Chapter 8
The pilgrimage arena: contesting ritual privilege and cultural representation

This chapter will explore pilgrimage from the arena perspective and show how people’s assertion of shared belonging can coexist with the arena itself. The first part deals with the competition for ritual privileges in the pilgrimage arena. Although the pilgrimage is formally held by the Baishatun Mazu temple, pilgrimage tasks are organised and allocated annually. Some ritual privileges are not assigned permanently to specific groups of people, so that competition among eligible groups and individuals is possible. At the same time, the palanquin performance also represents a field of battle, since it can be exploited in the interests of certain agents. The second part concerns the pilgrimage arena of cultural representation. Different ritual constituencies depict their notion of the goddess Mazu and perceive the pilgrimage in different ways. Rivalry in representing the Baishatun perspective seems inevitable if the pilgrimage is to be presented from the “native point of view”.

8.1 Contesting ritual privilege in different ritual constituencies
As Gerholm’s essay (1988) suggests, ritual is composed of contradictory and contestable perspectives (cf. Baumann 1992, Parkin 1992). Similarly, Eade (1991) shows the tension between lay (ritual) helpers and pilgrims in a Catholic pilgrimage shrine in Lourdes: while the former uphold the official regulations of ritual practice, the latter refuse to obey the rules and use strategies to perform the ritual to their own advantage. This section will explore pilgrimage contestation for ritual privilege from the perspective of distinction and competition.1

The decisive questions in exploring the pilgrimage arena take account of what people contest, who they fight against, and for what reason (cf. Schlee 2004). Bearing this in mind, I separate the contest for ritual privileges into four categories. Firstly, the ritual position of

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1 Chang Hsun’s (1993: ch 5, 157-197) research on the Dajia pilgrimage in Taiwan refers to internal distinctions in terms of gender, economics and ethnicity. However, these distinctions seem irrelevant in the Baishatun pilgrimage. The Baishatun temple committee members, for instance, are primarily rich locals or politicians, who do not have a monopoly on ritual privileges. Similarly, participants in several pilgrimage brigades (especially the palanquin and head-flag brigades) include both workers and successful businessmen. Also, some of the ritual positions and brigade tasks include women, albeit the latter constitute only a small minority. Nonetheless, similar to the case of Dajia, Baishatun pilgrims include a small minority of other ethnic groups apart from the Minnanese (cf. 6.3.1).
Mazu servant is contestable when conventional ritual authority is weakened. Secondly, leading rights on the pilgrimage journey is a competing field, which reveals the tension between temple committee (TAC) members and performers of the goddess’s palanquin oracle. Thirdly, the communal Mazu pilgrimage, which brings people from four Baishatun neighbourhood temples into the arena, is a strong area of competition on the shamanistic ritual stage. And finally, pilgrims and believers on the pilgrimage journey compete for individual ritual advantages or opportunities to worship.

How can we account for people competing with each other on the pilgrimage? What is the significance of the ritual privileges pilgrims strive to achieve? In the analysis of political rituals, Kertzer (1988) illustrates that the ritual power of symbols is essential to legitimising political order. Does pilgrimage contestation imply potential access to other advantages in the ordinary lives of the participants? Or, does pilgrimage ritual privilege affect people’s social status in Baishatun? I will seek answers to these questions in this section.

8.1.1 The contest for the ritual position of Mazu servant

8.1.1.1 Conventional ritual authority versus legal administrative authority

The pilgrimage is organised by the temple administration committee (TAC), which is a legal organisation of the Gongtian Gong temple in Baishatun. TAC members are usually rich or successful local residents (cf. 3.2.1.3 for the selection of the TAC). With regard to the pilgrimage, committee members are responsible for conducting the communal ritual and taking care of the relevant affairs on the journey (cf. 4.1.2.1).

However, these TAC members are not authorised to deal with the goddess’s image. This task is mainly carried out by Mazu servants of the traditional ritual office system (cf. 4.1.2.2). Because Mazu servants are chosen by casting divination blocks for Mazu’s approval, they enjoy public recognition and ritual authority in terms of the pilgrimage. More importantly, Mazu servants possess the ritual knowledge of dealing with three sacred pilgrimage objects, i.e., the goddess’s image, the head-flag, and the pilgrimage censer. Ritual knowledge, such as pertaining to taboos, explains the authority of the Mazu servant and his superior pilgrimage status. While female servants are privileged to perform the purification rite of the goddess’s image (see also 4.2.1.4), male servants have the supreme authority to take care of the three sacred objects in all pilgrimage rites. The people who serve in these positions are never chosen at random. The late Chen, a ritual specialist who conducted the séance ritual in Wuyun Gong temple in Baishatun, was one of the more famous male servants. His position was passed on to one of his younger brothers, and from
1972 to 2000 to the latter’s son. Although neither successor was a shaman, the position of male Mazu servant remained in this family until 2000. One other renowned servant in the past, a woman, was said to have been possessed by the goddess. She was, however, unwilling to become a ritual professional, nor was she encouraged to do so. Her religious skills and family background made her an obvious choice. Her grandmother was famous for making clothes for the divine image. When she got older she was succeeded by her daughters, one of whom lived in Baishatun, while the other was married in a nearby city. A widow from another family was also selected for the position as a result of her dressmaking skills.

Tension between Mazu servants and temple committee members emerged in 1997, when the latter attempted to take over the position of the former. TAC members act as leaders of the pilgrim group or address the public. In contrast, both male and female Mazu servants are illiterate senior villagers, who appear on the relevant occasions and perform their ritual task in silence. Hence, Mazu servants tend to lose ground when TAC members try to intervene in their ritual sphere.

8.1.1.2 The dispute between female Mazu servants and temple committee members

When I first came to Baishatun on the eve of the pilgrimage departure in 1997, I was amazed by a serious dispute that took place in the temple before the purification rite for Mazu’s image. The quarrel began when some TAC members prevented three female Mazu servants from entering the shrine room of the main hall. The female servants were publicly rebuked by a TAC member for ignoring the announcement abolishing the rite. Disclaiming the order of the committee, these women in their sixties and seventies did not comply, arguing that no one had the right to cancel this ritual convention. The conflict in the temple caught the attention of pilgrims and residents. The stridency on both sides made people concerned about the goddess’s image, the real focus of the pilgrimage eve. While the committee members claimed their decision was Mazu’s instruction as revealed in a séance, the female servants insisted on continuing the rite, supported by many residents present in the temple. Under pressure, one committee member cast divination blocks to ask Mazu’s approval for their new rule. When after three attempts at divination no positive response emerged, the committee members withdrew their decision.

Tension between the two parties, nevertheless, remained. When I carried out my fieldwork in 2000 and 2001, both sides contributed more details. According to an influential

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2 Another male servant was chosen in 1972. He worked with the third successor from the Chen family, but died six years later.
committee member, the reason for abolishing the conventional purification rite was to preserve the Mazu image from possible damage (cf. 4.1.2.2), and that this, the goddess’s instruction, was revealed by a shaman speaking in a séance ritual in Baishatun. Since shamanistic speaking is not a recognised pilgrimage authority, the TAC attempt to dispense with the rite was doomed to failure from the start. Several committee members consequently saw the enormous authority of the Mazu servants as a potential threat to their pilgrimage activity.

The female Mazu servants, however, told a different story. The eldest female servant claimed that the temple committee members had wanted to oust them from their ritual position. They had even gone as far as making new clothes for Mazu, a task that had always been theirs. The female servants had heard about the TAC plot in advance and decided to persevere with the rite regardless of opposition, as they were concerned about the attempt to put an end to this ritual convention. Having discarded the clothes offered by the committee members as unsuitable, they finally used those they themselves had prepared. As a Mazu servant, she would normally never dare to refuse clothes donated by believers. However, faced with the indifferent attitude of the TAC members, she decided to step down in the end. Respect for her ritual task is crucial to her:

“I began serving Mazu as my mother’s helper when I was 12 years old, and became a Mazu servant at the age of 30. I have been serving Mazu for more than sixty years. … We shouldn’t be quarrelling with them [TAC members]. Actually, Mazu belongs to all of us. If there was someone capable of serving Mazu, I could retire. … They [TAC members] never called me to perform the rite after that and I didn’t go to the temple either. There is no sense in going. If they don’t want me to serve Mazu, I won’t. … When we served Mazu in the past, no men would have dared to stay in the temple. You see how people respected Mazu and our work in the old days. But people have no interest in it nowadays” (Fang-zhi)!

