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The Local Production of Culture in Beigang*

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This paper examines "culture work" (*wenhua gongzuo*), a broad field of deliberate cultural production which focuses on documenting and reproducing vernacular history and culture as a specific realm of social action in Beigang, Yunlin. It contextualizes local culture work as part of a revised nation-building ideology and then examines the particular narratives of locality produced by culture workers in Beigang to demonstrate that they are the result of both specifically local and broader trans-local political and economic processes. Narratives that emphasize a traditional moral past critique contemporary power relations in town; and an interest in recovering an earlier history which is not focused on its Mazu temple, Chaotian Gong, reflects a reorientation of local identity away from the temple and its leaders.

Keywords: culture work, cultural production, ritual, locality, communal identity

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Introduction

Beigang 北港, in Yunlin County 雲林縣, is in most respects an unremarkable market town on Taiwan's western coastal plains, indistinguishable from dozens of other small townships across the island. Its one remarkable feature is Chaotian Gong 朝天宮, a temple dedicated to the popular goddess Mazu 媽祖 dating from the end of the 17th century and a major pilgrimage destination for faithful island-wide.[1]

The people of Beigang, or Pakkang lang 北港人 as they refer to themselves in Taiwanese, speak of themselves as a distinct bounded collective and evoke this community through the use of the inclusive phrase *lan Pakkang* (咱北港, our Beigang) in their speech. They imagine a community (Anderson 1983) united by shared values of piety and devotion to Mazu, the goddess who protects the town and whose magical aura draws the millions of pilgrims who drive the local economy: "Chaotian Gong is Beigang's heart. Without Chaotian Gong there would be no Beigang," one local shop owner told me. At the same time, they also imagine a community fallen from grace, suffering a slow decline and facing an uncertain future.

Beigang's grassroots activists play a key role in this "production of locality" (Appadurai 1996:346); they are central to shaping local communal identity as it is understood, negotiated, and expressed. They are key creators of local sociality and culture through their active writing, producing, and reproducing a narrative of Beigang's "culture", history, and religiosity. Although the number of people at the center of this cultural production industry is relatively small (a few dozen at most), their activities have a significant impact on the ways other people in Beigang perceived their town, their obligations to their fellow community members, and their relationship to the nation-state and the world beyond. These activists in their numerous local organizations participate in various kinds of activism. A large portion of them, however, deal with what is known in Taiwan as "culture

1 Chaotian Gong has been an important pilgrimage center for the south-central western plains region (雲嘉南和彰化) since the mid-nineteenth century at the latest. It became the preeminent center of an island-wide Mazu cult during the 1910s. For an analysis of this process see Chipman 2007 and Zeng 1996. Today Chaotian Gong is no longer the undisputed primary Mazu temple on Taiwan, but nonetheless it continues to attract massive numbers of pilgrims. For example, the Tourism Bureau at the Ministry of Transportation and Communication ranked the temple the third most popular travel destination in Taiwan for 2002, with over five million visitors (Su 2003). This would mean that nearly a quarter of the island's population visited Beigang and its temple in the space of one year.

