted. These temples are Cihui Gong temple in Tongxiao, Ciyun Si and Cihe Gong temples in Yuanli, Ziyun Yan temple in Qingshui, Yuhuang Tan temple in Shalu, Nanyiao Gong temple in Zhanghua, Yushan Si and Houtian Gong temples in Xizhou, and two Mazu temples (Fuxing Gong and Guangfu Gong) in Xiluo.
suddenly fell into a trance uttering indecipherable words as the palanquin performance took place on the journey in 2001. On this occasion the shamans acted on behalf of their temples, and attempted to bring them into the pilgrimage arena (cf. 8.1.3.2). Finally, due to the absence of a monopoly on interpretation, this palanquin performance category provides pilgrims with ample opportunity to produce miraculous stories about the goddess. The disparate explanations of the performance recounted by the pilgrims usually accumulate to Mazu pilgrimage legends, all of which are associated with the goddess’s efficacy or magical power as manifested by believers on the journey. There seems to be no end to pilgrim productions of miraculous stories about Mazu. Indeed, wherever the palanquin performance is displayed, pilgrims present their accounts of Mazu’s intentions and the relevant miraculous stories. Discussing these is one of the greatest pilgrim attractions on the journey (cf. Chen Min-hwui 1988). Thus, the production of pilgrimage legends of the goddess also assists in perpetuating the existence of the second palanquin performance category.

In concluding the topic of palanquin performance, the main difference between the two palanquin performance categories is the measure of conventional rules attached to the individual forms of display and their represented meanings. The first category has basically been conventionalised to manifest signs for the selection of paths, the halting of proceedings, and the termination of each day’s journey. In contrast, the second category, which is devoid of observable consequence and clear meaning, is relatively vague, even unpredictable. Nonetheless, the “conventional” meanings of the palanquin performance are not entirely rigid. The oracle performance category (the first category) leaves room for negotiation, as mentioned in 5.3.2.2. Also, three popular interpretations of the second performance category are widely spread among the pilgrims. In this respect, I contend that the so-called “convention”, accumulated from past journeys and experience, is indeed a relative definition. It therefore seems probable that the popular interpretations associated with the second performance category will gradually become conventionalised with represented meanings, should they occur often enough and be widely accepted. Conversely, the conventionally represented meaning of the oracle performance category could alter if negotiations occur too frequently, and thus challenge existing convention.

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19 Neither the shaman nor the palanquin brigade members were supposed to give any explanation of the meaning of these palanquin performances. They were regarded as ordinary pilgrims, although some performed special pilgrimage tasks.

20 Comparing different linguistic forms (formal oratory, spell and singing), Bloch (1974) points out the significance of the formalisation of language in ritual.
While the first performance category can be seen as Mazu’s palanquin oracle guiding pilgrims on the journey, the second category expresses the believers’ manifestation of divine intervention that contributes to producing Mazu pilgrimage legends. The success of both performance categories depends on audience reaction. Once audiences are convinced, the performance will have achieved its aim, whereby audience comment appears to be more fundamental to the second performance category. Not only because pilgrims freely reproduce Mazu pilgrimage legends, but also because they enjoy telling them on the journey.

5.5 The pilgrim’s physical experience of the journey
The physical body can become an instrument of transformation on the pilgrimage (Quintero 2002, cf. Köpping 2000, Schnepel 2000). The carriers make tremendous demands on their bodies (similar to the receptacle or Gefäß, cf. 5.2.2) to serve Mazu and follow her “pulling” force in the palanquin performance, during which they experience the goddess’s theophany (or divine intervention, xianling). By the same token, pilgrims dedicate their bodies to the goddess in order to accompany her on the journey. Despite insufficient sleep and rest, many pilgrims continue to walk with blistered feet, sometimes up to 16 hours a day. Regardless of sweating in the heat or stumbling with kinaesthetic pain, pilgrims endeavour to transcend their physical limitations to undertake the pilgrimage odyssey. The next section will begin by explaining why walking is claimed to be Baishatun journey tradition, and will be succeeded by a discussion on the physical experience of walking.

