

# The Cult of Mazu in Hainan, China and Among Vietnamese Hainanese Diaspora: A Comparative Study of Mazu Culture<sup>\*</sup>

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The cult of Mazu is a common folk belief in China and Vietnam. Originating from the Song and Yuan Dynasties, particularly during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the cult of Mazu spread to Vietnam through maritime trade and migration from coastal regions of China. After centuries of integration and development, it evolved into its own cultural system of Mazu worship, becoming an important component of Vietnamese folk culture. Hainan, China, as a crucial supply station on the Maritime Silk Road, has close connections with the transmission of Mazu culture to Vietnam. This paper adopts field investigations and literature research methods to explore the Mazu worship and culture in Hainan, China, and the Qiongfu Assembly Halls in Vietnam.

*Keywords:* Mazu worship and culture, Hainan, Vietnamese Hainanese diaspora, comparison

## Introduction

Mazu (also known as Tian Hou, Tian Fei, Tianshang Shengmu, Niang Ma, among other titles in Chinese) is revered as the goddess of the sea, worshipped collectively by generations of shipwrights, seafarers, travelers, merchants, and fishermen. In Hainan, she is venerated in various coastal fishing villages, ports, docks, and households with devotees, even aboard ships. Originating from Fujian (China) during the Southern Song Dynasty, the cult of Mazu proliferated during the Yuan Dynasty, flourished in the Ming Dynasty, reached its zenith in the Qing Dynasty, and has persisted to the present day (Chen, 2008). As a maritime cultural belief system, the Mazu cult diffused as Fujianese fishermen or merchants from Guangdong migrated to Hainan, subsequently spreading further via maritime routes to various Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam. Over centuries of assimilation and development, the Mazu cult among the Vietnamese diaspora from Hainan has diverged from its original form on Hainan Island, yet it retains common elements and has become integral to the folk beliefs of both Vietnam and China.

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### **The Culture of Mazu in Hainan, China**

After over 700 years of development, evolution, and preservation, Mazu belief has emerged as a cultural hallmark of Hainan, exerting significant influence in contemporary society (Chen, 2007). Apart from tangible cultural heritages such as temples, Hainan possesses distinctive intangible cultural heritages associated with Mazu belief, encompassing ritual practices, festival customs, as well as customs pertaining to livelihoods and ways of life.

The Mazu culture and sacrificial rituals which integrate the local characteristics of Haikou city, first emerged spontaneously among the populace during the Yuan Dynasty and has since persisted for over 700 years. Mazu worship constitutes a folk belief activity venerating and extolling Mazu, primarily conducted within Mazu temples. The rituals of Mazu worship comprise both household and temple ceremonies, with grand ceremonies held during temple fairs. Annually, elaborate commemorations for Mazu's birthday and ascension are conducted during temple fairs. Evolving over centuries, the Mazu worship in Haikou has developed relatively standardized rituals and procedures. During the worship and sacrificial rites, a sacrificial altar is erected in front of the temple, adorned with candlesticks and censers, and laden with offerings including whole roasted pigs, fully cooked chickens, rice, fruits, and others. The presiding officiant recites benedictions while devotees eagerly engage in the rituals of offering incense, bowing, and seeking blessings. Before and after the worship ceremonies, there are also cultural performances, featuring procession teams, waist drum troupes, martial arts teams, dragon dance troupes, song and dance teams, lion dance troupes, among others. These performance groups, accompanied by local melodies, showcase spectacular dragon and lion dances, with "Tudigong" (the Earth God) and "Tudipo" (the Earth Goddess) leading and following the procession with lively Yangge dance steps, creating a splendid spectacle.