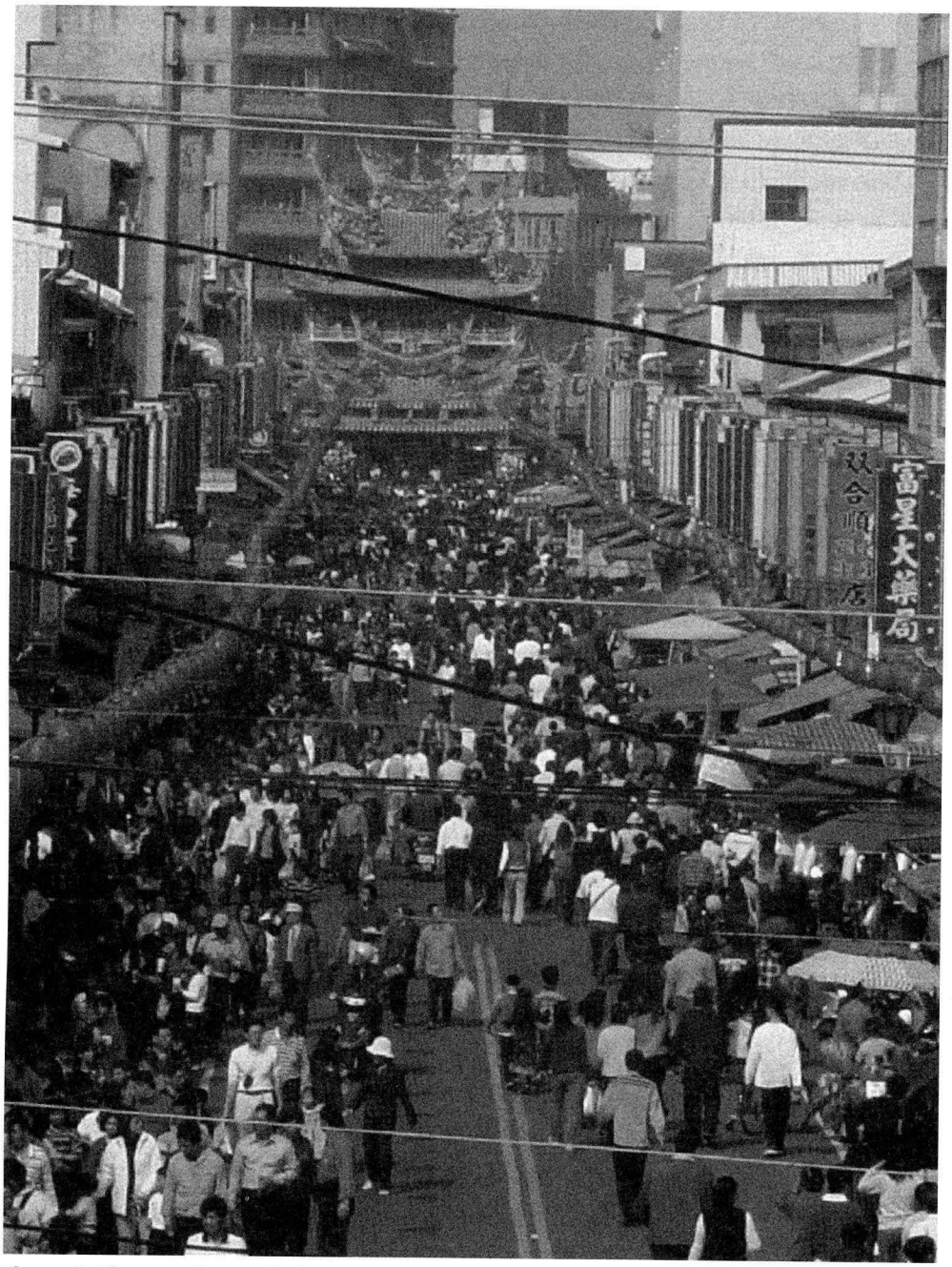

Figure 1 Chaotian Gong and Zhongshan Road during the New Year season. Beigang, 2003. Photo by author.

work" (*wenhua gongzuo* 文化工作), [2] a broad field of cultural production which focuses primarily on Beigang's ritual and religious culture, and especially on temple festivals (*miao hui* 廟會) focused on Chaotian Gong. In recent years, to a lesser extent, culture workers have also become involved in tracing Beigang's history beyond its religious heritage and are increasingly also focusing on the town's early pioneering past and its role as a regional center of trade up until Japanese occupation.

Drawing on the work of Lu Hsin-yi (2002), this paper traces the emergence of "culture work" as a recognizable and legitimate realm of social action in Taiwan and then goes on to examine the particular narratives produced by culture workers in Beigang in order to demonstrate that they are the result of both specifically local and broader trans-local political and economic processes.