Unlike the mild reaction of the eldest servant, another Mazu servant in her seventies continued to perform this task after the dispute, albeit she waged a continual war with the members of the TAC. Earning a living by making clothes, she began to serve Mazu at the age of 28, and supported by numerous village companions, she was confident about continuing her ritual service to the goddess as her servant. When I talked to her about her pilgrimage ritual task, she expressed her anger at the temple committee members:

“The temple people used always come to my house in the old days or called me, asking me to prepare clothes to dress Mazu. None of them [TAC members] do this today. They even wanted to get rid of me. …Lots of people supported me. And they said I was chosen by Mazu and shouldn’t have stepped down. …Yes, I certainly have the right to serve Mazu. I am far
Several TAC members finally came to see Feng-jiao and ask her to perform the rite for Mazu’s image in 2000. The TAC members, who did not possess the ritual knowledge to perform the rite on their own, were obliged to reach a compromise with her. Two female employees of the temple office were delegated by the TAC to assist the female servant, as training for later accession to the ritual position of Mazu servant. The tension on both sides had relaxed to a certain extent by the following year. On the one hand, Feng-jiao regained her ritual status with the associated respect and recognition, an important victory in the struggle to maintain female servants’ ritual privileges. The TAC, on the other hand, gradually began to access control of these ritual privileges by selecting new successors from their own camp if there were no other candidates on the horizon.

8.1.1.3 Contesting the position of male Mazu servant

The position of male Mazu servant is more significant and more prominent than that of female servant. The reason is twofold. In living memory, accession to this unique position was confined to one Baishatun family (Chen), and male servants possess supreme authority in pilgrimage ritual. Unlike female servants, who are responsible for the purification rite only, male servants control the ritual of dealing with three sacred objects (the Mazu image, the head-flag and the pilgrimage censer) on the relevant pilgrimage occasions. Albeit the third successor from the Chen family retained his position until 2000, his ritual authority had already been undermined by the TAC in the late 1990s. In 2000, regardless of ritual convention, the temple committee members cut the privileges of the male servant and conducted the initiating and fulfilment rites themselves. Meanwhile, a rumour that the position of male servant was to be replaced by a TAC member began to circulate in the village.

Why did the TAC attempt to take over the authority of the male servant? This question should be understood in the context of personal ties (quanxi, relationships or personal connections, cf. Jacob 1982, Yang 1994) in Baishatun. Jacob’s (1982) study points out that ganqing (the “affective component” of a relationship) is the key basis for cultivating or maintaining relationships. A certain male servant and an influential member of the committee (A) did not get along with each other, and furthermore both belonged to different local factions. The dispute was not confined to the individuals themselves but extended to include rivalry between the members of both factions. As a result, the TAC member (A) used his influence to deprive the male servant of his pilgrimage ritual privileges.
The power arena with regard to this position first surfaced behind the scenes in 2000, gradually shifting to emerge centre stage in the following year, when the male servant was unable to attend the pilgrimage as a result of illness. Several different camps were involved in competing for this ritual position. Firstly, friends from the factions of both the male Mazu servant and the TAC member $A$ joined the arena.\(^3\) In 2001, TAC member $B$, a representative of $A$’s faction, was designated as formal successor to the male servant. The intention of the TAC’s faction was obvious: ritual authority was to be replaced by administrative authority. The male servant’s faction, on the other hand, supported the shaman as a contender for the position. The latter had been the male servant’s helper for many years, but was dismissed by a neighbourhood temple in Baishatun following a scandal. Since gaining the position of male servant would have meant the shaman’s rehabilitation, the male servant’s faction seized every opportunity to have him reinstated in the service of Mazu on the pilgrimage. In this sense, the pilgrimage brought people from both factions into the arena, thereby greatly swelled the discord between the various members. Secondly, palanquin association members also entered the arena, representing the younger generation engaged in reforming the pilgrimage. Emigrants living in Taipei, most of them have been core members of the palanquin brigade for more than ten years. They used the advantage of having a pilgrimage task to compete for the position, since they considered both the TAC member and the shaman incompetent. Despite temple regulations and competition from two candidates, the palanquin brigade members firmly took over, thus preventing anyone else from getting close to the palanquin to serve Mazu. Two experienced carriers from the brigade, who had carefully observed the former male Mazu servant’s work for many years, seized the position to take care of Mazu’s image. Known as pilgrim “stars” in the palanquin brigade, both performed the ritual task of the male Mazu servant on each occasion of that year. According to some TAC members, the temple committee was compelled to accept the two palanquin carriers as the future successors to the male Mazu servant.\(^4\) The result seemed inevitable since both carriers showed evidence of ample skills to fulfil the ritual task involved in this position.

The male Mazu servant’s ritual task must be divided into two parts. Albeit the two palanquin carriers were responsible for the goddess’s image along the journey, they were not authorised to take care of the other two sacred pilgrimage objects: the head-flag and the

\(^3\) Local factions are based on kin relations, temple membership, or common occupations or interests. These two factions were at odds with each other over village public affairs and local politics (cf. Crissman 1981). They supported different candidates, for instance, in elections at county level.

\(^4\) I was informed by telephone that the two palanquin carriers were assigned the task of looking after the goddess’s image on the pilgrimage in 2002 and 2003.
pilgrimage censer. As TAC member B had no experience of dealing with the pilgrimage censer, the duty was taken over by a qualified member of the head-flag brigade on the journey. An emigrant living and working in Taipei, this man had no close links with local factions and was in fact a descendant of the previous male servant’s clan. He was assigned by the TAC to lead the head-flag brigade and look after the pilgrimage censer as a result of his widely acknowledged ritual task skills.

In a word, ritual competence and public recognition are indispensable to acquiring the position of male Mazu servant. Although supported by local factions, neither TAC member B nor the shaman had a chance of getting the position, since neither were able to fulfil the two conditions. In contrast, accumulated ritual knowledge and public recognition on the pilgrimage led to the victory of the members of the palanquin brigade, notwithstanding their status as emigrants.

8.1.2 Competing for leading rights on the pilgrimage journey

By and large, there are two kinds of leading rights in conducting the pilgrimage journey: the temple committee’s (TAC) administrative leadership, and the palanquin brigade’s monopoly of the performance in the name of Mazu’s direction. While the TAC members are entitled to act as secular leaders of the pilgrim group, palanquin carriers assert their right to lead through the goddess’s pulling force in the palanquin performance. Conventionally, the former decide the length of the rest and the time of the departure thereafter, whereas the latter have the power to deviate from the TAC’s command when they carry Mazu’s palanquin. However, since this conventional rule is not unalterable, contestation emerges.

I divided the palanquin performance into two categories in the fifth chapter, whereby the performance and its represented meanings are negotiable. Indeed, the palanquin performance, devoid of precise rules, also has the potential for contestation. I will focus on a dispute between the TAC and the palanquin brigade in this sub-section, notably on the occasion when both sides insisted on their respective rights to deviate from the conventional rule on the pilgrimage journey. At the same time, internal distinctions in the palanquin brigade can lead to problems of carrier coordination, which is a prerequisite for the palanquin performance. Thus, the question as to whether the outcome of the palanquin performance is perceived as following Mazu’s pulling force or as human intervention (under the pretext of Mazu’s instruction) is indeed debatable.
8.1.2.1 The tension between the TAC and the palanquin brigade

Two events that occurred on the journey in 2001 are described in chapter five (cf. 5.3.2.2). They serve to illustrate how the TAC made decisions contrary to the goddess’s palanquin oracle revealed after the performance, and notwithstanding criticism from pilgrimage participants. Both events not only prove that the represented meanings of the oracle are negotiable, but also disclose the tension between TAC and palanquin brigade members.

While the latter regard the palanquin oracle revealed after the performance as Mazu’s irrevocable decision, the former see it as adjustable in accordance with the conditions and believer reactions prevailing on the journey. In contrast to the palanquin brigade’s monopoly of the palanquin performance, TAC members assert their right to lead after the Mazu palanquin has rested on the two long benches.

Tension between TAC and palanquin brigade members has in fact only emerged in recent years. Most palanquin brigade carriers belong to the palanquin association, which is composed of Baishatun emigrants and residents from the younger generation, and focuses on the reform of pilgrimage activity (cf. 5.2.2). Conservative and incompetent are two of the adjectives they use to describe the TAC members from the older generation (over sixty), and in their eyes good reason to dispense with them as far as pilgrimage activity is concerned. It is their view that influential TAC members, as county assemblymen, attempt to exploit the pilgrimage for their own political devices. In 1996, for example, the committee members had planned to lead the pilgrimage into downtown Xiluo because ex-President Li Deng-hui was visiting the town on his election campaign. Viewing the pilgrimage as purely religious activity, the carriers did not carry Mazu’s palanquin into the town as the TAC had expected. According to carrier accounts, they simply followed Mazu’s pulling force in the palanquin performance to choose the path. The result was highly embarrassing for the TAC, since they had promised local people the goddess’s palanquin would visit the town.