The procession of Mazu is the most spectacular part of the entire mourning ceremony. During the procession, carried by four individuals, the palanquin bearing the statue of Mazu leads the way. Following closely behind are various ceremonial items such as flags, insignias, banners, weapons, and religious symbols carried by attendants. A large crowd of devotees surround the palanquin, accompanying it throughout the procession. The act of carrying the palanquin is highly ritualized; it is not carried steadily but instead rocked as if simulating the motion of waves, as it is believed that the more vigorously the palanquin sways, the greater the protection it offers. Along the coastline, banners and colorful flags decorate ships lined up to welcome the procession into the harbor. As the procession moves through each location, the sound of firecrackers fills the air. Upon conclusion of the procession, the worshipers return to the temple, reverently placing the statue of Mazu back in its rightful place and paying homage once again. Thus concludes the entire ritual of mourning (Liu, Zhu, & Zhang, 2020).

In folk activities dedicated to Mazu, the "Mazu Lantern Festival Parade" in Haikou stands out for its distinctiveness. This event, hosted by both the Baishamen Mazu Temple and the Zhongshan Road Mazu Temple, unfolds at different times, thereby spanning a considerable duration. The Baishamen Mazu Temple's parade takes place on the 18th day of the first lunar month, whereas the Zhongshan Road Mazu Temple's Mazu parade occurs on the 30th day of the same month. Alongside the Mazu parade, there are additional rituals known as "Mazu Lantern Blessing Ceremonies". On the evening of the 17th day of the first lunar month, Baishamen Mazu Temple orchestrates the procession of the Land God and Goddess, carrying torches to light lamps at various households. Conversely, the Zhongshan Road Mazu Temple in Haikou conducts its lantern blessing ceremony on the 30th

day of the first lunar month. During this event, over 20 oil lamps are initially arranged in front of the Mazu statue within the temple. Devotees bring their household lamps to the temple for exchange or to be ignited, enabling Mazu to embark on a blessing procession throughout the community, illuminated by the collective glow of myriad households' lamps.

After the commencement of each fishing season, typically in August according to the Gregorian calendar, fishermen from Hainan embark on fishing expeditions to the southern seas facilitated by the northeastern winds. Engaging in fishing activities for approximately half a year, they return with the aid of the southwestern monsoon winds, coinciding with the birthday of Mazu, the Sea Goddess. The fortuitous alignment of Mazu's birthday with the transition of monsoons adds an additional layer of mystique to her persona. Fishermen perceive Mazu as a divine protector born for maritime endeavors; thus they ritually honor her both before setting sail and upon their return, expressing gratitude for her sheltering benevolence.

Tanmen Port has currently evolved into a nationally designated pivotal fishing harbor. Since 2015, the town of Tanmen annually hosts the "Gan Hai Festival", during which ceremonies venerating the Dragon King and Mazu (also known as the Goddess of the Sea) take precedence alongside the pivotal activity of clamming. This festival attracts a multitude of tourists eager to partake in the clamming experience. Presently, it is customary for fishermen in Hainan to invoke blessings from Mazu prior to embarking on their maritime pursuits, ensuring the smooth progression of their seafaring operations (Fu & Yan, 2022).

One of the most distinctive local activities within the Mazu Sacrificial Rite is the Mazu Banquet, during which each temple offers traditional Hainanese cuisine to the public free of charge before conducting the Mazu worship ceremony. In the Mazu worship ceremonies in Haikou, the earliest Mazu Banquet was organized by the Baishamen Mazu Palace, typically held on the eve of Mazu's birthday. The featured dish is known as "Xianmian", also referred to as "Mazu Noodles" or "Ping'an (lit. 'peace') Noodles", seasoned with ginger and brown sugar water. After consuming this dish, worshippers proceed to set up the sacrificial banquet. Similarly, at the Haikou Mazu Palace on Zhongshan Road, Mazu Banquet is laid out on the morning of Mazu's birthday, including Hainan rice noodles and peanut sugar water, spread over 10 tables. The Hainan rice noodles at this time are referred to as "Mazu Rice Noodles" or "Ping'an Rice Noodles". Additionally, at the Haikou Mazu Palace in Xin'hai Village, the Mazu Banquet is also set out on the morning of her birthday, consisting of seafood porridge known as "Mazu Porridge" or "Ping'an Porridge". Many nearby residents, regardless of their religious affiliation, specifically visit on this day to partake in Mazu's food before going to work or school, hoping to receive her blessings for peace and health.

