Chapter 9
Conclusion

My analysis of pilgrimage focused on the ritual aspect. The pilgrimage includes a series of rituals performed at household and communal level. While the practice of ritual is crucial to believers in accessing divine protection, organisation of the local Mazu cult is ritually constructed through the pilgrimage. Pilgrimage ritual unites several villages to form a territorial community centred around the Mazu temple in Baishatun, although distinctions between the central and peripheral cult areas in terms of resident ritual shares still exist. I understand the palanquin performance as a performance-oriented ritual claimed to be the result of divine intervention and hence a vital feature of the pilgrimage. The oracles that result from the palanquin performance play a key role in leading the pilgrim group on its pilgrimage odyssey; the performance likewise provides an opportunity to produce and re-produce miraculous stories associated with the goddess’s efficacious power. In this way, the performance serves to absorb believers along the journey. The goddess’s efficacious power thus becomes a crucial resource for the construction of communities that centre on the worship dedicated to her.

Since the pilgrimage journey is devoid of a fixed route, examining its ritual topography takes on a spatial significance. The ritual topography consists of the annually selected routes and rest stops, based on the goddess’s palanquin oracles displayed on the pilgrimage journey. However, the selection is by no means random, but reflects the social map of the pilgrim group. Focusing on the social meaning of ritual topography, I argue that the flexible selection of various pilgrimage routes is indispensable to developing the ritual niche of the local Mazu cult in the western plain of Taiwan.

I have shown that the pilgrimage journey is a significant means of crossing the different boundaries of the local Mazu cult. Firstly, pilgrims endeavour to transcend their normal physical condition to follow the goddess on the pilgrim march guided by her palanquin. Their physical experience of the palanquin performance and of walking serves to demonstrate the transcendent power of the pilgrimage odyssey, during which divine intervention is constantly asserted. While performers experience Mazu’s theophany in the palanquin performance, the pilgrim’s perception of the performance centres on producing stories about the goddess’s efficacious power. Secondly, the ritual boundaries of the
Taiwanese Mazu cult are transcended through the performance of pilgrimage ritual at the destination. In this respect, the local cult deviates from Taiwanese temple hierarchy and establishes direct relations with the pilgrimage centre. Thirdly, pilgrimage travel involves crossing the geographical and social boundaries of the local cult. Apart from the actual journey to the destination, the palanquin performance display plays a key role in exploring possible alliances or forging bonds with believers en route. Hence, the pilgrimage journey is vital in spreading the reputation of this local Mazu cult.

The following three points conclude the main findings of the thesis:

1. Multiple connotations of “community” in the pilgrimage

As the case has shown, pilgrimage identity is forged by the common journeying experience, where pilgrims assert the sense of shared belonging that is indispensable to constructing “community”. While the Turnerian approach focuses on a coherent *communitas*, I suggest that different communities can be constructed in the pilgrimage context, and that the meaning of community is indeed multiple. The geographical referent is clearly a major element in constructing the territory-bound community of the Mazu cult. The wide reputation of the pilgrimage has encouraged residents of this local cult to engage in place-making projects and cultural preservation.

However, community is not necessarily confined to territory. As a concept, it can denote different human affiliations in different contexts relevant to the pilgrimage. Thus, apart from the residents of the territory-bound community, the relational cult community accounts for the participation of emigrants, who claim a sense of belonging as a result of continuous participation in the pilgrimage despite having moved away a long time ago. Neither does the pilgrimage exclude outsider-pilgrims or believers from other areas from the religious community. Their common Mazu worship allows them to assert a sense of belonging to the pilgrim group. Electronic-mediated communication, such as Internet and pilgrimage films, contributes to forming an “imagined” community, in which the collective imagination of the pilgrimage is closely linked to the common journeying experience.

Since community is constructed in various contexts, people’s identification with a specific we-group can shift according to need. Apart from the geographical referent, community as a concept can refer to different relational categories of human affiliation, such as kin relations, common religious worship, or the collective imagination of the pilgrimage. In this respect, pilgrimage based on a local cult writ large has a quality of deterritorialisation, so that community exists as abstract phenomena that provide people with a sense of belonging.
Indeed, the meaning of community today is difficult to confine to a specific territory. As the pilgrimage case has shown, translocal influence due to migration and the spread of the cult’s reputation must be taken into account.

