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CONCEPTS, THEORIES, & INTRODUCTIONS

The Goddess Mazu Has Many Homes: Place, Experience, and Autoethnographic Encounter With the Sacred

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This paper asks how researchers can fruitfully and respectfully approach traditions of the sacred. It centres on the author's efforts to use autoethnography to interact with the Chinese sea goddess Mazu at Nansha Tianhou Temple in Guangzhou, China. Combining methods and concepts from folklore and human geography, the paper takes an experience-centred and relational approach to religion, belief, and the supernatural while understanding the sacred in terms of excess. The paper argues that reflexive, autoethnographic openness to experiences with the sacred can help researchers understand how people are influenced by the sacred and how this influence is productive of culture, society, and place. Through the autoethnographic study at the heart of this paper, the author experiences Mazu (who transcends folklore, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism) as a complex and multifaceted figure, combining a young woman, a tutelary deity, and the imperial Tianhou (Queen of Heaven). The author's interactions with Mazu prompt thoughts about home and belonging, highlighting subjectivity and divine agency in the experience of the sacred.

Introduction

This paper asks how researchers can fruitfully and respectfully approach traditions of the sacred. It is centred on my own efforts to use autoethnography to come into relation with Mazu 妈祖, a popular Chinese sea goddess who transcends folklore, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Combining methods and concepts from folklore and human geography, I take an experience-centred and relational approach to the sacred (Hufford, 1982a; Qin, 2018) while understanding the sacred in terms of excess (Arumugam, 2020a). This is an attempt to approach belief, the supernatural, and the sacred on the terms negotiated by those who have the most stake in them—worshippers, religious professionals, and the deities themselves.

Because I advocate here for perceiving the sacred through experience of relations, much of the writing that follows is unavoidably personal. The sacred may be inhuman, but experience of the sacred (like all experience)

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can never be objective or impersonal. As the folklorist David Hufford (1995, p. 58) argues concerning the study of religion, impersonal academic writing turns 'objectivity' into "the name of a rhetorical style [...] By leaving ourselves out of our accounts, we simply leave the subjective realities of our work uncontrolled." I thus ask readers to excuse my deviations from norms of scholarly writing. These norms are disciplining tools of a globalised academia that enforces the logics of European Modernist rationality (Kilomba, 2012).

"You don't *believe* in Mazu, do you?"

For the past year, I have, whenever possible, been visiting temples dedicated to Mazu. I have been to temples on Meizhou Island and Macao in China, to temples in Malaysia and Singapore. I have placed a small statue of Mazu from Kuala Lumpur so it stands facing the front door of my apartment, for reasons unknown to me.

I first encountered Mazu in the Penghu archipelago over a decade ago. If you ask why I am drawn to Mazu, I can give several answers, related variously to my interests in folk belief, vernacular religion, islands, and Chinese cultural history. Somehow, these answers never seem to be enough, neither for me nor for others.

A few months ago, my nine-year-old son asked me, "But you don't *believe* in Mazu, do you?" This is a question I have been asked in various forms ever since I began studying what might be called 'the supernatural': "So, you are studying fairies. But do you *believe* in them?"

I do not *believe* in Mazu, but neither am I entirely sure what belief in Mazu might look like. To take a religion seriously is to act as though its deities exist and have power (Chau, 2019). In the case of Mazu, and many other Chinese deities, however, there is nothing like the Judeo-Christian God's insistence on exclusive devotion in the absence of clear evidence, the Kirkegaardian leap of faith toward the unknowable (Climacus, 1846). Mazu simply *is*, and if you do not care about her, she is unlikely to care about you.

Yet Mazu is not just any goddess: She is among the most prominent female deities in China, second only to the bodhisattva Guanyin, and is the Chinese deity with the widest and deepest reach outside the Chinese mainland, particularly in Taiwan. Prayers are offered to Mazu, pilgrimages are made to her centres of worship, and she crosses over into popular culture. Furthermore, perhaps to a greater extent than any other major Chinese deity, Mazu is personalised: She exists in an exceptional tension between human, tutelary deity, and celestial royalty.

In the next section, I discuss more deeply the limits to knowing the sacred outside the realms of experience and relation. This is followed by an overview of narratives concerning Mazu. After that comes an autoethnographic account of 20 hours spent at and around Nansha Tianhou Temple 南沙天后宫, seeking experience of the sacred. Next, I analyse my experiences, before ending with a brief conclusion.

An experience-centred and relational approach to the sacred

One way of learning about Mazu is to read primary and secondary sources related to the origins and development of what is now called the Mazu 'faith' 信仰. Another way is to study the customs of those who practice this faith. These are both worthwhile scholarly activities, and they form part of my ongoing research into interactions between people, place, and the sacred in present-day China. But they are at best indirect ways of encountering Mazu. Historiography of religion is liable to get bogged down in questions of historical truth and to privilege elite perspectives. Research into religious practice *per se* may tell us more about culture and society than about the sacred. Even ethnography, which is so helpful for learning how people see the world, does not provide "access to [...] the extraordinary world of others" (Kahn, 2014, p. 239).

Writing in the discipline of folklore, Hufford (1982b, p. 47) speaks of scholarly 'traditions of disbelief' concerning supernatural experience, that is, the—often unacknowledged—starting point "that supernatural beliefs arise from and are supported by various kinds of obvious error." This approach distances the researcher from believers and prevents the researcher from understanding narratives in the same manner as those to whom these narratives belong. For Hufford (1995), it is absurd to insist that religious belief is a scholarly impossibility while disbelief is impartial and disinterested: Spiritual questions are of such significance to humanity that *no one* is a disinterested party. There is no escaping subjectivity. The valorisation of rationality, which is so critical to various elite strands of Western thought that developed within European Modernity, is itself a tradition of belief (Hufford, 1982b).

Attempts to sidestep the issue by not taking belief seriously are both patronising and poor scholarship (Kahn, 2014). Belief can neither be compartmentalised nor taken as a monolithic, culture-blind, universal concept. Perhaps *belief* itself is a nonstarter (Gatling, 2020). To even regard belief as a variable is to take disbelief as standard. It is thus that Hufford (1982a) advocates an 'experience-centred approach' as a means of looking more deeply into that which underlies belief. The experience-centred approach has an empirical focus on the phenomena that experiencers report, while being reflexively self-critical of one's own position as a researcher.