### **The Cult of Mazu Among Vietnamese Hainanese Diaspora**

Vietnam, formerly known as Jiaozhi, has maintained commercial exchanges with China since the Eastern Han period. Particularly during the Song and Yuan Dynasties, and notably in the Ming and Qing periods, the Mazu belief system diffused into Vietnam via maritime trade facilitated by Chinese immigrants residing along the coastal regions of China, including Hainan. Over centuries of amalgamation and evolution, among the Chinese diaspora in Vietnam, a distinct yet mutually influential cultural framework of Mazu veneration has arisen. This framework, while exhibiting variances, has become an integral facet of Vietnamese folk culture, engaging Chinese immigrants, Vietnamese nationals, and Ming diaspora alike.

Ethnic Chinese of Hainanese descent in Vietnam predominantly reside in the coastal towns of central and southern Vietnam, primarily engaging in maritime fisheries and trade (Phan, 1990). Despite their relatively small

population and modest economic prowess, they have established a unified association throughout Vietnam. The Hainanese-style folk temples erected in their settlements maintain close connections, with their devotion to the Goddess Mazu intricately linked to the Hainanese assembly halls. In Vietnam, three main Hainanese assembly halls venerate Mazu, situated in distinct regions: the Qiongfufu Assembly Hall (Hainan Mazu Temple) at 278 Tran Hung Dao, District 5, Ho Chi Minh City in the south; the Qiongfufu Assembly Hall (Zhilin Mazu Temple) at 307 Phu Xuan Pho Street, Hue City in the central region; and the Qiongfufu Assembly Hall at 10 Chen Fu Road, Hoi An City, Quang Nam Province in the central-south region.

These assembly halls serve not only as cultural and religious centers for the Hainanese community but also as places for the preservation and promotion of Hainanese cultural traditions and beliefs. Each guildhall possesses its unique architectural style and history, becoming a part of the local cultural landscape. The Mazu belief among the Hainanese diaspora in Vietnam reflects the amalgamation of Hainanese traditional culture with the local Vietnamese context. They establish assembly halls and temples to worship Mazu, expressing their gratitude and desires for protection from this deity. Celebrations of Mazu festivals and rituals are widely conducted, demonstrating the integration of faith into daily life and also aiding in maintaining and fostering relationships among the Chinese communities in Vietnam. On the occasion of Mazu's birthday, the management committee of the Qiongfufu guildhall in Ho Chi Minh City offers a roasted pig or chicken along with fruits and organizes theatrical performances, and lion and dragon dances. The ceremony takes place on the morning of the 23rd day of the third lunar month. At noon, the management committee of the guildhall and members from the Hainanese community stay for a banquet known as "Fu Yan". The guildhall also observes several other important dates throughout the year: the Shui Wei Sheng Niang Festival (15th day of the 10th lunar month), the Yi Mei Niang Festival (10th day of the 2nd lunar month), the 108 Xiong Di Gong Festival (16th day of the 6th lunar month), the Memorial Day of Emperor Huaguang (27th day of the 9th lunar month), Mid-Autumn Festival (15th day of the 8th lunar month), Dragon Boat Festival (5th day of the 5th lunar month), Qingming Festival (3rd lunar month), Spring Festival, New Moon, Full Moon, and Three Yuan (including the Upper Yuan on the 15th day of the 1st lunar month, Middle Yuan on the 15th day of the 7th lunar month, and Lower Yuan on the 15th day of the 10th lunar month) (Phan, 2018). The hosts of the activities in this region are primarily Hainanese Chinese, with participants mainly consisting of other Chinese ethnicities local to the area and Vietnamese residing in the vicinity. Activities at the Qiongfufu guildhall in Hué are also organized by the management committee but in a more simplified manner. The rituals are conducted swiftly, with only one member of the management committee preparing offerings at the guildhall, followed by lighting incense and candles for prayers, concluding with a bow of respect. The hosts and participants in this region are primarily Hainanese Chinese. The Qiongfufu guildhall in Hoi An, also known as Zhao Ying Temple, holds the 108 Xiong Di Gong Festival as its major event instead of solely worshipping Mazu, as Mazu goddess has been revered collectively by the Chinese ethnicities in Chinese assembly halls. The influence of Hainanese Chinese in this region is relatively weak, with the worship of Mazu being more widespread among Ming and Fujianese Chinese, prompting Hainanese Chinese to actively integrate into the activities of these assembly halls (Phan, 2018).