The tense relations between the TAC and the palanquin carriers came to light when the latter exploited the palanquin performance under the pretext of “Mazu’s decision” (cf. 5.4.2). The unfortunate event in 1996 was the cause of the growing tension between them in the following year. The palanquin carriers were extremely angry with the TAC members for attempting to abolish the purification rite for Mazu’s image on the eve of the pilgrimage departure (see above). In the afternoon of the second day’s journey, Mazu’s palanquin lingered on the roadside for about 40 minutes, as carriers displayed the palanquin performance beside a car belonging to a TAC member. Due to public pressure, the TAC
member got out of the car and prayed to Mazu after the carriers had made a hitting gesture with the palanquin rods at the side of the car. He was pushed away by carriers during the performance, as he tried to get close to the palanquin to pray to Mazu publicly. Despite different interpretations of the palanquin performance on that occasion, the TAC member told me in 2001 that the palanquin carriers had seized this opportunity to deliberately challenge his authority.

The tension heightened in 1998. According to brigade members, TAC members came to worship Mazu with several county assemblymen when her palanquin was resting in Tongxiao on the return trip. TAC members had invited these politicians to carry Mazu’s palanquin when the pilgrimage set off again, in order to experience the pilgrimage. The palanquin brigade members, who considered this suggestion utterly inappropriate, vehemently refused to comply with the TAC’s intention of cultivating a relationship with local politicians. While TAC members reprimanded the palanquin carriers, referring to them as arrogant and difficult to communicate with, the latter reproached them with incompetence because they had ignored the conventional palanquin etiquette that did not permit guests to carry the palanquin on departure.

The animosity between the two parties reached a climax in 1999. The carriers boycotted the TAC’s authority by withdrawing collectively from their pilgrimage tasks. The TAC, on the other hand, employed other carriers to form a new palanquin brigade and banned the previous carriers from touching the Mazu palanquin on the journey. Noticing that the new carriers hired from outside were not in a position to carry out their tasks skilfully (in particular the palanquin performance), several pilgrims asked the experienced carriers why they had withdrawn their services from the brigade. A member of the palanquin association spoke of the event and how he saw it now:

“I was struck by the words of one pilgrim, who said, “Don’t you feel awful seeing our Mazu being carried like this! Why don’t you serve Mazu in this brigade”? At that moment I knew we [experienced carriers from the palanquin association] were wrong. We left Mazu in the lurch [carried improperly] on the journey because of our bad feelings toward those people [TAC members]. We should not have withdrawn from our usual tasks. Fighting with them [TAC members] resulted in damaging our Mazu. In fact we made a terrible mistake” (A-ding).

These experienced carriers subsequently registered their names for the palanquin brigade again; the TAC was unable to find carriers to replace them. Unlike the TAC members, who reside in the Mazu cult area, most of these skilled carriers from the younger generation are
emigrants who live and work in Taipei. Apart from the annual pilgrimage, they have little contact with TAC member. For these emigrants, absence from the brigade also means absence from the competitive arena with regard to the TAC. Although TAC members may have the administrative authority to lead the pilgrim group, serving in the palanquin brigade gives carriers the right to control the palanquin performance in the name of Mazu’s direction. In the event, the TAC members managed to save face and the experienced carriers from the palanquin association were downgraded to normal walking pilgrims. Finding competent alternatives required time, and the TAC desperately needed experienced carriers for the pilgrimage task on the strenuous journey. Hence a temporary compromise was reached, and both authorities were able to coexist on the pilgrimage journey.

8.1.2.2 The internal distinctions of the palanquin brigade

The majority of the experienced carriers come from the palanquin association and play a leading role in the palanquin brigade. They pushed the reform of the pilgrimage ahead by serving as Mazu’s loyal bodyguards in the palanquin brigade (cf. 5.2.2). With their strong sense of solidarity and the reformed image of the palanquin brigade attributed to them, this group of experienced carriers has impressed pilgrims since the 1990s. There are others, however, serving in this brigade. While the majority from the palanquin association act as protagonists in the brigade, the minority either adjusts to them or remains in a marginal position.

Generally speaking, physical ability and religious belief are the basic requirements for registering with the palanquin brigade, albeit the registration is voluntary, with no street control. Recruiting new members to the palanquin association, on the other hand, involves group control, where identification with group solidarity and pilgrimage reform is indispensable. Thus, not all voluntarily registered carriers can be included in the palanquin association. In this respect, internal levelling in the palanquin brigade is inescapable. One young carrier has participated in this brigade for over five years. He is assigned as a preparatory carrier, which means that he can only serve on unimportant occasions or when other carriers are absent. He says it is very difficult to enter the brigade brotherhood society (palanquin association) and encountered problems when he himself tried to enrol. Belonging to the TAC camp, another carrier also talked about the vast control exercised by people from the palanquin association:

“I have been part of the brigade since 1999. Those people [the experienced carriers from the palanquin association] usually manipulate the whole palanquin brigade. One of them even
tried to persuade me to go in a certain direction. I refused completely. Our pilgrimage is supposed to follow Mazu’s direction [e.g., the palanquin performance]; they are not supposed to manipulate it” (Tian-lai).

From Tian-lai’s point of view, carriers from the palanquin association possess the leading right in this brigade. Nevertheless, people’s relationships change. If they break down in the brotherhood, the inevitable consequence is mutual animosity. Thus, the palanquin performance becomes a competitive stage for the carriers, all of whom can claim to follow Mazu’s direction (pulling force). A dispute took place between members of the brigade, for example, on the journey in 2000. The goddess’s palanquin was carried into the destination temple about 30 minutes before the arrival of the head-flag brigade. Entering the destination temple in this manner was in fact a violation of the pilgrimage convention within living memory: members of the head-flag brigade, symbolising Maze’s vanguards, were supposed to reach the temple before the Mazu palanquin. While some Baishatun people criticised the palanquin carriers for their unforgivable mistake, others stated that the traffic brigade had failed to transmit the relevant information between the palanquin and the head-flag brigades. One carrier, an ex-member of the palanquin association, was in charge of the palanquin performance on that occasion. While he asserted that he followed Mazu’s pulling force in carrying the palanquin, he was criticised by his former companions for being both uncooperative and a show-off because he had pulled the palanquin and deliberately run into the temple,

Briefly, the palanquin performance is both pretext and weapon for the carriers in the pilgrimage arena. On the one hand, the monopoly of the carriers allows them to exploit the palanquin performance in the name of Mazu’s direction, which in turn becomes their unique weapon in contending with the TAC for the leading right on the journey. On the other hand, internal differences within the brigade can lead to lack of collaboration in the performance, whereby the goddess’s pulling force is a superb pretext for the different concerns of the agents involved.

8.1.3 The ritual arena for neighbourhood temple reputation

The Mazu pilgrimage reveals the ritual hierarchy in Baishatun. As Sangren (1987) and Ahern (1981) point out, the Chinese celestial hierarchy is perceived as imperial bureaucracy, and deities of lower celestial status are subordinated to those with higher status. In possession of high celestial status, Mazu’s temple is regarded as supreme in Baishatun. Four neighbourhood temples, dedicated to male plague gods from a lower celestial status than
Mazu, are classified as secondary temples under the goddess’s temple (cf.3.2). However, neighbourhood temples all enjoy the same status. Apart from participating in the journey individually, some people also appear in pilgrimage parades and rituals on behalf of their neighbourhood temples. How does the pilgrimage bring these neighbourhood temples into the arena? And what do people compete for?

8.1.3.1 The pilgrimage procession as a ritual arena

According to the pilgrimage etiquette in Baishatun, deities enshrined in neighbourhood temples are carried out to show reverence to the goddess Mazu during her pilgrimage activity. They appear to perform the etiquette to Mazu’s palanquin on the occasion of departure and on the day of return. They also participate in the pilgrimage parade to escort the Mazu palanquin on her return to her temple (cf. 4.2.4.3 & 4.2.4.4). While people from these temples compete for space to escort Mazu’s palanquin on the departure, the pilgrimage parade becomes their formal ritual arena on the day of return.