5.5.1 Walking as a tradition of the pilgrimage journey
While driving from Baishatun to the destination (Beigang) takes only three and a half hours, the pilgrimage journey on foot can last up to nine or ten days. Many pilgrimage activities in Taiwan are now carried out by car tours, whereas Baishatun pilgrims still maintain the tradition of walking on the journey as their fathers and grandfathers had done. One Baishatun senior resident, who has since died, informed me that walking was obeying Mazu’s decision:

21 According to the journey record made by the U theatre (Chen Ban 1992:78), the foot march on the first day of the journey in 1991 lasted about 16 hours. The most difficult journey was the return trip in 1996. It took 30 hours to get from Beigang to Tongxiao, including a rest of only two hours and forty minutes on the first day and half an hour on the second day. In recent years the number of marching hours seems to have decreased, i.e., a maximum of about 12 to 13 hours a day. See Table 5-1.
“Our Mazu’s zinhiunn (pilgrimage) must be carried out on foot. Our Mazu is Ingsin-e [special form of the goddess’s image], so she cannot go by car [i.e., her image cannot be transported by car]. I heard that our village seniors tried to change the pattern in the past and take cars. But Mazu disagreed. Sinbue [positive response after casting divination blocks] never came up whenever they asked Mazu” (Jin-long).

Almost all Baishatun people I talked to are of the opinion that their Mazu pilgrimage journey on foot will never change. Although not every pilgrim can walk the entire journey, the goddess’s palanquin is always carried on foot. They also claim that the asceticism involved in walking is part of their pilgrimage tradition.

Talking of the foot march in the past, some senior informants from Baishatun emphasised the mutual assistance that prevailed among the pilgrims. According to them, following Mazu’s palanquin and adhering to pilgrimage taboos were strictly observed in the past, and the authority of leaders or shamans greatly respected. One 74-year old informant spoke of past pilgrimage journeys:

“When we went on the pilgrimage journey in the past, those who could walk had to wait for those who had difficulty in continuing. There were no cars on the pilgrimage in those days. Every hiunndingka (pilgrim) undertook the journey on foot, even with blisters on their feet. It was not like today when you can get into a car for a rest. … We always set out at one or two o’clock in the morning because there were less people and cars on the road. And we walked until sunset and then rested [ended that day’s journey]. … The leaders and the old people were so authoritarian then that no one dared to go against what they said. For example, we were not allowed to eat guavas, peaches, plums or tomatoes, as they could easily have caused indigestion. If anyone had a stomach ache or diarrhoea, the others had to take care of them, which affected the whole group. So everyone followed older people’s instructions in those days. But who would bother about that taboo now? … The most important thing in the past was that hiunndingkas (pilgrims) took care of each other” (Yi-xiong).

In the memory of some informants, the number of pilgrims was no more than two hundred in the 1960s. Pilgrims used to walk within a viewable distance of each other between the head-flag and the Mazu palanquin on the journeys in the past, so that they could look after each other. A 53-year old Baishatun woman recalled her experience of such a journey:

“The feeling associated with walking on the pilgrimage in the past was very special to me. The pilgrims all walked within a short distance of each other. We particularly listened to the gong sounding in front [beside the head-flag] and behind us [beside Mazu’s palanquin] at night. Two gong sounds usually responded to each other, and seemed to remind us not to fall asleep. It was very quiet during the night, and we walked only to the sound of the gong. It was really a very nice feeling to accompany Mazu on foot at night. What a pity that we can no longer enjoy that experience today” (Mei-fang).
The sound of the gong is hard to hear on today’s journeys, unless people walk alongside the palanquin or the head-flag. Due to growing numbers of pilgrims on foot in recent years (cf. table 4-3), the zone allocated for walking pilgrims between the Mazu palanquin and the head-flag has been greatly extended. Also, the traditional music played from a truck in front of the palanquin makes it almost impossible to hear the sound of the gong.

For Baishatun pilgrims, walking is an integral part of their religious odyssey. Although nowadays they can get into a car and take a rest if they are exhausted or obtain a seat on a rented bus, all pilgrims are greatly encouraged to undertake the journey on foot in order to accompany Mazu on her pilgrimage odyssey.