Beigang's residents, and especially its culture workers, often explained their motivations in terms of "restoring Beigang's glory" (*huifu Beigang de guangrong* 恢復北港的光榮). For example, during a conversation about Beigang's history, one culture worker described a scene from this glorious past so vividly that I could see boats and rafts busily plying back and forth across the Beigang River and porters carrying heavy bundles of goods up and down wharfs of the prosperous port. At first, I was captivated by these narratives and, like the people of Beigang, imagined a resplendently prosperous town that had slipped into decline. Yet, I have come to understand the obsession with Beigang's past as nostalgia for something that probably never was. Arjun Appadurai noted that local cultural production is often an attempt to produce and reproduce locality under conditions of anxiety, volatility, and entropy (1996:181). Beigang's economy has been steadily declining for years, and now that the local sugar refinery (Beigang Tangchang 北港糖廠) has ceased operations, the pilgrimage trade is the town's main source of income. Although Chaotian Gong remains an important center of an island-wide Mazu cult, drawing millions of visitors a year, inter-temple competition and rivalry are perceived as a threat to this one remaining lifeline. Thus, the town residents' investment in an obviously mythic vision of a magnificent and important Beigang of the past reflects their anxiety about the present.

Responding to this anxiety about their present and future, Beigang people and their leaders have consciously produced a narrative in which they lay claim to being the preservers of tradition and morality. They present Beigang's religiosity and its ritual

2 Indeed, one of the most active local organizations is called Wenhua Gongzuo Shi (the Culture Work Room, 文化工作室). The activities of this particular organization focus on social activism, rather than cultural production per se.

traditions as forms authenticity now explicitly lacking in other places; the self-image of Beigang references the past and is tied to its history. The pilgrimage and territorial processions that energize Beigang's streets with sound, sights, and crowds link the town to this imagined past, when it was bustling with commerce.[3]

Culture work is thriving all over Taiwan (Lu 2002), yet Beigang is remarkable for the intensity and pervasiveness of this activity in local society. At times it seemed as if everyone I came across during my research was involved one way or another in these forms of cultural production, or in other words, in the production of local identity.[4] Just a few examples include a young man who helped his parents run a small shop near Chaotian Gong and guided tours of the temple when he had the time, a local tax bureau official who compulsively filmed local ritual events and collected old photographs, a dry-cleaner who headed a local festival troupe, a bicycle repairman who contributed his labor and money to ritual and cultural activities, and schoolteachers who produced local educational materials (*xiangtu jiaocai* 鄉土教材, Yan 2002). During my fieldwork in Beigang, a town of about twenty thousand residents, I encountered at least twenty local organizations—both grassroots and state-affiliated[5]—involved in cultural identity production to one extent or another. It is also important to emphasize that these groups have not replaced but rather augmented the town's dense and thriving network of traditional associations—temple committees and god's associations (*shenming hui* 神明會), the latter primarily made up of trade guilds and festival troupes (*zhentou hui* 陣頭會)—which continue to play a central role in the town's social organization.[6] Many of Beigang's

3 The town's rituals are in this sense also acts of nostalgia: they are a direct link to the past, bringing it into the present.

4 I was so struck with the intensity of people's identification with Beigang and their enthusiastic participation in these myriad activities that I found the usual academic term used to describe local identity (*difang rentong* 地方認同, local consciousness) unsatisfactory: I use instead a more colloquial term, "local patriotism" (*aixiang zhuyi* 愛鄉主義). My thanks to Prof. Lin Meirong of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, for suggesting the Chinese equivalent term.

5 Such as the Beigang chapter of the *Jiuguo tuan* (救國團), originally associated with the Chinese Cultural Renaissance movement under the Guomindang. In Beigang, one of the group's main activities was arranging local cultural heritage excursions for children during school holidays.

6 Gods' associations are voluntary organizations nominally dedicated to the joint worship of specific deities, but they often encompass additional common interests and goals. In Beigang, traditional gods' associations include guilds and merchant associations, festival troupes which perform at temple events, and palanquin carrying associations (Chipman 2008; Zeng and Kong 1998). Of 114 local organizations surveyed in 2007, 47 were traditional associations (temple committees and gods' associations), while at least twelve listed culture work as one of their main activities.

culture workers are active in both kinds of organizations, yet the distinction between the two types usually remain clear, as does the difference between ritual and culture work.