Why is the pilgrimage parade so important to the neighbourhood temples? On the one hand, it provides a stage for the spirit mediums in the village. It is a unique annual occasion, where the shamans from each temple display individual self-mortification rituals to demonstrate the efficacy of their gods. The size of the audience decides on whether the shaman performance will increase the reputation of the respective temple. On the other hand, the procession celebrates the pilgrimage with various kinds of folk performance troupes (zhentou), and programmes presented by neighbourhood temples compete for audience appreciation. Mazu’s pilgrimage parade is the only occasion, where all neighbourhood temple shamans are present on the same competitive stage. Thus, the parade is the best opportunity to show off the temples and promote their reputation consistent with audience reaction. This explains why, apart from local residents, people from branch temples divided from the neighbourhood temples also return to participate in the parade.

The pilgrimage parade is displayed along the way from Baishatun station to the goddess’s
temple. The walking distance is about 15 minutes, whereas the pilgrim procession lasts more than two hours. Folk performing troupes (zhentou) represent various groups in the parade, apart from the neighbourhood temple programmes. The climax of the parade is the ritual contestation of the shamans, which takes place in front of Mazu’s palanquin. Tiande Gong temple and Wuyun Gong temple are usually the leading lights in the parade. Not only because both temples have a similar reputation and about the same number of members in the area, but also because the shamans of both temples are regarded as different from and in competition with each other.

In fact, most Baishatun residents participate in neighbourhood temple organisations as members (believers). The number of members allowed for each temple is generally fixed and not affected by the shaman’s performance in the parade. Therefore, successful shaman performances symbolically represent the honour of their respective temples, which is closely related to their reputation. The Taiwanese proverb “su lang m su din” pinpoints the significance of group reputation in participating in ritual festivities, so that no one would dare to stay away from the parade, and no neighbourhood temple has ever been absent on such an occasion. In order to take part in the procession, people from each neighbourhood temple and its branch temples go about preparing for the celebration wisely so as not to risk losing face in public.

8.1.3.2 Rivalry in pilgrimage ritual and on the journey
Shamans from neighbourhood temples conduct certain pilgrimage rites and interpret the represented meaning of the second palanquin performance category on the journey. Unlike their participation in the parade, the ritual stage for shamans on these pilgrimage occasions is relatively limited, so that competition among eligible ritual professionals is inevitable. In fact, religious competence and public recognition are indispensable to victory on the ritual stage of the pilgrimage. Ritual specialists from the two renowned neighbourhood temples (Tiande Gong temple and Wuyun Gong temple) have been highly competitive in the pilgrimage since the 1950s. Moreover, the rivalry between them became more complicated after the establishment of the Mazu temple committee (TAC) in 1974. Because the TAC governs all pilgrimage rites, contestation between the two neighbourhood temples must account for the influence of the Mazu temple.

In order to understand the ritual arena of the two neighbourhood temples, I will briefly mention a renowned ritual specialist and a shaman in the living memory of both temples. The late ritual specialist surnamed Chen from the Wuyun Gong Temple monopolised
pilgrimage ritual in the past. Chen is remembered for his skills in conducting the rite of spirit-writing (fuji, wielding a divination instrument, cf. 3.2.2.3), through which he interpreted and translated the instruction of the gods for believers. Because of his special religious skills, he also acted as Mazu’s male servant until his death in 1967. The ritual position was passed on to his younger brother and then to a nephew, so that the ritual authority of the male Mazu servant was confined to his family until 2000. Another well-known shaman surnamed Hung, who was younger than Chen, came from Tiande Gong temple. He was a spirit medium of the plague god from 1935 until his death in 1997. He had a large reputation for shamanistic speaking of instruction revealed in the séance, which had helped many people to overcome problems. Unlike Chen’s ritual authority in conducting the pilgrimage ritual, his ritual skills lay in transmitting Mazu’s intention revealed in the palanquin performance on the journey.

There are two pilgrimage rites conventionally conducted by a ritual specialist or shaman. The first is the rite of choosing the date for the pilgrimage journey. It was initially performed by Chen from Wuyun Gong temple, and later by Hung from Tiande Gong temple from 1967 until the early 1980s. As a result of their specific religious skills and unanimous public acclaim, both Chen and Hung occupied the ritual stage in the pilgrimage rite. Although the reason for shifting from Wuyun Gong temple’s ritual specialist (Chen) to Tiande Gong temple’s shaman (Hung) remains unknown, the competition between both temples to conduct the pilgrimage ritual has continued. Nonetheless, Hung refused to conduct the rite in the pilgrimage in the early 1980s, because the TAC did not follow the god’s instruction as revealed in his shamanistic speaking. This also meant that Hung’s status was not entirely respected. In fact, after 1980 it became difficult for a ritual specialist to practice this pilgrimage rite, and more and more Baishatun shamans attempted to move away from the convention and compete on the ritual stage in the pilgrimage. Because no ritual professionals of public esteem could be found, the rite of choosing the pilgrimage date has excluded shaman participation for the last twenty years (cf. 4.1.1).

The second is the rite of sending spirit soldiers to stand guard and protect the Mazu cult domain, which is performed on the second day after return from the pilgrimage (cf. 4.2.6.2). Similar to the rite mentioned above, this rite was controlled by Hung in the past. It has rotated between the shamans of both neighbourhood temples in the last two decades. However, the almost balanced rivalry for this ritual stage changed when the Wuyun Gong temple shaman was dismissed in 2000 after a scandal. According to the opinion of one TAC member of the Mazu temple, the dismissed shaman was no longer allowed to perform
pilgrimage ritual. The Tainde Gong temple shaman was authorised to perform the rite when the subsequent shaman of Wuyun Gong temple failed to gain sufficient public recognition in the village.\textsuperscript{10} In this respect, the Mazu temple approbation can affect the rivalry between the two neighbourhood temples.

Moreover, there are possibilities for the shaman to contest the ritual stage on the journey. As mentioned in the fifth chapter, the goddess devoid of a spirit medium and the second palanquin performance category provide shamans with an opportunity of interpreting the meaning of the performance. I was told that the renowned shaman Hung of Tiande Gong temple used to be a famous interpreter of the palanquin performance, giving rise to many pilgrimage stories and attracting believers from other places. Following this convention, the shamans from the Tiande Gong and Wuyun Gong temples usually appear to shows off their status on behalf of their temples on the journey (cf. 5.4.2). Generally speaking, the TAC does not try to hinder the ritual shows of Baishatun shamans on the occasion of the second palanquin performance category.

In short, the competition between four neighbourhood temples in Baishatun is to a large extent a ritual stage for shamans. While shamans enter the ritual arena on behalf of their temples, showing off their religious skills and their gods in the pilgrimage parade, the competition to conduct pilgrimage rites and interpret the meaning of the palanquin performance is confined to the shamans from two temples of repute. Apart from the shamans’ religious competence and social reputation, the TAC of the Mazu temple can affect rivalry by authorising the ritual stage in a specific neighbourhood temple.

8.1.4 The competition between pilgrims and believers for personal advantage

The pilgrimage arena also includes pilgrim and local devotee competition to obtain paper charms and worship on the journey. Eade’s (1991) study shows the tension between lay helpers and pilgrims. The latter challenge the established ritual order and the power of the lay helpers to practice ritual to their own personal advantage. Although the pilgrimage discussed here does not strictly regulate pilgrim and believer ritual practice, rivalry between pilgrims and devotees does emerge en route. This sub-section will discuss the struggle for personal advantage in pilgrimage ritual, where disagreement between pilgrims and devotees on the journey is inevitable.

\textsuperscript{10} Both shamans of the two neighbourhood temples live and work in Taipei, but return quite frequently to Baishatun for their religious services.
8.1.4.1 Struggling for personal advantage on the journey

Pilgrimage ritual can be separated into the communal and the individual level (cf. 4.4.2). My concern here is the latter. To achieve the personal aim of the pilgrimage, pilgrims perform a succession of household rituals and obey taboos on the journey to the destination temple, from which they take incense ash and put it in the censers of their domestic altars on return (cf. 4.2.3.3). Meanwhile, pilgrims also bring home ritual paraphernalia with ling (divine efficacy in response to believer supplication), symbolising divine protective power, such as paper charms (“hu-a”)\(^{11}\) from temples, paper spirit money put under Mazu’s palanquin (degiaugim), and incense ash (lodan) and sacred water (gingde or jingcha)\(^{12}\) dedicated to Mazu on the journey (cf. 1.3.3.1 & ch4. no. 29). Some pilgrims insist that Mazu’s approval by casting divination blocks is required to obtain ritual paraphernalia, whereas others say praying is adequate. There is no definite rule that regulates the pilgrim ritual practice of acquiring ritual paraphernalia. Hence, competing to obtain advantage is quite common on the pilgrimage journey (cf. Chang 1993:166).