I wish to suggest here that, when taking an experience-centred approach to the sacred in China, it can be useful to also adopt a perspective of *guanxi* 关系 or 'relation'. The Chinese political scientist Qin Yaqing argues that a relational perspective is foundational to a Chinese thought that conceives of being as taking form through the agentic interactions of mutually constitutive actors (Qin, 2018). Such actors need not be people but can be ideas, and relations matter even if they are not understood or acknowledged in the same way by all actors (Grydehøj & Su, 2021). This perspective has subsequently been deployed in human geography to study place- and space-making processes (Grydehøj et al., 2021; X. Zhu & Grydehøj, 2023; Su & Grydehøj,

2021). In common with the experience-centred approach's affirmation of subjectivity, this relational perspective necessitates rejection of monolithic identities and universalising frameworks that exist outside relation. Drawing upon Fei Xiaotong's concept of 'cultural self-consciousness' (Fei, 2013), Ou Zuan et al. argue that China and Chinese culture are themselves continually reimagined into being through complex relational exchanges (Ou et al., 2024): There are as many Chinas as there are people who care about and engage with China. Folklore and traditional culture are important elements in the construction of Chinese subjectivity and cultural self-consciousness (Se, 2022).

This allows us to consider the Chinese supernatural as the experience of relations. Humans and deities (regardless of whether we 'believe' in them) produce one another through situated and personalised interactions. This combined experience-centred and relational approach respects both the experiences of believers and the spatialised social and cultural contexts in which experiences occur.

When studying religion or belief, such an approach could involve asking: How do people experience interactions with deities? Believers may experience deities in different ways that express the deities' complex agency. Supplicants may find that their prayers are answered: Business ventures may be successful, health may improve, family conflicts may be resolved, disasters may be averted. People may see, physically encounter, be spoken to by, or be mentally manipulated by deities. Deities may harm or kill. Just as human actions (prayers, offerings, neglect, offense, etc.) may prompt human experience of reactions by deities, the actions of deities may inspire humans to take certain actions themselves, thereby contributing to the production of culture and society.

This role of deities in social and cultural production is demonstrated by Chang Hsun's place-sensitive study of the Mazu faith in Taiwan, which shows how localisation of ritual and mobile materialisations of the sacred (statues, incense fire, and incense ashes) are inseparable from people's experiences of the goddess (Chang, 2012). Because people experience Mazu within the structures of human society, ritual activities of the Mazu faith coexist with and serve to justify a range of other cultural practices, so "that sacred space and sacred time are never completely separated from the mundane world" (Chang, 2012, p. 303; see also Hatfield, 2019).

A variety of this experience-centred relational approach is evident in the work of Indira Arumugam, who considers spatialisations of the supernatural and human-deity relations. Arumugam (2020b) emphasises 'divine agency', expressing wariness of scholarly "tendencies to see religion primarily as a reflection of other social, economic, and political pressures." Because both humans and deities are shaped by their home places, migration will occasion changes in practice and character: Just as Tamils find themselves dislocated in Singapore, the goddess Periyachi finds her mobility and agency constrained in urban Singapore in ways that it is not in her Tamil Nadu homeland

(Arumugam, 2020b). This is partly because landscape change and migration facilitate the socialisation of deities. Arumugam (2020a, pp. 52–53) sees the sacred as essentially *excessive*: It is the nature of deities to resist socialisation and the application of human norms, to "exceed human institutions and transactions. They evade attempts to fix them through cosmology, architecture, iconography, and ritual. Overwhelming human intentions, the sacred forcefully asserts its own will." Experience of the sacred reveals it to be extra-cultural: Both gods and monsters "evade their creators' control and ultimately culture itself. They stop being metaphors of and for something and take on a life of their own. [Their] sheer surfeit of life, beyond human conception and containment, makes them meta-social" (Arumugam, 2020a, p. 47). This is the sacred as excess.

What, then, is the best way to study the sacred? It might be best to ask believers about their experiences. But is this enough? After all, deities and other supernatural phenomena are productive of culture and tradition (people's experiences influence human social and cultural practices), yet as argued above, these phenomena *as they are experienced* are not entirely enclosed within culture and tradition. Similarly, a reflexive researcher cannot regard themselves as standing external to the society, culture, and relationships they study. Researchers can instead benefit from opening themselves up to experiences of the sacred. In the case of the Mazu faith, this would mean that researchers can seek to relate with and experience Mazu.

Methods and study site

In this study, I employ autoethnography as a means of coming into relation with and communicating my experiences with the goddess Mazu. Autoethnography here is both a research method and an expressive mode. Significantly, the focus of the present autoethnography is on my own attempts to experience Mazu, not on my experiences with other people who engage with Mazu.

I come from a tradition of disbelief. Although I acknowledge Mazu's social and cultural impacts, my lack of belief in Mazu makes it difficult for me to observe Mazu in the field. An artificial suspension of this disbelief (that is, a temporary bracketing of Mazu's truth or untruth) for research purposes would be disrespectful to both Mazu and believers. It would also deny me access to the experiential world of someone who actively engages in the Mazu faith.

I seek to move beyond this impasse by situating myself as a participant in the goddess' social interactions with humans. That is, although I cannot rationalise my disbelief out of existence, I can locate myself in places and practices that seem conducive to experiencing the goddess. Mazu can be present anywhere and everywhere, yet there are places (e.g., temples, islands, coastal areas, boats) and practices (e.g., ritual greetings, prayer, photographs and selfies, wishing, videoblogging, contemplation) that seem to be particularly associated with experiences of Mazu.