Local Consciousness and the Emergence of Culture Work in Taiwan

As part of the island-wide investment in recovering "traditional" culture, most small towns, and even villages, in Taiwan now have at least one local culture work association dedicated to documenting local history and culture, and other related activities—in other words, to the "cultural production" of local identity. These grassroots organizations emerged across the island with political liberalization and the rise of both local and Taiwanese consciousness in the late 1980s. They were a product of the state-led reinvention of Taiwan as a nation made up of unique communities and have proliferated especially since the late 1990s, when the government committed extensive funding to the endeavor.

Lu Hsin-yi, in her book *The Politics of Locality* (2002), describes the political process through which culture work emerged and grassroots organizations began flourishing in Taiwan: After the Guomindang's Nationalist government retreated to the island in 1949, it promoted a cultural imaginary of Taiwan as the "Fortress for reviving the Chinese nation." Taiwan was the haven of "pure" Chinese culture—a northern elite version—that had been lost under communism (Chun 1994). Despite the heavy and oppressive propaganda aimed at rooting out all traces of Japaneseness and suppressing local languages and cultures, an interest in vernacular cultures emerged as early as the 1970s, paralleling the emergence of the "native-soil literature movement" (*Taiwan xiangtu wenxue* 臺灣鄉土文學) and early forms of Taiwan consciousness (Lu 2002:18). But it was only after liberalization in the mid-1980s, that icons of high Chinese culture such as Peking opera lost their symbolic power to represent Taiwaneseness. By the early 1990s a nativized Guomindang leadership headed by Lee Teng-hui began promoting the notion of Taiwan as a distinct *Gemeinschaft* linking community to the nation-state. Lu (2002:25) argues that uncertainties about the future as well as the discomfort created by renewed travel to mainland China and recognition of both similarities and differences have prompted the people of Taiwan, not just their leaders, to seek a territorialized cultural identity distinct

from mainland China.[7] The preservation and revitalization of local cultures was seen as an essential component of this process and a vital step towards liberal democracy and the acceptance of Taiwan as a nation in its own right. High Chinese culture was abandoned in exchange for a specific Taiwanese history and heritage that culture workers were to recover. Culture work thus became a legitimate and recognizable occupation by the mid-1990s. Indeed, Chen Shuibian, in his 2000 presidential inaugural speech, commended culture and community activists as instrumental in constructing and consolidating Taiwanese culture and consciousness over the previous decade, empowering the island as a distinctive and pluralistic society, a nation on par with others (Lu 2002:17-19).

National and county government bodies are invested in culture work also because of its contributions to developing and strengthening what in Japan has been called "nostalgia tourism." Beginning in the early 1970s, specific localities in the Japanese countryside were valorized as a sort of generic "homeland" or "hometown" and as the source of Japaneseness and virtue. Various projects revived and invented traditional festivals for urban tourist consumption as part of a neo-nationalist project that contrasted with the rapid internationalization and urbanization of Japanese society (Ivy 1995). In Taiwan, too, the rising interest in local cultures developed out of a growing "postindustrial discontent" among the middle classes. Ironically then, but like Japan and elsewhere, it was the urban bourgeoisie who initiated the move to salvage Taiwan's landscape from the impact of industrialization and urbanization (Lu 2002:36; Harrell 1994). Internal tourism has consequently enjoyed unprecedented growth over the past decade and helped offset, at least partially, the effects of de-industrialization and the decline of the rural economy.

Boyer and Lomnitz (2005:112) point out that the role intellectuals play in the development of national culture has its dialectical counterpart in their reliance upon that very notion of national culture as a rhetorical device in service of their own specific interests. Similarly, by participating in the state project of local cultural uniqueness, Taiwanese culture workers gain local prestige and influence, and often, material support. In sum, although Taiwanese consciousness arose first among the opposition under martial law, by the time the Guomindang had completed its nativization, the interest in local cultures had become a nation-state project.[8] On a discursive level, government support for local

7 And I would add, this consciousness vis-à-vis China led by a nativized national leadership found fertile ground among a population already conscious of their distinct identity following their experiences of Japanese colonialism and Nationalist martial law.