5.5.2 The pilgrim’s physical experience of walking on the journey

The total walking distance of the pilgrimage is about 350 kilometres, and can vary according to the individual route taken each year. As shown in Table 5-1, the journey in 2001 was longer than those in 1998 and 2000. The duration of the daily journey is influenced by the time required to reach the destination and return to Baishatun. The length of the journeys on the day of the approach to the Beigang temple and that of the return to the Baishatun temple are usually shorter than those of the days in between. Generally speaking, the first day of the return trip is the hardest, as pilgrims have to march at night on leaving the destination, and the number of marching hours is always highest on that day (e.g., between 11.5 and 13.5 hours). In fact, the hours of walking vary on each day of the journey and can last from between 3.5 and 12.75 hours per day.

It is an astonishing feat to accomplish the entire journey on foot. According to the temple registration records,22 only 65 pilgrims completed the journey entirely on foot (almost 4 percent of all registered walking pilgrims) in 2000, and 33 pilgrims (less than 2 percent) in 2001. In order to encourage walking, each year the TAC prepares memorial gifts for pilgrims who complete the journey on foot. Although most pilgrims do not achieve this aim, they do their best to hold out as long as possible. In particular, some pilgrims endeavour to walk the whole journey to repay the vow fulfilled by Mazu, or to pray for the goddess’s assistance. In the meantime, when walking becomes unbearable, some pilgrims cast divination blocks to ask Mazu’s approval of getting into a car for a rest.

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22 The temple records are not always exact. Some pilgrims walk the whole journey but do not report to the temple.
Table 5-1 Number of marching and resting hours on the pilgrimage journeys in 1998, 2000 and 2001¹

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<td>Journey hours/ minutes</td>
<td>March h/m</td>
<td>Rest h/m</td>
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<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>9/9</td>
<td>7/0</td>
<td>2/9</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>13/30</td>
<td>10/32</td>
<td>2/58</td>
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<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>7/10</td>
<td>6/4</td>
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<td>5th</td>
<td>14/23</td>
<td>[11/36]</td>
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<td>7th</td>
<td>12/28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>94/58</td>
<td>72/40</td>
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<td>Average</td>
<td>10/33</td>
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¹ Data on the 1998 journey is from Liang 1999: 54. Data on the journeys in 2000 and 2001 are based on my own journey record.

Apart from uncomfortable kinaesthetic pain caused by long periods of walking, the most difficult part of this activity is to follow the goddess’s palanquin. There are two reasons why pilgrims seldom keep pace with the palanquin carriers. Firstly, Mazu’s palanquin does not always march straight ahead. Palanquin carriers might linger in one place or retrace their steps quite a distance for the palanquin performance. Secondly, the speed of walking is irregular, varying between slow, fast, or even running. This is why experienced pilgrims prefer to walk behind the head-flag instead of following the goddess’s palanquin. Members of the head-flag brigade usually maintain a regular pace, although they might make a detour and then accelerate their speed to return to their original position in the procession, e.g., if they had failed to take the direction chosen by Mazu’s palanquin. Nevertheless, no matter where pilgrims walk on the journey, Mazu’s palanquin represents the highest command with regard to the direction of their movements.

In order to take part in the journey, some Baishatun pilgrims work on their physical condition in preparation, such as jogging or some kind of sport, before setting out. I had not prepared myself physically for my first journey in 1997 and subsequently got blistered feet and swollen legs very soon. One couple in particular from central Taiwan, who had no relatives in Baishatun, have taken part in the journey since 1994. They were unable to walk the whole journey in the beginning, but finally achieved this after accumulating walking experience. They told me about their preparation and experience of the journey:
“A good pair of jogging shoes is a must. Shoes for the journey should be bigger than normal shoes, because your feet and legs get swollen after walking for a long time. We also put on two pairs of cotton socks. Whenever there’s a rest, you take off your shoes and socks, and massage your feet and legs. If possible, lie down and lift your legs up. … We love coming because Baishatun’s Mazu is different from the Mazu in other places. Especially, the Mazu giangglau is full of mysticism, and we love discussing what the giangglau means. …We love coming and walking on the journey. It’s like sport. … Actually, all the pilgrims here are in the same boat and should look after each other” (Da-hua and A-jiao).