In September 2022, I began involvement in a collaborative research project concerning interactions between people, place, and the sacred in present-day China. This project combines secondary research, ethnographic drawing, and more traditional ethnographic methods (including interviews and participant observation). I have been seeking in parallel to open myself to experiences of the sacred. The case reported in the present paper is just one particularly intensive instance of this reflexive research work: On 27-28 November 2023, I spent 20 hours at and around Nansha Tianhou Temple. During these 20 hours, I engaged in the kinds of ritual activities that traditionally occur at temples dedicated to Mazu, though as noted below, engaging in some typical ritual activities proved impossible. I more generally spent time reflecting on my emergent understandings of the goddess within a sacred environment suffused with and dedicated by humans to the spirit of Mazu. This paper is autoethnographic in that I focus on my own thoughts and experiences in the field. Whereas the wider project also intends to produce learning about other people who interact with deities, this was not the focus of the research visit reported here. This visit was designed to focus on my personal interactions with Mazu, rather than on engaging with or observing others with whom I shared the sacred space.

During my time at Nansha Tianhou Temple, I recorded my impressions by taking photographs of both me and my surroundings. I also made a series of audio recordings of the soundscapes in which I found myself, which I have listened to later, in the process of writing up this paper. These recordings included such diverse sounds as human voices, mediated music from shops, insect chittering and birdsong, footsteps, bells, dialogue and music from a series being streamed on someone's phone, boat noises, and the wind. I took extensive handwritten fieldnotes both of what I experienced and of my own feelings and reactions to these experiences. Most of the writing in the empirical section below concerning my own feelings and sensations is taken directly from the fieldnotes, with minimal editing. The wider narrative largely follows the observations I recorded in the notes, supplemented by recourse to the audio recordings and photographs (some of which are included below).

Not all the feelings or fleeting thoughts I had during this period make sense to me now (and not all of them made sense to me then), but inasmuch as these were products of the autoethnographic process, I include them here. Inevitably, my 20 hours at and around the temple also included some mundane thoughts and activities that are not described in this paper.

It may be asked whether a 20-hour research visit is sufficient to know the sacred. No amount of time will ever suffice to know the sacred, for the sacred always exceeds knowing. Experience of the sacred is an ongoing process that is inevitably perceived on a personal level through lenses of belief and disbelief. It is thus with intention that I write of my desire to "come into relation with" Mazu, rather than to "get to know" Mazu. Despite Mazu's unknowability, I argue that through experience and practices of relation, it is possible to become more proximate to—though never coincident with—her.

The study site is itself significant. Nansha Tianhou Temple is located on Dajiao Mountain 大角山 in Nansha District at the southeastern periphery of the city of Guangzhou. Guangzhou is today at the core of the Greater Bay Area megacity region, which arose out of the Pearl River Delta's island and archipelagic cities. Island geography has been crucial to the millennia-long development of this part of China, providing ideal spaces for locating centres of state power, easily defensible colonial enclaves, and port construction for trade with Southeast Asia and across the Indian Ocean (T. Lin & Su, 2022; Su & Grydehøj, 2022). The Mazu faith flourished in this island and coastal environment, with its numerous fishing communities and its reliance on waterborne transport and trade. Landscape change, including large-scale land reclamation over the past centuries, means that the prominence of water within conceptualisations of the Pearl River Delta has lessened, yet Nansha remains a collection of river islands that have over a long period been constructed out from wetland and water spaces. At the time that the Mazu faith became established in Nansha, Dajiao Mountain would have been a freestanding rocky hill rising out from the Pearl River.

Narratives of Mazu

There is no single story of Mazu. A multitude of spatiotemporally situated narratives have contributed to a Mazu whose present is felt by different people in different ways. Regardless of whether the sometimes mutually contradictory stories about Mazu possess 'historical truth', they have influenced Mazu's character, how people react to her, and subsequently how she acts toward people. Today's Mazu is inseparable from historical accounts of her activities.

In this paper, I distinguish between three 'figures' or aspects of the goddess: *Lin Mo* 林默 ('Silent Lin', the goddess as human), *Mazu* 妈祖 ('Maternal Ancestor', the goddess as tutelary deity with specialised protective functions), and *Tianhou* 天后 ('Queen of Heaven', the celestial goddess with an expansive range of action). These distinctions, though conceptually useful, are artificial: The goddess is composed of all three figures simultaneously. When I wish to emphasise a specific aspect of the goddess, I hereafter refer to this figure in italics (e.g., *Mazu*); I use the non-italicised term 'Mazu', 'the goddess', or 'the deity' to refer to Mazu more generally.

On the basis of biographies, shrine and temple records, and genealogies, most scholars hold that Mazu was a real person prior to becoming a goddess. The human *Lin Mo* is traditionally said to have been born on Meizhou Island (Putian, Fujian Province) on the 23rd of the third lunar month, 960 CE. According to the late-Ming dynasty *Record of Heavenly Concubine's Epiphany* 天妃显圣录, the goddess received the epithet *Mo* 默 ('Silent') because she did not cry as an infant (Chen et al., 1987). As she grew older, *Lin Mo* acted as a sorceress or shaman, and her early miracles are depicted as relatively simple and localised (T. Zhu, 1986), for example fortune-telling. *Lin Mo* remained unmarried throughout her life and died at a young age, customarily

27 or 28. She is variously said to have drowned (either by suicide or while attempting to rescue her father), to have died of disease, or to have ascended to Heaven (in line with Taoist concept of corporal liberation *shijie* 尸解) (X. Wang & Lin, 2013).

Within a short time of her death, shrines were being built to *Lin Mo* on Meizhou out of reverence for her powers and a desire to receive blessings. The construction of ancestral temples shows she rapidly entered the island's system of local deities (X. Wang & Lin, 2013). The goddess' popularity grew alongside her reputation as an effective benefactor and protector (T. Zhu, 1986). As belief in the goddess spread from Meizhou to elsewhere in Fujian, *Mazu* became somewhat disconnected from *Lin Mo*, and her connection with the water was strengthened. Some Song dynasty (960-1279) texts portray *Mazu* as a dragon (a water deity in Chinese tradition, with links to imperial power), capable of traversing the sea on a bamboo mat or flying over the ocean in vermilion robes, and she is said to be able to control water, vanquish monsters, rescue distressed ships, defeat robbers, alleviate floods and droughts, and cure epidemics (Li, 1997; Xie, 1990)—many of which are activities of particular relevance to Fujian's island and coastal fishing communities.