The comparison between the Mazu belief among the Hainanese in Hainan Island, China, and those of Vietnamese Hainanese descent reveals distinct ritualistic practices imbued with Hainanese cultural elements in both locales. While both communities engage in Mazu worship ceremonies characterized by corresponding sacrificial rites and festivities, the scale of such celebrations within the Vietnamese Hainanese community

appears comparatively smaller, with a diminished emphasis on maritime cultural elements. Nonetheless, despite the absence of grand processions and fishing rituals akin to those in Hainan, the Vietnamese Hainanese community demonstrates a greater diversity and richness in ritualistic practices. In Hainan, Mazu belief predominantly centers around the worship of Mazu and corresponding major festivals and activities during the Spring Festival. Conversely, within the amalgamated architecture of assembly halls and Mazu temples in Vietnam, ritualistic practices exhibit considerable diversity. These assembly halls house an array of deities, including mountain gods, sea gods, fertility goddesses, Guan Gong, the Jade Emperor, Guanyin, Shui Wei Sheng Niang, Yi Mei Niang Niang, and Zhaoying Gong, among others, reflecting the integration of multiple cultural influences within Vietnam.

Indeed, the Mazu belief among the Hainanese in China's Hainan Province and the Hainanese diaspora in Vietnam boasts a venerable history, persisting with formidable influence to this day. The Mazu belief culture constitutes a significant component of the traditional historical heritage of the Hainanese in China's Hainan Province and the Hainanese diaspora in Vietnam. Presently, as an integral facet of folk culture, the Mazu belief continues to play a constructive role in the contemporary national development endeavors, fostering harmony and stability within the societies of both nations.

Furthermore, the worship of Mazu has emerged as a transnational form of folk belief. It is evident that traces of Mazu worship culture can be found in many countries across Southeast Asia wherever there is a presence of Hainanese diaspora. Shared folk belief cultures, particularly in Mazu worship, have become a spiritual bond among overseas Chinese communities, including those in Vietnam and the native people of Hainan. Consequently, in recent years, overseas Chinese have been actively involved in the process of revitalizing Mazu temples (Mazugong) and practicing Mazu worship.

Therefore, the Mazu belief among the Hainanese in Hainan, China, and overseas Hainanese diaspora, particularly among the Vietnamese Hainanese diaspora, serves not only as an expression of reverence towards Mazu but also as a crucial foundation for community cohesion, preservation of folk culture, and facilitation of economic development. The worship of Mazu primarily reflects reverence for the ocean and aspirations for the well-being and prosperity of the people.

## Conclusion

The Mazu belief culture in Hainan, China, and among the Hainanese Chinese in Vietnam is an important component of folk beliefs in both China and Vietnam. It not only demonstrates how belief cultures adapt to new environments and enrich local communities but also promotes ethnic solidarity and social harmony. Although the beliefs in both regions retain common elements, the Mazu belief among the Vietnamese of Hainanese descent demonstrates differences from Hainan, reflecting a unique trajectory of cultural integration and development. This shared folk belief culture serves as a spiritual bond between overseas Chinese and the people of their ancestral homeland in Hainan, facilitating the inheritance and exchange of culture.

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