While some pilgrims consider walking on the journey as sport, several Baishatun residents regard it as Mazu’s arrangement: the fact that pilgrims rarely walk enough in their daily live led the goddess to send pilgrims on a long walk. Some of the female pilgrims consider the pilgrimage journey to be an excursion led by the goddess. One 63-year old Baishatun housewife has taken part in the journey for more than thirty years. She explained why she participates:

“I don’t want to join a tourist group to travel. As an illiterate, I cannot even go to Taipei or Taizhong to visit my sons by myself. But I love going on the zinhuunn (pilgrimage) with our Mazu. Once I almost fell asleep walking at night and was suddenly woken by the sound of ducks quacking nearby. It was really fascinating! … I have been taking part in the journey since I was thirty. I usually walk throughout the journey, apart from the last three years. …Walking with blisters on my feet is quite normal. If I get blisters, I stick a needle and thread into them and leave the thread there to let the water out, and then I can go on walking. It’s easy for me. I love beating the gong beside taugi (head-flag), although I usually have to run to keep up with the others” (A-zhu).

Because there was no alternative to walking in the past, female pilgrims seldom participated in the journey.23 Yet, the majority of pilgrims today are women, and some of them undertake the journey entirely on foot. Further, driver-pilgrims pick up those who are exhausted and might thus be left way behind the Mazu palanquin. A Baishatun housewife in her late fifties has been carrying out the entire journey on foot for several years. According to her, Mazu’s protection helped her do so:

“To walk the whole journey, you need good physical condition and a strong will. You cannot walk without strength; you cannot continue without volition. But in my view, the most important thing is to rely on Mazu. To tell the truth, without her protection, I could not go through the whole journey on foot. …I usually eat very little during the pilgrimage, because it is better for walking. I prefer to drink water than eat. Actually, I never feel tired when I walk beside Mazu’s palanquin on the journey. On the contrary, I feel a lot of linggam [the goddess’s efficacious power to take care of pilgrims] … In the beginning, I had a lot of pain walking

23 According to informants, there were no female pilgrims before 1950. However, more and more women have been taking part in the journey since the late 1950s, when vehicles were introduced on the pilgrimage.
and a lot of blisters on my feet. Both legs were swollen. But I continued walking all the same. Then, the pain disappeared. It was really strange. You know, we can always pray to Mazu for her protection on the way, such as using her lodan [incense ash from Mazu’s censer] or gingde [water dedicated to Mazu]. …I think Mazu is happy that we are walking with her. So as long as I can walk, I will follow her on foot on the pilgrimage” (Xiu-feng).

Similarly, another sixty-year old woman from the northern village successfully overcame chronic leg problems to walk on the journey:

“When I first walked on the journey, I got a big blister on my foot. It hurt a lot to walk on it. I then went to Mazu’s palanquin at noon and told her about my problem, praying to her to let me go on walking. Later on I felt better and went on walking. After sunset, the pain had disappeared without a trace. The blister was almost gone the next morning. Indeed, our Mazu is very ling [divine efficacy or magical power]. … Both my legs used to swell up in the past, so I couldn’t walk too far. But the problem disappeared after I walked on the journey with Mazu. I came to join the zinhiunn [pilgrimage] because my daughter hequan (made a vow) for me. Mazu’s protection has enabled me to walk and my leg is almost cured. … About ten people from my family usually take part in the journey each year. I’m going to join the journey every year to thank Mazu for her protection” (A-yin).

Many pilgrims believe that the pain caused by walking for long periods will disappear if they believe in Mazu and rely on her. For this reason, they carry on walking with a will of iron, despite bloody feet and swollen legs. Pilgrims also pray to Mazu for the incense ash or water dedicated to her, and use them to cure their bodily ills or at least abate them. If the pain does not go away, people claim it lies in the pilgrim’s lack of belief in the goddess. Once physical pain has been overcome, it is imputed to the goddess’s miraculous ling (divine efficacy or magical power). In this respect, pilgrim representation of experience on the journey entails self-productive power, which is normally attributed to divine intervention. Thus, pilgrim representation of the pilgrimage contains transcendent power (see below), as Sangren’s (1991, 1993) research has illuminated.24