From the Song dynasty onward, the *Mazu* faith expanded beyond Fujian, a process that was linked to significant changes in Chinese society, including substantial migrations of people. In 1123 CE, *Mazu* received formal Northern Song dynasty (960-1127) imperial court recognition as a deity of seafaring and protection, following her rescue of a government official who was sailing to Goryeo (Chen et al., 1987; G. P. Lin & Su, 2021). During the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279), the official conception of the goddess focused more on her as a public service-minded deity, engaged in official acts such as putting down rebellions, defending against foreign enemies, transporting people and materials, rescuing starving people, and contributing to water conservation efforts (Li, 1997). After a series of miraculous feats in the national defence and public welfare, the imperial courts of the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties (960-1911) praised and crowned the goddess a total of 35 times, with her title being continually elevated, until she attained the status of *Tianhou*, thereby completing her transformation from a general female deity to a goddess of war (X. Wang & Lin, 2013). However, the *Tianhou* of state rituals never overwhelmed the popular *Mazu* faith, and the goddess retained followers among ordinary people (Li, 1997).

Concurrently, from the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) onward, *Mazu* was integrated into the three officially supported orthodoxies of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. In line with Confucian ethics, *Mazu* was gradually seen to embody loyalty, filial piety, and benevolence (Xie, 1990). This development was supported by the many tales of *Lin Mo*'s self-sacrificing behaviour that flourished in the Yuan and Ming dynasties (1271-1644). These include what is now the most-famous *Lin Mo* story, in which the young woman falls into a trance while weaving at the loom, and her spirit

rushes off to rescue her drowning brothers and father. Other stories that supported Confucianism's embrace of the goddess involve *Lin Mo* blessing ships, assisting soldiers in fighting off bandits, preparing medicines to cure poor people's illnesses, and setting her own house ablaze as a guide light for endangered boats (G. P. Lin & Su, 2021). Meanwhile, stories about *Lin Mo* obtaining talismans from wells, praying for rain, exorcising spirits, and ascending to Heaven all bear Taoist overtones (G. P. Lin & Su, 2021), and a Buddhist legend emerged in which *Lin Mo*'s birth was brought about by the divine intervention of Guanyin (M. Wang, 1996). That is, even as *Tianhou* rose in official prominence, attention kept returning to the resolutely human figure of *Lin Mo*, who could help ground *Mazu* as a goddess of the people.

Worship of *Mazu* outside Fujian was initially predominantly among Fujianese migrants, with temples serving as places for maintaining hometown community connections, hence Mazu's popularity on the adjacent island of Taiwan. Other social institutions gradually took on this role during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), however, and the temples began serving a broader demographic, encouraging *Mazu*'s shift into a more pan-Chinese deity (Li, 1997). *Mazu*'s movement out from Meizhou and across China also led to the goddess taking on attributes of and sometimes merging with preexisting local deities. For instance, *Mazu*'s partial fusion with the goddess Chen Jinggu 陈靖姑in Gutian, Fujian, encouraged associations of *Mazu* with fertility rituals (Xie & Zou, 2011). Away from her island and coastal homelands in east Fujian, *Mazu* adopted locally relevant protective functions. Among the Miao of Songtao, in landlocked Guizhou Province, *Mazu* became a water goddess protecting tea ancestor trees *chazu*茶祖, and temples attached to merchant guild houses in northwest China often depict *Mazu* as a goddess of wealth (G. P. Lin & Su, 2021). In the mountainous Hakka areas of west Fujian, *Mazu* was venerated for her role in extinguishing fires (Xie, 1994). Through localisation, *Mazu* has gradually expanded in influence and become the 'classic' and 'standard' deity of multiple geographically and ethnically distinct regions (X. Wang & Lin, 2013).

As Chinese people travelled outside the Chinese mainland, the goddess evolved into a symbol of global Chinese identity. Overseas Chinese believers often travel to the main temple on Meizhou, and *Mazu* has come to be used as a cultural bridge, connecting the Chinese mainland with Taiwan and the global Chinese diaspora. It is thus that *Lin Mo/Mazu/Tianhou* has become a goddess with many facets and many places.

In the next section, I present the results of my autoethnographic research visit to Nansha Tianhou Temple.

Results: A visit to Nansha Tianhou Temple

The first day

I arrive at my hotel in the early afternoon. This beautifully constructed boutique hotel is called Mo Niang Home 默娘之家 (*Silent Maiden Home*). It is meant to represent the house of pre-deification Mazu herself.

It is not the first time I have come to Mazu's dwelling. On my May 2023 visit to Meizhou, I was taken to a creative reconstruction of Lin Mo's house, which belongs to the Goddess's Cultural Relics Park 天妃故里, on which construction began in 2020. Although the interpretative signs made clear that the house was new and designed to depict life for a well-to-do family in tenth-century Meizhou, I had been perplexed by my guide's habit of encouraging me to treat the building as Lin Mo's actual house. "Here is Lin Mo's bedroom," "Here is where Lin Mo did her weaving," and so on.

Now, seven months later in Nansha, I will be eating and sleeping in another of Lin Mo's houses.

As is typical of mountainside temples in China, Nansha Tianhou Temple is laid out with a ceremonial gate at the bottom, leading up to a succession of tiered plazas, flights of stairs, passageways, and worship halls. My hotel is located halfway up, less than two minutes' walk from the temple's mid-level. I thus have the strange feeling of approaching the goddess from the wrong direction as I step over a low wall and onto a flight of side stairs rising from the base of the mountain. Below me, in the distance and at ground level, I can see the back of a large granite statue of Mazu, facing the Pearl River. I feel embarrassment, bordering on mild shame, because I have failed to approach Mazu from the river, failed to bow and greet her face-to-face prior to making my way up the mountain. I had wondered if staying at the hotel on the mountain would bring me closer to Mazu, but I immediately feel it underlines my status as an interloper in someone else's home.

On one side of this mid-level plaza is a gift shop with woodwork products. On the other is a shop selling glass votive bells, which tinkle prettily in the breeze. I stop to listen to the bells, then proceed to the building on the long end of the plaza. This is the Main Hall, with a large, gold-painted sandalwood statue of *Mazu* in the centre. To the right is a smaller statue, a copy of the ancient black-faced statue of the goddess from Meizhou, which can be carried on a litter during processions. I stop and bow before them both. Along the side walls of the hall are large statues of eight government officials who, the interpretative sign explains, were influential in spreading the Mazu faith and were deified as a result.