Most competition concerns paper spirit money or degiaugim put under Mazu’s palanquin, which is believed to be the goddess’s most powerful paper charm with protective and remedial functions. It is usually burned and put in the water for bathing or drinking, similar to the usage of paper charms. Since the palanquin brigade members are responsible for Mazu’s palanquin rest, it is incumbent on them to prepare and distribute degiaugim before and after each rest on the journey. Thus, members of this brigade are privileged in the access of these paper charms, while other pilgrims and believers have to plead or negotiate with them in order to get some. The demand for paper charms usually exceeds the supply, so that competition and dispute is inevitable. TAC members occasionally have to keep order when pilgrims and believers try to grab paper charms after Mazu’s palanquin is lifted up again for the departure. In fact, there are constant complaints of brigade monopoly and unfair distribution by the TAC. Pilgrims agree that Mazu’s paper charms should be distributed equally among them.

Moreover, disputes can arise between palanquin brigade members and walking pilgrims when the latter attempt to walk closer to the palanquin or carry it. The palanquin containing Mazu’s image is believed to possess the goddess’s efficacious power, so that some pilgrims try to walk beside it in the hope that the goddess will give them strength to go on walking

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11 The charms are printed on bits of paper with written messages. Ahern (1981b: 24-30) regards the charm as a sort of written document used to communicate with spirits.
12 Pilgrims usually mingle incense ash with drinking water or put it on their bodies to cure pain. Gingde is water or tee dedicated to Mazu, and is believed to contain the goddess’s efficacy after the worship.
(cf. 5.2.3 and interview of Fa-cai and Mei-li). In fact, before the palanquin brigade came into being in the early 1980s, everyone could access the palanquin. Members of the palanquin brigade now control the proceedings and decide who to allow near the palanquin and when. Nevertheless, some pilgrims feel that they also have the right to carry Mazu’s palanquin out of religious devotion on the journey, and that they should not be deprived of this right by others. Brigade control of access to Mazu’s palanquin unavoidably leads to pilgrim complaints. My observations on three journeys confirm that pilgrims frequently argued with brigade members about their right to carry or walk close to Mazu’s palanquin.

One Baishatun housewife commented on this issue:

“To tell you the truth, I’m really angry with them [the palanquin brigade members]. They are so arrogant when they escort Mazu’s palanquin that they don’t even allow us [pilgrims] to walk close to it. It is so unreasonable. They just want to show off. If gianggliu [palanquin performance] is not being performed, why don’t they let us walk close to Mazu? They just occupy the whole space around the palanquin and keep us at bay. We have always wanted to walk to accompany Mazu on the journey, and we get very excited when we walk beside her palanquin. But, those people don’t even give us [pilgrims] a chance today” (A-xiang).

Hence, pilgrims and believers compete with one another for personal advantage in accessing ling, i.e., obtaining ritual paraphernalia or walking close to Mazu’s palanquin (cf. Chang 1993). Meanwhile, palanquin brigade members are in a privileged position when it comes to achieving their individual pilgrimage goal, and leads to opposition between pilgrims and members of this brigade. As in Eade’s study (1991), the negotiable space for pilgrims is limited, since palanquin brigade members are assigned the task of taking care of Mazu’s palanquin and thus have control, making it difficult for ordinary pilgrims to compete.

8.1.4.2 The rivalry for the opportunity to worship

The reputation of Baishatun Mazu’s ling is the reason why devotees come to worship the goddess on the pilgrimage when her palanquin journeys to their place. Believers usually compete to worship the visiting goddess with offerings and incense, because of the belief that places visited by Mazu’s pilgrimage palanquin bring good fortune to the host. They even kneel down on the street to pray, struggling to induce the Mazu palanquin to visit or stay at their houses. Worship by local believers involves competing for the goddess’s special protection.

As soon as Mazu’s palanquin rests, local believers come to the resting place to worship
Mazu, generally donate money to the goddess’s temple, and provide food for her pilgrims, as mentioned in the fifth chapter (cf. 5.3.1.2). As a rule, the host of the selected resting place is obliged to donate money for devotion. Many believers compete for the chance to be a host, and as far as worship and devotion are concerned they are not niggardly, since it is believed that the pilgrimage visit paid by the goddess’s palanquin will lead to their earning more money. As mentioned in the sixth chapter (cf. 6.2.3.1.1), competitive praying to Mazu is popular with devotees in Zhanhua in central Taiwan. They even compete for religious devotion by entertaining Mazu’s pilgrims and dedicating money to her temple. The fierce competition among Zhanhua believers in 2001 produced considerable friction. Moreover, believers en route also compete to practice the *lng giauka* rite (crawling under the palanquin), which is said to give divine protection and ritual curing (cf. 4.2.2.2). After praying to Mazu, believers kneel on the ground forming a line while the Mazu palanquin held aloft passes over their bodies. The rite is generally performed after the rest, before Mazu’s palanquin launches to continue the journey. The host family of the resting place is privileged to perform the rite, and nearby residents or believers (sometimes pilgrims) can also join the line to receive divine protection. The spectacle is generally witnessed in the town of the destination, where believers crowd on the roadside, occasionally forming two lines on the ground at the same time, as the rite is performed. Due to its popularity, members of the palanquin brigade, the traffic brigade and the TAC have quite a time controlling the crowd to keep everyone safe. Disputes occasionally occur between the supplicants (believers and pilgrims) and the controller (members of the two brigades and the TAC).

In short, there are three kinds of leadership in the pilgrimage: the legal administration of the temple by the TAC, the conventional ritual authority of Mazu’s servants, and the palanquin performance in the name of the goddess’s direction. Although the governing authority can coexist with the conventional ritual authority in the pilgrimage, tension arises between TAC members and Mazu’s servants, when the former attempt to overstep their administrative right and replace the ritual authority of the latter. Further, the journeying leadership of the TAC is challenged by the palanquin carriers, who in the name of the goddess’s decision perform the palanquin performance obeyed by the pilgrims on the journey. The power of the TAC members from the senior generation is strongly contested by the palanquin carriers, who represent the emigrant reform ideal of the younger generation. Generally speaking, competition for leadership or ritual privilege between different groups is restricted to the
annual pilgrimage. Contest does not appear to have any impact on ordinary life in terms of changing human relationships or social status. On the contrary, the ordinary rivalry between local factions tends to increase on the pilgrimage. Moreover, ritual contestation for neighbourhood temple reputation is formally staged in the annual pilgrimage parade, where shamans compete keenly on behalf of their temples to conduct pilgrimage rites and interpret the palanquin performance. While the ritual arena of these temples seems to disappear at ordinary times, the contest for temple reputation emerges on the occasion of the pilgrimage. In addition, pilgrims and believers compete for divine protection to their own advantage, and the internal levelling of the pilgrim group (between pilgrims and palanquin carriers) is inescapable. Nonetheless, the struggle of pilgrims and believers for personal advantage is restricted to a certain extent, since the power of the TAC and the palanquin brigade are still dominant in the pilgrim group.

8.2 Competition for pilgrimage representation
Eade and Sallnow (1991: 10) hint at the plethora of religious discourse inherent in the pilgrimage cult. Bowman’s (1991) study on Jerusalem reveals the multiple imaginations and interpretations of the sacred site among Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant pilgrims. He proposes viewing the sacred site as a text, in which “various Jerusalems function as signs in the diverse discourses on religion, power, and identity of the visiting groups” (ibid: 98). In addition, Watson’s (1985) research in Hong Kong’s New Territories shows that the perception of Tian Hou (another name for the goddess) installed in the same temple differs according to social category. Similarly, pilgrimage representation also comprises competing interpretations and discourses, as will be explored in this section. With regard to pilgrimage representation, I will explain how various participants interpret and describe the pilgrimage individually, and who put them in writing for public consumption.13

This section will first explore various descriptions of Baishatun Mazu from the outsider and Baishatun perspective. The arena emerged when BFO attempted to introduce the pilgrimage from Baishatun’s perspective in its first book. However, portraying the “native point of view” is a debatable issue. I will then look at the dispute about improper pilgrimage representation of two Mazu images, and the threat it poses to the relationship between the central and peripheral areas of the Mazu cult. By describing different depictions of the goddess and her pilgrimage, I will show how these discourses emerge, and how they form

13 As Sperber (1996:32) suggests, the relationship between who represents, what is represented, and the user of the representation is contained in the representation.
an arena for the cultural representation of the pilgrimage.