Moreover, physical discomfort can be caused by lack of sleep and rest, as well as numerous inconvenient situations on the pilgrimage journey. Exposed to the midday sun and the heat (more than 30 degrees Celsius), pilgrims drip with sweat as they walk, and even run the risk of sunstroke. In heavy rain, pilgrims persevere (sometimes with raincoats) despite the risk of catching cold. Apart from finding guesthouses to stay overnight, pilgrims sleep on temple floors, in devotee factories, or train stations close to the resting place of Mazu’s palanquin. In this sense, pilgrims attempt to transcend their normal physical condition and sacrifice

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24 Sangren (1993) holds that pilgrimage representation contains transcendent power, whereby for him, it focuses on the quality of the ideology. However, my analysis in this chapter suggests that physical experience constitutes a vital element of pilgrimage representation.
themselves to follow Mazu on the journey, even “pushing their bodies to a state of physical crisis” (cf. Quintero 2002: 141). This “physical sacrifice” carries an air of being the indispensable testimony to the pilgrim’s belief in Mazu. Or, as many Baishatun residents have stated, accompanying Mazu on the pilgrimage journey is the only way they can manifest their gratitude to the goddess.

The pace held by Mazu palanquin carriers directly affects the movement of other pilgrims. Although not everyone can keep up with the carriers, many attempt to walk within a viewable distance of the Mazu palanquin. Walking is therefore not merely individual physical movement, but an interactive process of physical movement with others. Some actor/actress pilgrims from theatre companies in Taipei have participated in the journey since 1990. Liu Jing-min from the U Theatre Company wrote about her running experience on the pilgrimage journey of 1991. I translated the following extract from her writing:

When we passed Yongjing, devotee worship declined. We had been walking in the heat for four hours, and were about two or three hundred metres in front of Mazu’s palanquin. … Suddenly, the carriers ran into us as though they had nothing on their shoulders. … As the palanquin and pilgrims ran towards us, we ran too. To my surprise, my tired swollen legs were able to move and run with the other pilgrims. However, when the running began, it was as if it would never cease. Gradually, I felt my legs complaining again, though they wouldn’t stop running. … When we approached the Yuanlin Funing Gong temple, I willed Mazu to stop for a rest, although my legs went on running. As soon as I was about to pray to Mazu with my hands, the palanquin was carried running past the front space of the temple without even stopping to greet. My hopes disappeared, and I had to go on running. Yet, this running experience made an enormous impression on me. I saw a group of people [pilgrims] in front of me moving as if in the same rhythm. They were neither walking nor running. It was a sort of flow, some power emanating from their bodies. It seemed to me they spread a kind of power that led us forward. But, how could that be? Many of us had dragged ourselves along a little while ago, but all of a sudden we became one in the same movement, at the same time. Everyone was pushing ahead with a strong sense of vitality. Meanwhile, I felt that my body was no longer mine. It seemed to follow the flow ahead and could not stop. Although my brain was clear, my thoughts were much slower than the movement of my body. I didn’t see anyone stop or get into cars during this march, when we, more than a hundred people, followed the palanquin and ran for more than two hours (translated from Liu Jing-min 1992:28-29).

Liu describes clearly how the running began with the palanquin carriers and extended to other pilgrims. According to Köpping (2000:174), the human body serves as a generator of emotion and attitude, articulating the sensory experience of human interaction, albeit the latter is an instinctive physical reaction. Hence, the body is not only the sensory unit, but also the material substratum for human action, i.e., a medium for somatic action. Pilgrims on foot concentrate on following the movements of the palanquin carriers, which in turn
affect their own physical movements, all of which are mutually transmitted during the march. At the same time, the element of religious belief should not be overlooked in considering the common physical movement of the pilgrims. Many of them admitted to feeling an animated force around the goddess’s palanquin when they walked alongside it (cf. 5.2.3 the experience of Fa-cai and Mei-li; and see Xiu-feng’s experience above). In this sense, it is not only Mazu’s palanquin carriers who experience the goddess’s theophany (xianling, the divine intervention); the concrete experience of walking also contributes to ordinary pilgrims believing in divine intervention during the march.