On this and subsequent visits to the Main Hall, I am surprised at the lack of *devotion*. Some people pray briefly, and some even kneel before the central statue, but this seems more perfunctory than the prayer rituals I have observed elsewhere. Furthermore, I never see any religious professionals such as monks or oracle interpreters in or outside the temple, and there is a complete absence of the usually ubiquitous incense and divination tools such as fortune sticks *kau cim* 求籤. Although it is true that I am visiting the temple on an ordinary weekday, the absence of the paraphernalia of devotion seems to affect visitors' interactions with the goddess. These exclusions are likely intentional: I assume the temple administrators are emphasising its status as a scenic spot and reducing its potential for hosting folk religious activities, prioritising cultural heritage over engagement with the sacred.

Most visitors treat the temple as a leisure park, as a nice place to go for the day—and yet this leisure activity is not precisely disconnected from Mazu. Although I witness little in the way of intensive prayer, nearly all visitors at least briefly step inside the Main Hall, and most subtly bow to the statue. Mazu is not receiving many supplications, but she is not just there for decoration; she is being greeted and acknowledged.

Although concealed from the plaza, walking behind the Main Hall provides access to a broad flight of stairs leading up to the Resting Hall. The English portion of a bilingual sign reads:

> The Resting Hall is the living room of the Goddess, where a sitting sculpture of the goddess is displayed together with some simple instruments of her daily life. It suffuses the hall with peacefulness, which makes people get more comprehension about the goddess that:Originally, the Goddess is am ordinary person thousand years ago who is virtuous,kindhearted and courage to sacrifice. [*Here, and below, errors in the original text have been retained.*]

True to the sign, there is another statue of Mazu in the centre of the Resting Hall. Yet whereas the Main Hall's central statue has the appearance of the goddess in her *Tianhou* or Queen of Heaven form, and its secondary statue resembles Meizhou's young *Lin Mo*, the goddess of the Resting Hall has a less gilded and more *lived in* appearance: This is Mazu as *Lin Mo*, but at a greater age than the human *Lin Mo* ever attained. It is a Mazu statue in this style that I have, in miniature form, sitting in my own home.

Figure 1. Simple instruments of her daily life. © Adam Grydehøj, 2023.

On the far right of the Resting Hall is a bed chamber, and beside that a chamber with a writing table and musical instruments lined up against the wall. On the far left is a loom for weaving, and beside that a chamber with an eating table, chairs, and implements for tea. Do gods have such quotidian habits? I can imagine Mazu sleeping, combing her hair, playing the zither, and drinking tea—but weaving at the loom? Did she not do enough weaving in her time as a human?

Fewer visitors enter the Resting Hall than the Main Hall, but when they do, they tend to bow not just to the statue of Mazu but before each chamber, empty though it is of statuary. This makes me wonder whether I really ought to be taking photos of the rooms, whether this is as much an imposition on the sacred as if I took photos of the enthroned Mazu statues themselves.

It is funny, I think, yet again, that people treat this as Mazu's house. The Resting Hall was constructed over a millennium after the time of, and more than 600 km distant from the site of, *Lin Mo*'s death. It *cannot be* Mazu's house. Or maybe, I do not know, it could be. It depends on how much of the historical *Lin Mo* remains in Mazu. Because *Lin Mo* might have just lived in a nondescript, nonheritagised building on ancient Meizhou, but Mazu has many homes. I am renting a room in one of these houses tonight. Mazu dwells wherever people want her, wherever she is needed.

"In my Father's house are many mansions." These words of Christian scripture come into my head—words from another religion I did not inherit. With this, the biblical Jesus promises his followers there will be a place for them all in Heaven.

Mazu is otherwise. Mazu promises no afterlife. Unlike the bodhisattva Guanyin, Mazu cannot even do much to help someone in their *next life*. All the finery and grandeur of *Tianhou* notwithstanding, Mazu is a goddess for the here and now. Mazu will not build dwelling places for her followers in a heavenly paradise; her followers must build dwelling places for her on Earth. And so, while Mazu has her regal statues in the form of *Tianhou*, I suspect it is the duality of *Mazu/Lin Mo* that makes people wish to spend time with her. Mazu is more sociable than most major Chinese deities, and knows more of human love and suffering. She did not kill anyone or do battle before becoming a goddess. There is no need to fear her fury. It is because Mazu was formerly *Lin Mo* that we have faith in *Tianhou*'s willingness to use her near-limitless power to help humanity.

Lin Mo, *Mazu*, *Tianhou*. All these names for the same goddess. Which goddess do we worship? To whom do we pray? Who do we adore? With whom should we seek protection? Which one makes for the best TV? With whom would you like to drink a beer?

Here I am, in one of Mazu's houses. When it becomes evening, the tourists will leave, the attendants will lock the doors, and they will turn off the lights. And Mazu will have the house to herself. Well, what is it that Mazu does when the tourists are gone? Who is Mazu when she is at home, and who is Mazu when she is away?

I leave the Resting Hall and take the steps farther up the mountain, to the base of a pagoda. The sign's English reads:

> The Nanling Tower, an eight floors building, rises to a height of 45 meters.There are two purposes of building the tower,one is the height which balances Dajiao Mountain main peak,the other is about the saying"Left-cyan dragon".The tower is not only the navigation to the ships ,but the marker of Nansha Tianhou Temple when people overlook the palace from far.When the wind is coming,the 56 bell which hang at the corner of the tower, will tinkle through the palace.Once the tourists climb the top,it affords a fine view of Tianhou Temple.

I walk into the arched tunnel at the base of the tower. The door to the staircase is locked. For all that the sign promises a 'fine view', Nanling Tower is best viewed from a distance.

I follow a trail off to the right, curving higher up the mountain. There are fewer people here. I encounter three young men three times: first taking macho selfies, later performatively scaring themselves at my approach in a dark tunnel, and finally playing a collectable card game in the depression of an old gun battery. Also, a family group of some kind, evidently with a historical interest. The top of the mountain contains various pieces of military architecture, and I learn from scattered interpretive signs that these fortifications defended the entrance into the Pearl River from Westerners in the Opium Wars (unsuccessfully) and then from the Japanese in 1937-1938 (successfully).