8.2.1 Depictions of Mazu and the arena for cultural representation

8.2.1.1 Different depictions of the goddess Mazu in Baishatun

I mentioned in chapter one (cf. 1.3.1) that cults dedicated to Mazu are widespread and frequently more than a thousand years old. Wolf (1974a) and Feuchtwang (1993:35) point out that localised phenomena are common in Chinese folk religion. Bosco (1999) confirms the existence of regional variations in the Mazu cult. As a significant religious symbol, the goddess denotes multiple levels of identity ranging from the pan-Chinese identity to various local identities (ibid: 12). Folk versions of Mazu legends reflect people’s distinctive local identities in Taiwan.¹⁴ Making the analogy between Chinese genealogy and the development of the Mazu cult in Beigang, Chen Min-hwei (1984) explains how this Mazu cult became a famous pilgrimage centre through the distribution of its Mazu legends, which in turn contribute to the formation of local identity. In her analysis, the spreading of Beigang Mazu’s divine efficacy (ling) is based on two conduits: the temple committee’s preservation in the form of written texts (cf. Guo Qing-wen 1989), and the local- and outsider-believer transmission of individual experiences (ibid: 11-53).

By the same token, legends about the Baishatun Mazu also reflect localised features. Apart from an article (Luo Yong-chi 1993) introducing the foundation of the temple and the goddess’s pilgrimage, several pilgrimage legends have appeared in the annual magazine (BGZZ, published by BMCEF, cf. 7.3.1.2) since the early 1990s. My concern here is to compare different portrayals and terms that refer to the Baishatun Mazu from the perspective of outsiders and residents. Closely related to the pilgrimage, all of these depictions reveal Baishatun Mazu’s efficacy (ling) and mercy. Albeit outsiders refer to the goddess by different names, Baishatun people (local residents and emigrants) always call their Mazu (in Mandarin) Mazo in the Minnanese dialect. Some depictions by outsiders have been adopted by Baishatun people, whereas others have been categorically rejected. The Baishatun Mazu is first of all known as siann-ma in Minnanese. According to one senior informant (cf. 6.2.2.2 interview of Fulu), this term depicts their Mazu’s ling (efficacious power), which protects believers from other places and absorbs them. Although it is not known how the term emerged, most Baishatun people view siann-ma as indicating

¹⁴ Unlike the TF depiction of Mazu as Lin mo in Chinese history, for instance, a recent collection (Fanfuzi 1999) of Taiwanese Mazu legends reproduced local versions of the goddess’s stories. The most conspicuous feature of the book is the view of Mazu as a divine title that is bestowed on women who, due to their good deeds in their lifetime, become deities after death and are enshrined in Mazu temples. I heard a similar explanation from a Baishatun resident.
their Mazu’s divine efficacy. In this sense, *siann* relates to the notion of *ling-siann* or *ling*, which means divine efficacious power in response to supplicant prayers. *Ma* is a kinship term in Minnanese, referring to mother or grandmother. It is also the term for female ancestors, as Mazu is regarded as the ancestress of the lineage Lin in Taiwan (cf. Chen min-hwui 1984, Xu Yu-cun 1994, 1996). However, *siann* can also denote the efficacy of ghost spirits. For instance, the term *siann-niu* signifies powerful female ghost spirits worshipped in Taiwanese folk religion. The second meaning of *siann* refers to the ghost spirits of the *yin* world, which is in sharp contrast to the category of gods that reside in the *yang* world. Informants rarely take note of this meaning, albeit the historical Lin Mo (name of the goddess), unmarried and childless, is seen as potentially having *yin* status in line with the Chinese concept of descent (cf. 1.3.1). Nonetheless, Mazu is regarded as a goddess irrelevant to the *yin* spirit. It seems that there is a confusion of pronunciation and meaning here, where the term relates to *sing-ma* meaning sacred Mazu.

Secondly, the Baishatun Mazu is also called *qin-a-ma* in Minnanese, which literally means childlike Mazu. In a report about the pilgrimage (Chen Ban ed. 1992:4,7,12; Zhuang hua-tang 1992), the Baishatun Mazu is described as *qin-a-ma*, a term that illustrates the goddess’s divine characteristics as revealed in the palanquin performance. Since the pilgrimage is led by Mazu’s palanquin, the choice of paths and places to rest are said to be unpredictable and preternatural, and not subject to human manipulation. For instance, the palanquin once rested in an elderly couple’s small old building in 1997, despite the fact that numerous prosperous believers had set off firecrackers, made offerings of incense and prayed piously to her. Or, Mazu’s palanquin led pilgrims across a river in 2001, to the surprise of many of the pilgrims. People claim that she loves to get close to her believers on the journey, whereby she resembles a recalcitrant child unrestrained by superfluous formal etiquette. Similarly, spontaneous palanquin performances demonstrate her self-willed style, perceived as a mysterious divine arrangement. At the same time, Mazu’s childlike character also implies her efficacy, reminiscent of the famous efficacious boy-god known as *qin-a-gong* in southern Taiwan.

While outsiders often use the term *qin-a-ma* to refer to Baishatun Mazu, many Baishatun people regard the term as derogatory.15 For most Baishatun people, Mazu is someone like their mother, and her awe-inspiring efficacy protects them always. Nevertheless, there are other interpretations. Though the majority reject the term *qin-a-ma* to depict their Mazu,

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15 See also the discussion of the term as communicated in the BFO guest book in 2002, no. 332, 334, and 335.
some perceive it as focusing on the goddess’s mercy, not unlike a childlike innocence of the heart, and as making her an approachable goddess for her believers.

Thirdly, as mentioned in chapter seven (cf.7.3.2.2 interview Fen-fang), some believers in Zhanghua city call the Baishatun Mazu ah-ma or grandmother. In fact, ah-ma is a popular name for Mazu in Macao, where people view the goddess as a somewhat matronly woman (Bosco 1999:9). Similarly, believers from outside look on Mazu as their own grandmother, thereby disclosing their dependence on the goddess. Nonetheless, this term is rarely used by Baishatun people.

Finally, as Wolf (1974) and Ahern (1981b) suggest, Chinese ritual reflects people’s view of political life, where different celestial gods are treated as secular imperial bureaucrats. Drawing on pilgrimage legends of Mazu’s efficacy, Baishatun residents depict their Mazu as a representative of the supreme Emperor of Heaven who protects humans. Apart from the ritual goal, they regard Mazu’s pilgrimage journey as divine providence that can only be fulfilled by such a powerful deity as their Mazu. On the one hand, Mazu’s palanquin usually decides to rest in believers’ houses, where it is said that the respective host families enjoy divine protection that will bring them good fortune or relieve them from possible disaster. On the other hand, the second palanquin performance category (devoid of observable consequence) is believed to be Mazu’s mercy in saving malicious spirits trapped in unclean places or in hell (cf. 5.4). In this respect, Mazu’s celestial task on her pilgrimage journey is similar to that of the plague gods. With their “Tour of Inspection Representing Heaven” (dai tian xu shou) (cf. 3.2.2), the male plague gods descend to the human world on behalf of the supreme god of heaven to reward good deeds and punish immoral behaviour. Baishatun residents, adhering to the custom of their local belief, compare the celestial task of the plague gods with Mazu’s pilgrimage journey, notwithstanding the different celestial status involved. Based on pilgrimage interpretation, Baishatun residents depict their Mazu as a representative of the Emperor of Heaven to protect humans, and thus see her as unique in comparison with the other two renowned Mazu cults in Taiwan.

The different terms and portrayals of Baishatun Mazu illustrate the disparate interpretations of outsider-believers and local residents, although the arena did not emerge until BFO produced a book about the pilgrimage. Who really represents the Baishatun perspective is

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16 However, Feuchtwang (1993) regards the relation between Chinese religious and political authority as one of dissimilarity.

17 The Dajia Mazu is depicted here as a celestial diplomat for her famous pilgrimage journey involving many temples and believers on the island. The Beigang Mazu is said to be the celestial premier. As the pilgrimage centre, her temple holds the highest position in the Taiwanese Mazu cults.
therefore debatable.