5.6 Discussion: the transcendent power of the pilgrimage odyssey

According to Turner (1974b; the Turners 1978), the universal desire of pilgrims is to reach a homogenised state of communitas, i.e., a release from the mundane structure of ordinary social life.25 Unlike Turner, who views transcendence as a matter of the individual pilgrim’s religious desire, Sangren (1991, 1993) regards transcendent power as related to representation. For him, the latter is in effect produced by individual subjects and social collectivities, but is always attributed to the supernatural deity (1993: 573).26 While Sangren’s usage of transcendence focuses on the ideological quality of the pilgrim’s representation of spiritually thanking the god, Quintero (2002:140-1) emphasises the “physically transcendent power” that is revealed in the pilgrim’s personal physical sacrifice. Based on Sangren and Quintero’s research on the Taiwanese Mazu pilgrimage, I have attempted in this chapter to combine physical pilgrimage experience with pilgrimage representation, asserting thereby the transcendent power of the pilgrimage.

I have analysed the palanquin performance (gianggiau) and walking on the journey from the perspective of physical experience and of ritual transformation. The pilgrim’s body either becomes the receptacle (Gefäß) that follows Mazu’s “pulling force” in the palanquin performance, or is dedicated to the goddess as manifested in the will to follow her on the pilgrimage odyssey. Ritual services allow the palanquin carriers to experience the existence of the supernatural, and their performance serves to affect the pilgrims, whose perception centres on the testimony of divine intervention and the production of Mazu’s miraculous stories. Walking pilgrims rely on their belief in the goddess and endeavour to transcend

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25 Sangren’s study (1993) on the Taiwanese Mazu pilgrimage challenges Turnerian notion of communitas.
26 Sangren (1991) contends that the self-productive power of individual subjects and social collectivities is usually misunderstood as the deity’s efficacy. He claims the existence of an alienation that “applies to representations of productive power that invert the real productive relations between producers and product so that the product appears to produce the producer” (p.67).
physical limitations on the journey; hence their experience of theophany is identical to that of the palanquin carriers. While subjecting their bodies to extreme physical rigours, the religious devotion of the pilgrims to the goddess makes them believe in the existence of divine intervention. Thus, individual pilgrim representations and those of the pilgrim group as a whole reveal the transcendent power of the pilgrimage.27

Moreover, the common pilgrimage experience of walking contributes to the common emotions and sentiments of the pilgrims. Phrases such as “we [pilgrims] are in the same boat” or “we should take care of each other” can be heard constantly on the journey. Thus, the original differentiation of roles among the pilgrims (i.e., pilgrimage brigades or TAC) appears to be submerged in the same physical experience. Quintero (2002) states that this common physical experience introduces walking pilgrims to a state of Turnerian *communitas*, which seems to incorporate all pilgrims in a quasi-egalitarian state. Role differentiation is, however, quite prominent in the palanquin performance, which is monopolised by members of the palanquin brigade. Also, the so-called homogenous state of *communitas* is problematic. Not only do the pilgrims negotiate and debate the meaning of the palanquin performance, but the performance itself reveals the contesting of human relationships.

**Conclusion**

The first theme of the chapter addressed the palanquin performance, which I separated into two categories according to the convention of the performance and its interpretation. While the first category serves as the goddess’s palanquin oracle, the principal function of the second category is to provide pilgrims with an opportunity of producing miraculous stories associated with the goddess’s efficacious power. The palanquin performance convention, however, is not entirely rigid. The fact that the performance-oriented ritual is negotiable means that a clear-cut separation between performer and audience is out of the question.

The second theme of the chapter dealt with the pilgrim’s physical experience of the journey on foot. The palanquin performance executed by the carriers seems to embody the transformation of the pilgrimage, so that Mazu’s theophany (*xianling*, divine intervention) can be claimed. Meanwhile, all of the walking pilgrims (including the palanquin carriers) share a similar physical experience on the journey. In order to demonstrate belief in Mazu or thank her, pilgrims transcend their normal physical condition by carrying out the journey.

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27 In Sangren’s (1993) words, the self-productive power of the individual pilgrim and the whole pilgrimage group is ideologically mystified and misunderstood as the power of the goddess.
on foot. By walking, the pilgrim also embodies the physically transcendent power of the pilgrimage.
Apart from this power, there are evidently other dimensions of transcendence involved in the pilgrimage. Yet, its boundary-crossing will be the topic of the following chapter.