I am eager to get a look at the temple and the surrounding river and island spaces from the top of the mountain. So, I keep climbing, keep coming to fortification platforms (now outfitted with stone benches), keep listening to birdsong and crunching dry leaves underfoot, keep going through tunnels and hearing the echo of my footsteps, keep circling back and moving forward, keep looking for an overview that does not come.

I am less surprised than I am stubborn. In my European culture, there is an obsession with the overview, with the lookout point, with the illusion of seeing everything at once. No one would make and maintain a path up a mountain without ensuring you get a great view from the top. I am still learning not to expect this in China, where it has been my experience that most mountain paths end in a clearing or a pavilion surrounded by trees, with no clear view. The purpose of the path up the mountain is not to see one's surroundings more clearly but is something else. Yet here, in the ruins of a fort, I glimpse the pagoda and temple through the leaves and, gazing up, see a network of branches set against the sky—dark wood, green leaves, blue heavens—looking for all the world like a satellite image of a river delta.

Figure 2. Looking for all the world like a satellite image of a river delta. © Adam Grydehøj, 2023.

I go back down the mountain. This time, all the way down, past the Main Hall and through the Hall of Blessing, where *Mazu*'s two guardian demons—her conquered suitors or marauders, Thousand-Mile Eye and Wind-Following Ears—stand watch. Through the archway, I see the backs of a pair of stone lions, then the ornate ceremonial gate, and finally, in the distance, the back of the great Mazu statue. I am stuck doing everything in reverse.

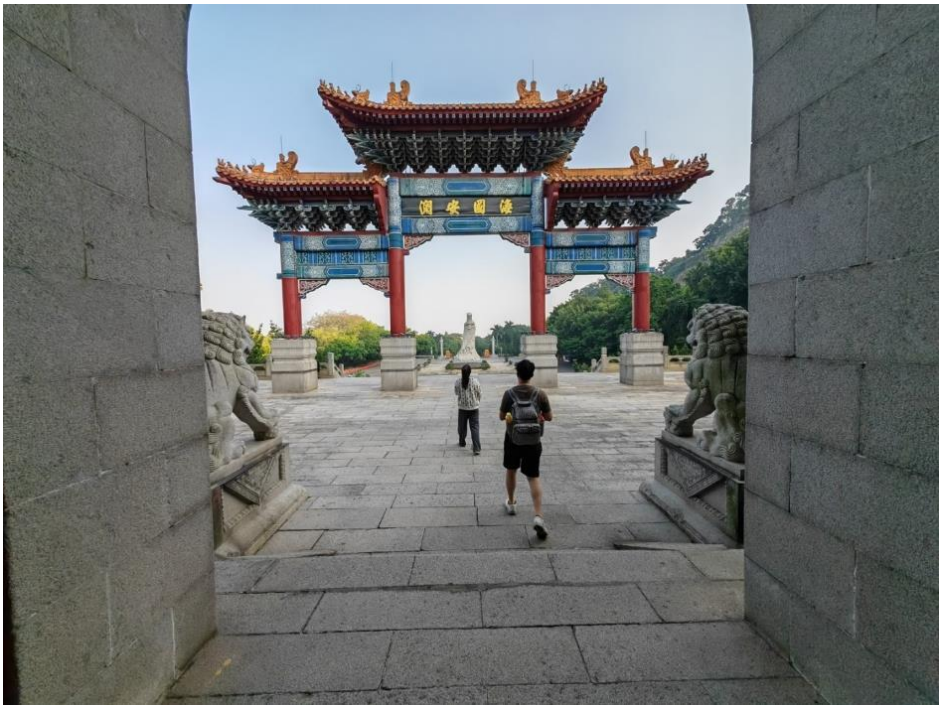

Figure 3. Stuck doing everything in reverse. © Adam Grydehøj, 2023.

I come around to see the statue from the front. This Mazu resembles the largest mountaintop statue on Meizhou: *Tianhou* in her imperial regalia, militaristic, and carrying the ceremonial sceptre *ruyi* 如意, her symbol of power. This is the Mazu who can do anything, if she feels like it.

The temple looks magnificent, rising up the mountain. I am reminded that in the not-so-distant past, the plaza on which I stand would have been river, and I would be drowning, and it would be pretty helpful to have a sea goddess to call upon.

Figure 4. The temple looks magnificent, rising up the mountain. © Adam Grydehøj, 2023.

I walk back up through the temple. It is nearly 17:00, closing time. A middle-aged woman in a historical costume walks up, holding out her phone, and I expect her to ask if we can take a photo together, but instead she just wants a photo of herself, alone, her back to the façade of the Hall of Blessing. As I take the photo, I feel the warmth of belonging, of not being a foreigner who is fascinating by virtue of their being out of place. Instead, I am just some random person who can perform a simple favour. That feels nice.

By the time I reach the Resting Hall, the doors are shut, and soon, all the people are gone, save for a lone employee, who—his day's work complete—is watching a series on his phone, volume turned up high. We sit on benches a few metres apart, not interacting in the slightest, except inasmuch as noninteraction is itself a form of engagement.

I wonder whether Mazu is home. I get up and peek through a gap between the heavy latticework windows and the frame at the north end of the building. I think for a moment that I see movement, but then I think that I *would* think I saw movement, given my efforts to be as open and suggestible as possible. So, I decide to think no more of it.

After sitting a few more minutes on a bench, facing the river, my back to Mazu's house, I walk up the steps to Nanling Tower. I wish to see the drawing in of the dusk from here, the highest point in the park where one gets a clear view of the river. I am aware of my restlessness. I have been up and down and up the mountain. Why am I unable to stay in one place? It is 23 years since I left home. Three continents have set their marks on me.