8.2.1.2 The arena of cultural representation of the Baishatun Mazu

Only two articles were written by local residents on the Mazu temple and the pilgrimage before the temple annals appeared in 2003. One is a brief two-page text produced by Gongtian Gong temple; the other is a more detailed text (Luo Yong-chi 1993) written by a retired schoolteacher from the northern village. Apart from these articles, most work on the pilgrimage is written from an outsider perspective (cf. 7.3.1.2). When BFO continued with the pilgrimage records in 2001, there was a demand for texts on the pilgrimage from the local perspective.

When I was in the field, I participated in several BFO discussions about producing the book on the pilgrimage. The main BFO actors are three Baishatun emigrants living in Taipei (cf. 7.3.1.2). Three other Baishatun emigrants in Taipei were invited to the discussion. In addition, the participants were mainly outsider-pilgrims, such as a female actress from a theatre company, who has served as a gong-player in the palanquin brigade since 1994, and several volunteers (including myself) and other theatre people from Taipei and Beigang. However, BFO core members played a key role in the discussions.

The BFO book claims to present the pilgrimage from a “native” point of view. The debate on the foregoing terms and depictions took place during discussions I had with the group on how to depict Baishatun Mazu in the book. The term qin-a-ma was for the most part regarded as derogatory and was not supposed to be included in the book. According to the Baishatun emigrants, the term was coined by outsiders and falsely adopted in the first report produced by the U Theatre in 1992. “Ah-ma” was considered irrelevant because there was no such term referring to Mazu in Baishatun. To my surprise, the term siann-ma seemed problematic, but was finally adopted in the book as a synonym for “sacred Mazu” (Wu 2001:62). It was based on my interview with a resident (cf. 6.2.2.2 interview of Fulu) who mentioned Mazu’s efficacy to protect pilgrims wading across the river in former journeys and led to people calling Mazu siann-ma. The Mazu legend about wading across the river enjoys wide popularity and is retold regularly, notwithstanding highly exaggerated versions. Baishatun people prefer to link Mazu’s efficacy to the term siann-ma, which probably explains why it crops up repeatedly when this legend is told.

The analogy between Mazu and the plague gods was hotly debated, where Mazu was depicted as a representative of the supreme Emperor of Heaven. This depiction of Mazu was strongly rejected in the discussion because the analogy seemed disrespectful to Mazu, a
goddess with a higher celestial status than the male plague gods. While most Baishatun emigrants focused on the difference between these deities, the juxtaposition of the Baishatun Mazu cult with two other famous Mazu cults was ignored. To my surprise once again, when I mentioned this depiction, which had come from Baishatun residents, the emigrants were the main discussants. The depiction did not appear in the book because BFO is primarily in the hands of several Baishatun emigrants living in Taipei. Nevertheless, this depiction of Mazu is found in Baishatun itself, and in the northern and southern villages. Hence, it is not easy to discern what precisely constitutes a genuine Baishatun point of view. In fact, BFO was once criticised by Baishatun residents, who claimed that the cultural preservation work for “Baishatun people” was being implemented by “non-Baishatun people” (non-residents), in other words emigrants from Taipei. I was also informed by residents that emigrants from Taipei constantly interfered in village affairs. According to them, BFO was in the possession of considerable cultural resources and support from outside in the name of Baishatun, and as a voluntary association was an emigrant weapon for participating in the local affairs of Baishatun. The stage was set for a power arena. Similar was shown in the Mazu temple election for believer representatives and TAC members in 2003 (cf. 7.3.3.2). As a result, several people from the younger generation, including some from BFO, successfully entered the Mazu temple organisation. Since emigrants organise BFO in Taipei, the so-called Baishatun perspective is based on BFO decision-maker opinions and not those of genuine local residents of Baishatun. Therefore, Baishatun emigrants with BFO resources act as local people in addressing the public, whereas genuine Baishatun resident opinions are dismissed.

8.2.2 Competition for pilgrimage representation

The Baishatun Mazu cult distinguishes between the central (Baishatun) and the peripheral (northern and southern villages) areas (cf. 4.3.3). As Baumann (1992:99) points out, ritual comprises different and competing constituencies. People from the central and peripheral areas of the Mazu cult interpret the pilgrimage differently. This sub-section is about the competing pilgrimage discourse between different groups of people in the cult. I will explain how people from Baishatun and Shanbian, a hamlet in the northern village, attach different meanings to the pilgrimage, and how an improper description led to a dispute that threatened their relationship.
8.2.2.1 Different perceptions of two Mazu images in the pilgrimage

Pfaff-Czarnecka (1998, 2002) shows that a religious symbol can be used as a forceful political statement for different ritual constituencies, and that various participants attach multiple meanings to a religious celebration at distinctive ritual levels (1998:577). Similarly, although people from Shanbian and Baishatun participated in the same pilgrimage journey, there was no consensus on their interpretation of the pilgrimage.

Shanbian residents have worshipped Mazu’s icon communally from time immemorial. Unable to afford a temple in the past or hold their own pilgrimage journey, they joined the communal pilgrimage held by Gongtian Gong temple in Baishatun. The small icon of the Shanbian Mazu (about 20 centimetres high) conventionally occupies the lower seat in Baishatun Mazu’s palanquin when they undertake the pilgrimage journey together. Despite being a minority, Shanbian people attach meanings to the pilgrimage that differ greatly from those of the people of Baishatun. Only the Shanbian Mazu icon is allowed to sit in Baishatun Mazu’s palanquin, making the Shanbian people feel unique on the pilgrimage, albeit the reason for Shanbian’s privilege remains unknown. The Shanbian people feel that because of this special pilgrimage status they should have more privileges than the rest of the people from the northern and southern villages. Moreover, they perceive the relationship between the Shanbian and the Baishatun Mazu as sisterhood, referring to the latter as dua-ma (the eldest Mazu) in deference to her superior status. Using the notion of sisterhood, Shanbian people endeavour to promote their pilgrimage status, and consider that their relationship with the Baishatun people should be on a par with that of the two goddesses. However, this claim has been ignored by many people of Baishatun. In the opinion of the latter, Baishatun should maintain primary status in this Mazu cult, and the peripheral cult areas (including Shanbian) a secondary status.

On the other hand, two Mazu images sitting in the same pilgrimage palanquin has led to different interpretations of the palanquin performance. The Baishatun people perceive the performance as caused by their Mazu’s pulling force, whereas the Shanbian people insist that it is also caused by their Mazu sitting in the same palanquin. According to the latter’s perception, the swinging speed of the palanquin is only moderate when pulled by Baishatun Mazu but becomes violent when the Shanbian Mazu descends to the palanquin. Nevertheless, many of the Baishatun people I spoke to did not agree with this interpretation.

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18 Shanbian people speak of Mazu’s unique status, which emanates from her seat in Baishatun Mazu’s pilgrimage palanquin. They say that they themselves were once too poor to afford the journey for Mazu. In the narrative, the pilgrimage status of the Shanbian Mazu is recognised by the people at the pilgrimage centre and can therefore not be disputed by others. However, this narrative only circulates in Shanbian and is rarely accepted by Baishatun people.
Indeed, while Baishatun villagers focused on the efficacy of their Mazu and the central status of their village on the pilgrimage, the Shanbian residents, notwithstanding their peripheral cult status, insisted that their Mazu had similar efficacious power. Despite the sensitivity of this topic on both sides, the contrasting discourses on the two goddesses on the pilgrimage coexist in communal pilgrimage activity. However, discord flared up when the first pilgrimage report included an improper description of the Shanbian Mazu.

8.2.2.2 The dispute over pilgrimage representation and its impact

The first pilgrimage report produced by the U Theatre (Chen Ban ed. 1992:7) contains pictures of each of the two Mazus. The Shanbian Mazu is described as an annual “hitchhiker” in Mazu’s pilgrimage palanquin on the way to Beigang. Depicting their Mazu as a hitchhiker kindled Shanbian people’s anger. Although it happened more than a decade ago, residents quoted it repeatedly to illustrate their relationship with Baishatun. One senior resident told me how this offensive description became a serious problem and how it was solved in the end:

“It must have been a mistake by the Baishatun temple committee members. I was told by my nephew on the journey that year that the report had used the word dah biancia (hitchhike) to describe our Mazu on the pilgrimage. …This was a really serious problem! All of us [Shanbian people] spent a lot of money on the pilgrimage. Why did they say that? Actually, our young people were about to fight with the Baishatun people when we returned to Tongxiao but I stopped them because Mazu’s pilgrimage was not the right occasion to argue with them. When Mazu returned and finished yu-zng (the inspection trip), I went to the Baishatun temple and asked them [TAC members] who had started this about us. No one in the temple said anything. But I told them that this would have consequences if it was not solved properly. In the end the chairperson and twenty committee members came to Shanbian to worship our Mazu with offerings and incense, and apologised for the mistake in the report. They did apologise, and it’s better to have a harmonious relationship with Baishatun. So I told our young people to forget it” (Tian-hai).