2. The coexistence of community and arena in the pilgrimage

Apart from constructing communities, the pilgrimage exposes differentiation and provides an arena. Ritual positions and pilgrimage privileges have not been completely institutionalised, so that contestation by eligible agents seems inevitable. The pilgrimage arena can intensify existing discord between people from different local factions. While clashes seldom occur between residents and emigrants in the course of their daily lives, tension and strife can surface on the pilgrimage journey. In addition, the pilgrimage provides a platform for the power arena, where hitherto invisible discord emerges. Since holding the pilgrimage journey brings economic and social resources to the local Mazu cult, dissension and conflict are generally confined to a minimum, so as not to endanger achieving the pilgrimage goal, which promises the greatest communal benefit. Further, despite competing relations (e.g., tension, dispute and even conflict), pilgrims and believers claim their religious identity centred on the Mazu cult in Baishatun, albeit it can be inscribed with different meanings. In this sense, identification with the Mazu cult is fundamental to preventing a split in the pilgrim group through contestation. In other words, the arena is also a constituent part of the pilgrimage, and coexists with constructing communities.

Far from being a paradox, the coexistence of communities and arenas in fact reflects the complicated and fuzzy real world. Assertion of belonging to a community is crucial to people’s identity in religious activity, whereas the contest for personal advantage in the pilgrimage is a natural impulse that is achieved, even legitimised in the name of religious devotion. While stressing pure communality represents one end of the spectrum of human relations, the arena for individual or sub-group advantage occupies the other extreme. Nonetheless, extremists on both sides are rare in reality. Most people are positioned somewhere between the two poles. They claim to belong to a certain community in a certain context, and struggle against others for specific reasons.

3. Multiple social identities in the pilgrimage

Although the organisation of the Baishatun Mazu cult remains an ethnic emblem for the Minnanese, ethnicity does not play a significant role in constraining people’s participation
in the pilgrimage. Most pilgrims are Minnanese, with people of other ethnic backgrounds such as the Hakka or mainlanders forming only a small minority. Nonetheless, the boundaries between the different ethnic groups become blurred as the pilgrims share common pilgrimage rituals and similar journeying experiences. While the influence of the small non-Minnanese minority on the pilgrimage is negligible, the Minnanese are the dominant voice in the pilgrim group, where ethnic distinction can still be observed.

Bearing the name of the locality, the pilgrimage thus expresses the local identity of the Baishatun people, who are aware of their position in the wider society of Taiwanese Mazu cults. While local identity centres on the Mazu cult in Baishatun, its definition can vary in different contexts. Internal distinctions between the central and peripheral areas of the cult emerge when the Mazu shrines of individual villages are emphasised. Apart from residents of the cult domain, emigrants who identify with their home villages can also claim local identity, although they may have left the cult area a long time ago.

Religious identity in terms of Mazu worship is a more general pilgrimage category. Since Mazu worship is extremely popular in Taiwan and pilgrims come from places beyond the Baishatun Mazu cult domain, different people attach different meanings to the same Mazu belief. While Baishatun people prefer to connect Mazu worship to their locality, pilgrims from other areas focus solely on religious belief, which is not necessarily bound to a particular place.

In short, the pilgrimage functions as a cultural repertoire of resources for people to create identities, which may overlap or have different combinations. The individual assertion of identity is inextricably bound up with the practical needs of the agents.

Worship dedicated to the goddess Mazu can be appropriated for political purposes. The popularity of the Baishatun pilgrimage has run parallel to a general demand since the late 1980s for a new “Taiwanese” identity rooted in the island. The latter is in sharp contrast to the Chinese identity largely propagated by the nationalist state government after its defeat in the Chinese Civil War of 1949. The demand for a new identity coincides with more recent political propaganda, which increased when the DDP took over state control in the 2000 election. Political slogans appropriated the pilgrimage to express “Taiwanese” (in fact, Minnanese) grassroots religious culture, as the Baishatun cultural festival has shown. Paradoxically, Taiwanese grassroots religious culture today forms a sharp contrast to the culture of the Chinese elites, who promoted Mazu worship at state level for centuries.

However, the Baishatun Mazu pilgrimage requires further observation, should politicians...
continue to propagate pilgrimage activity. Similarly, the development of this local Mazu cult is worthy of further research, since internal cult distinction and competing relations within the pilgrim group could pose a threat to pilgrimage activity.