My mind turns, as it has with increasing frequency over the past eight months, to the contemplations of the poet-politician Su Shi 苏轼 upon his banishment to the island of Hainan in 1097 CE:

> When I first came to Hainan, I felt sad at seeing the boundless sea. I was lost in deep thought and wondered, "When will I depart this island and resume my office?" Yet I realised soon after, since Heaven and Earth are in the ocean, [...] is there anyone who is not living on an island? (Su Shi, qtd. in Liu, 2005, p. 271; translation my own)

It is approaching 18:00 when I see the first bat flitting past on its hunt. A breeze is about me. When I look up, Nanling Tower seems to sway along with the trees. I turn to river, where the barges and ships are chugging away, nosily industrious, alive.

Figure 5. Nanling Tower seems to sway along with the trees. © Adam Grydehøj, 2023.

And I think, Mazu has travelled so far, from Meizhou, out to all these places in the world, and everywhere, she has found new houses. She has been localised: The Mazu in each place is different, *must be* different.

Yet Mazu has not just been localised. She has also shaped localities. Without *Mazu*, without her boldness to face the waves, without that spirit of going to sea and not forgetting where you came from, would there be Nansha? Would there be the Pearl River Delta? Mazu is given new houses, but she also makes places home. Her domesticity—a strange trait for a deified unmarried, childless woman—is not a coincidence. It is Mazu who calls people back, who guides travellers home, who helps voyagers take home with them on their journeys. Mazu is generative of place-based social meaning. *Lin Mo* never left Meizhou, but wherever people from Fujian go, *Mazu* is waiting for them.

I come out of my reverie in the darkness and walk back down to the hotel to have my dinner of fried aubergine and beans. I eat at a wide table in blond wood, with a tea set alongside, and musical instruments lining the wall.

The next day

I have set the alarm for 05:00 but wake earlier still, eager for the dawn. When I leave the hotel and get onto the road, I am surprised at the darkness and must use the torch on my phone to find the way to the temple. I hurry past the Resting Hall, noticing a light on inside, and take the stairs up to Nanling Tower.

There are a few dim lamps, but otherwise the only light on the plaza is the drink machine's spectral glow. There is a rushing of wind, which sets the branches rattling and leaves tinkling like glass votive bells.

I find words tumbling out of me and into my notebook, and I write and write, letters crashing in the night of the page.

Below and to the north, Nansha lies motionless, yet lights on the tall buildings flash on and off, and so too do lights on boats in the river, lest things come into unwanted contact in the dark. I hear the sound of bells down the mountain, and then above me, perhaps from the pagoda, or perhaps an echo from my imagination, and the moon rings through the sky so clear.

I question Mazu again in my head: Who are you when you are at home? Who are you when you are away?

And then I feel the impulse to return to Mazu's house, to peek again through that gap between window and frame. I wonder about the light inside the Resting Hall. Why would they leave on a light? Is the light for Mazu?

Figure 6. Is the light for Mazu? © Adam Grydehøj, 2023.

Having come back down, I look through the gap. There is a light, but it is still very dark; I perceive yet cannot discern. I think, too gnomically for comfort: "Only in ignorance can there be understanding."

I stand there, contemplating it all, and gaze out to the river, to see the water and the boats, so docile now. I walk to the south end of the building to get a view from there, where the roof of the Main Hall below is less obstructive. As I return to the north side, I see through the Resting Hall's latticework windows from a new angle—and it is now obvious that the light inside emanates from a security camera. I think this is probably ironic, without being able to give a reason.

And the dawn comes quietly pink and purple out past Dongguan, then in a rush, and the first of the ships on the river starts to move, slipping amongst its fellows, beginning its day's work while the others are still asleep. I feel a sadness, and some hope. There are tears in my eyes, and I do not know why.

Who am I when I am at home, and when I am not?

The river shines golden, its ripples cast in dawn relief, all the opacity and translucence of a pearl. The thought comes into my head, "You ask for what you get." I think of the time wasted loving that which cannot love back, all that is left undone because we do not know how or where our hearts should settle.

And yet there is always a light on for Mazu. The goddess is always at home.

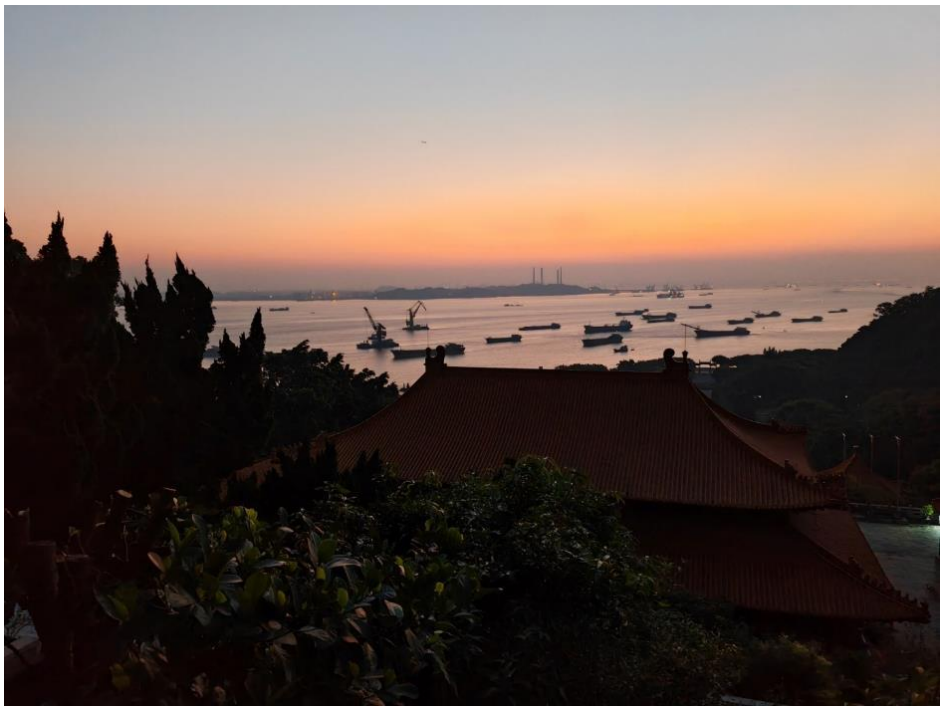

Figure 7. The goddess is always at home. © Adam Grydehøj, 2023.