Although the said description of the Shanbian Mazu was written by outsiders, Shanbian people saw it as coming from the Baishatun Mazu temple committee members, who usually acted as interview partners for outsiders. Because the description showed disrespect towards the Shanbian Mazu, Shanbian people felt they were being looked down on by the people of Baishatun. It became a big issue on both sides. While Tian-hai asked his village companions to accept the Baishatun people’s apology in the interests of their communal pilgrimage, some Shanbian people disagreed, albeit they could not react strongly against Baishatun
either. Another senior Shanbian resident explained why people felt it was unfair:

“How dare they say that we dah biancia [hitchhike] on the pilgrimage! This really makes us angry! Although most people want to keep the peace, I personally don’t want to accept their apology. … Even though dua-ma [Baishatun Mazu] has a large temple and we don’t, we still go on the pilgrimage journey together. It’s obvious that there are two Mazus sitting in the same pilgrimage palanquin. Why is it only the Baishatun people who receive donations of gold medals and incense money? After all, we make the journey together. Why are they the only ones to get money and gold medals? … Why do people always say that Baishatun Mazu is very ling [efficacious power]? Our Shanbian Mazu is powerful too. In fact, the pilgrimage depends a lot on our Mazu’s huatwi [showing divine efficacious power]” (A-mu).

Consequently, the Baishatun people have made efforts to preserve the relationship. Offerings of gold medals and incense money, for instance, are also dedicated to Shanbian Mazu on the pilgrimage journey. Meanwhile, both ritual officeholders and associated ritual officeholders from Baishatun and Shanbian enjoy the same status in the ritual performed at the destination temple. According to A-mu, the solidarity among the Shanbian people is still not strong enough at the moment to build a communal temple to house their Mazu. Two newly-established temples have been dedicated to two other Mazus in the hamlet owing to a difference of opinion. This lack of consensus on Mazu worship makes it difficult for Shanbian people to form an alliance to compete with Baishatun.

As a result of the error in the U Theatre report, the BFO book (Wu ed. 2001) on the pilgrimage treats the issue carefully. Only a few sentences describe the Shanbian Mazu case, including the fact that the preparation rite for the goddess is performed in her ritual officeholder’s house, and her icon carried from Shanbian to Baishatun, where it is placed in Baishatun Mazu’s palanquin to go on the journey (ibid: 28). Two pictures show both Mazu images together in the destination temple (ibid: 32, 34). According to Baishatun emigrants from BFO, a detailed portrayal of the Shanbian Mazu would be inappropriate and could lead to false promotion of the Shanbian status on the pilgrimage. For them, the Shanbian procedure is a pilgrimage convention devoid of any great significance; Baishatun remains the sole centre of the Mazu cult and the pilgrimage. Hence, the BFO book on the pilgrimage produced by Baishatun people excludes the Shanbian people’s perspective.

In fact, the ritual share between the central and peripheral areas of the Baishatun Mazu cult is unequal in terms of resident ritual obligations and privileges (cf. table 4-6). In the event of discord or conflict, cult relationships can suffer serious setbacks, such as when the majority of Xinpu villagers withdrew their share in the pilgrimage (cf. 4.3.2.1). Although the dispute between Baishatun and Shanbian has not reached the level of conflict or split, a
feeling of rancour on both sides lingers on. Despite the pilgrimage convention, the people of Shanbian did not take any kaojun flags, symbolising spirit soldiers guarding the fort, as ordered by Baishatun Mazu in 2000 and 2001 (cf. 4.3.3.2). They were of the opinion that their own deities were powerful enough to protect them. If the dissension between Shanbian and Baishatun is fuelled, it could pose a threat to their pilgrimage alliance.

In brief, various pilgrimage participants attach disparate meanings to the goddess Mazu and her pilgrimage from different perspectives. Competing discourses address the subject of two Mazu images on the pilgrimage. However, cultural representation of the pilgrimage is inextricably bound up with who controls the resources and who speaks for whom. BFO, a newly-established cultural preservation association, has evidently become a powerful agent in speaking for Baishatun people. Supported by numerous emigrants and outsiders in Taipei, the BFO book on the pilgrimage reflects emigrant opinions, while the different voices of real Baishatun residents and those of the peripheral cult areas are left out in the cold.

8.3 Discussion: the arena coexists with the community on the pilgrimage

On the background of such distinctions and competitive situations, how can we account for people’s assertions of shared belonging on the pilgrimage? Can the “community” or “we-group” coexist with contestation on the pilgrimage? Two explanations of group identification in conflicting situations are insightful in this regard. The first is the consideration of advantages and disadvantages, focusing on the cost-benefit analysis of economic resources; the second deals with social structures and people’s cognitive representations, where a particular identity is either asserted or rejected (Schlee 2004:135-6). From these two perspectives, I will explore why clashes in the arena do not of necessity lead to a split in the pilgrim group.

Holding the pilgrimage implies rich economic and social resources significant to the Baishatun Mazu cult. On the one hand, the incense money donated by believers along the journey constitutes the largest income of the Gongtian Gong temple in Baishatun (cf. 4.1.2.1 & ch4 no 7). The pilgrimage journey, which serves to absorb believers and spread the reputation of the Mazu cult (cf. 6.3.2), propagates the local cult and attracts the attention of Taiwanese society as a whole, on the other hand. Thus no contestation can afford to run the risk of jeopardising the common goal of the pilgrimage, which is to access these resources. Indeed, as soon as a clash threatens to interfere with the common goal,
problem-solving intervention follows hot on its heels. The contest for leadership (between TAC members and Mazu’s servants, and between TAC members and palanquin carriers), for example, ended in a temporary compromise in order that the pilgrimage objective can be successfully accomplished. Similarly, competition between Baishatun’s neighbourhood temples and between pilgrims and believers does not constitute an obstacle to achieving the common pilgrimage goal.

Moreover, the Baishatun goddess Mazu is the common religious symbol of group identity, despite discrepancies of interpretation. Religious devotion to the goddess on the pilgrimage is particularly exploited as a pretext for diverse concerns. Thus, when representation of the we-group focuses on the pilgrim group as a whole, the internal distinctions of the latter are attenuated. Where believers draw the cult boundary depends on the context. Hence, pilgrims from Baishatun and believers en route unite and divide in different situations, although both claim to belong to this cult. Baishatun’s local factions (e.g., TAC members, Mazu servants, and neighbourhood temple people) continue to contend with each other within the scope of their ritual positions and tasks on the pilgrimage. The distinction between residents of the central and peripheral cult areas can become a sensitive issue when cult relations are threatened. While emigrants cooperate with residents on the pilgrimage, they are the most powerful agents when it comes to intervening in the latter’s local affairs or their pilgrimage representation.

Hence, while people assert a sense of belonging on the pilgrimage, they compete at the same time in their own personal interest. Contestation, which is restricted on the pilgrimage for fear of destroying the common good, coexists with the assertion of community, constructed in different contexts.

**Conclusion**

The pilgrimage exposes the opposition in different ritual constituencies. The absence of completely institutionalised rules to conduct the journey may lead to competition for ritual privilege between the relevant agents in the pilgrim group. While the pilgrimage seems to exacerbate standard discord and competition between local factions, it can also lead to rivalry between local residents (TAC) and emigrants (palanquin carriers). The pilgrimage brings Baishatun’s neighbourhood temples into the ritual arena to struggle for temple reputation. Cooperation between Baishatun residents and emigrants appears indispensable on this occasion. In the struggle for personal ritual advantage on the pilgrimage, pilgrims
and believers compete with each other en route to access the protective power of the goddess.

Moreover, different participants attach different meanings to the goddess Mazu and her pilgrimage. Although believers depict Mazu from diverse perspectives, the cultural representation of the pilgrimage in writing relies on powerful agents, who are in possession of the resources and represent the “native” Baishatun people. The cultural preservation association supported by outsiders and Baishatun emigrants in Taipei has become a powerful agent in this regard. With Baishatun emigrants in control, the different voices of genuine Baishatun residents and the people in the peripheral cult areas are not taken into account.