Analysis

We are surrounded by traditions of belief and disbelief (Hufford, 1982b). Although it may be possible to experience Mazu directly (e.g., to see a vision or receive a message), my own entanglements in traditions of disbelief meant that I did not visit Nansha Tianhou Temple hoping for a direct experience of Mazu that I would perceive as supernatural. My autoethnographic fieldwork at the temple led, however, to relational engagements with the goddess, and they caused me to reflect upon what Mazu might mean—not only for others, but also for herself in relation to others. Such knowing is necessarily subjective and provisional, for rootedness in relation means that being itself is always changing.

Mazu may be experienced as a relational actor (Qin, 2018). She engages with human society and culture but does not exist entirely within it. Mazu has always been *excessive* (Arumugam, 2020a): At the very start of the Mazu story, we find the Lin family's baby girl who did not cry. This is a silence, an inaccessibility that speaks of the incomprehensible and unsocialisable. When Mazu refuses to accept suitors, when she undertakes impossible feats and commands the wind and waves, when she resists confinement to her home temple back on Meizhou—all this exceeds what human society can or could encompass.

Yet it is the human impulse to try to socialise the sacred (Arumugam, 2020b). During my time at Nansha Tianhou Temple, I found myself ineluctably dividing the goddess into three distinct figures: *Lin Mo* (the self-sacrificing human who lived on Meizhou), *Mazu* (the Fujian sea goddess and protector of fishers and sailors), and *Tianhou* (the symbol of celestial power, whose scope of influence knows no bounds). These three figures are

all represented in separate statues at the temple: *Lin Mo* in the Resting Hall and Main Hall, *Mazu* in the Main Hall, and *Tianhou* at the ground-level plaza. The goddess at Nansha Tianhou Temple is subject to human efforts at domestication, at retrieving *Tianhou* from Heaven and reestablishing *Mazu* by calling upon the humanity of *Lin Mo*. In response to this humanising process, we can sense a *Mazu* who acts to establish and defend place. People have built a house for Mazu, and by dwelling in it, Mazu makes Nansha home for people. However, Mazu will not be confined to just one house; Mazu has many homes.

Mazu is in some senses a typical Chinese localised deity and ancestral benefactor who has, through skill and circumstance, become a transnational deity and transfamilial benefactor. Because Mazu is sacred, she embodies excess, desiring more than humanity can offer or contain. Yet Mazu is a goddess who provides the illusion of humanity. She is owed nothing by her followers, the vast majority of whom have no familial connection with *Lin Mo*. That is, human-Mazu relations are purely voluntary. Mazu is, however, targeted by exceptional efforts at personalisation: The human (*Lin Mo*) is unusually prominent in the Mazu faith. The goddess' simultaneous humanity as *Lin Mo* and elevated status as *Tianhou* makes her capable of engaging with people in the manner that an ancestral spirit would—just with much greater efficacy and much less burden of reciprocal duty. 'Mazu' 媽祖, indeed, means 'Maternal Ancestor'. People came to experience the childless, unmarried *Lin Mo* as *everyone's* mother and grandmother. As both a domestic goddess and a sea goddess, Mazu is furthermore capable of constructing home-place for fishers, sailors, travellers, islanders, coastal peoples—peoples for whom sense of home and place has long been particularly precarious.

During my 20 hours at and around the temple, my thoughts were not always coherent. Yet immersed in this environment, and consciously seeking experiential openness to Mazu, my thoughts continually turned back to notions of home, travel, and belonging. Confronted by Mazu's place-making and home-making activities, and feeling perhaps that she was making these things for others and not for me, I experienced a sense of rootlessness and melancholy. I may have been open to experiencing the sacred, but I did not feel I deserved it.

And yet, while the sacred is not for me, neither is it *for* any other human. The sacred is excess (Arumugam, 2020a). The sacred is that which humans can never hold.

As a result, even when the sacred is experienced socially and culturally, there will also always be a part of it that is experienced personally, in the relationship between the subject and the sacred. My rootlessness and melancholy were personal, but I experienced them in relation with Mazu (whether as idea or as deity).

The Mazu of Nansha Tianhou Temple contributes to a unique construction of place and can only be approached through this place. Both deity and place in tandem are unique in the sense that they are formed

through relation, which is always unique and conditional. Mazu and Nansha, believers and non-believers, China itself (Ou et al., 2024) are all undergoing continual and self-conscious creation and recreation, containing multiplicities.

If Mazu can have many homes, maybe anyone can. Maybe *I* can. And maybe that feeling is how *I* experience Mazu. My experience of Mazu will not be the same as anyone else's experience since all subjectivity is formed through distinct and personal relations. However, the very act of being open to experiencing Mazu brings me closer to understanding her believers, if only in this single respect.

Conclusion

In this study, I asked how researchers can fruitfully and respectfully approach traditions of the sacred. This paper has focused on my efforts to stage a personalised, autoethnographic encounter with the goddess Mazu, specifically during a particular 20-hour visit to Nansha Tianhou Temple, which occurred as part of a longer engagement with the deity. I have argued that researchers of the sacred or supernatural ought to reflexively investigate their own positionings within traditions of belief and disbelief. I have suggested that this could meaningfully be done by taking an experience-centred approach, supplemented in the Chinese context by a relational perspective. I have not attempted to provide the full story of Mazu or to say much about the Mazu faith. Other methods of studying Mazu and the sacred are available, and I am engaged in other methods elsewhere in my research activity.

Although deities are social and cultural phenomena, the sacred cannot be encompassed by society and culture alone. Utilising theories from folklore and human geography, I have argued that relations with the supernatural will always be personal and subjective. There is no possibility of 'objectively' approaching or 'rationally' suspending disbelief in the sacred. Autoethnography proved to be an appropriate method for helping me relate with the sacred, in a manner that respects the experiences of believers—an important finding for both folklorists and geographers.

A deity, as an instance of the sacred, is fundamentally unknowable, excess to human understanding and control. My proposition has been that taking the sacred seriously from a research perspective requires openness to our own and others' experiences of the sacred. Each of us is surrounded by traditions of belief and disbelief. Shifting inquiry into the realm of experience, with relational attentiveness to divine agency, allows us to gain better understanding of how people are influenced by the sacred, and how this influence is productive of culture, society, and place.

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