8 Indeed, the greatest surge in culture work came relatively late, in 1994, when President Lee Teng-hui initiated the "integrated community making program," a mass state-sponsored project that led to the rapid proliferation of local organizations of various kinds across the island (Lu 2002:18).

culture production has made cultural workers active collaborators with the nation-building project and significant participants in the authoring of local identity. Thus, the state's shift in ideology and policy has been largely successful in creating a new shared national ethos, encompassing and crossing various ethnic divides, and neutralizing potentially dangerous rural discontent.

Culture Work in Beigang

In the early years after liberalization, Beigang's culture workers were nearly all affiliated with the Bengang Mazu Cultural Education Foundation (Bengang Mazu Wenjiao Jijinhui 笨港媽祖文教基金會), established in 1989 with an endowment from Chaotian Gong. Much of the foundation's work focused on documenting the religious culture and history of Chaotian Gong and Beigang, and this research was published in the foundation's own periodical, the *Bengang Journal* (Bengang Zazhi 笨港雜誌). Personal differences, however, quickly led to fragmentation and within a couple of years most activists had left the foundation for a multitude of other organizations, each with its own areas of specialization. One of these splinter groups, the Hehe Hui (和合會),[9] is a longstanding and well-known culture-work association active across a range of issues in Beigang. The Hehe Hui was originally founded by some of the defectors from the foundation in 1991 to provide logistical support and food for visiting pilgrimage groups,[10] but today its activities extend to research and publishing on local history and culture, and to the organization of various public cultural activities. Members of the Hehe Hui also guide visiting groups around Chaotian Gong and other local sites, and participate in a wide array of communal activities organized by other associations. For example, in 2003, members of the Hehe Hui participated as individuals in a series of events aimed at preserving an old Japanese water tower and its grounds as a public park, in communal mobilization against construction of a medical-waste incinerator nearby and in protests against the destruction of old trees; all events organized by another very active local grassroots organization, the Wenhua Gongzuo Shi (文化工作室). They also helped with staging the Beigang Peanut Festival (Tudou Jie 土豆節), an event organized by the municipal government to

9 Hehe Hui is an abbreviation for 笨港和合民俗發展協會, The Bengang Collective Association for the Promotion of Folk Customs.

10 Particularly the pilgrimage on foot from Baishatun 白沙屯, in Miaoli County 苗栗縣, which became the most important pilgrimage to Beigang after the rift with Dajia Zhenlan Gong 大甲鎮瀾宮 in the late 1980s.

Figure 2 Culture workers from Beigang and Xingang visit an archaeological dig on the banks of the Beigang River. January 2003. Photo by author.

promote the local economy, and monitored archaeological work in the Beigang River riverbed nearby. Some Hehe Hui members, such as Teacher Lu, who researches and writes prolifically about local history, focus their attention on scholarly pursuits, while others harness other skills and interests in service of common cultural projects. A-Lao, for example, maintains a website dedicated to Beigang's culture and documents local events in stills and video.

The range of culture-work activities in Beigang is great, and this is one reason the local culture-work world is fragmented. Individuals participate in some projects and not in others, often on the basis of inter-personal relationships and individual interests.[11] Nonetheless, a certain *esprit de corps* prevails, and on any given night, a dozen or so lo-

11 This pattern is apparently not unique to Beigang: Verdery (1991) also found local intellectuals in Romania highly factionalized (and politicized).

cal activists could be found at A-Hiu's[12] compound on the outskirts of town, drinking tea and debating current local affairs or planning their next project. In addition to A-Hiu's residence and a teahouse run by his wife, the compound also housed a cultural center – the Old River (Jiuhedao 舊河道) – the unofficial local museum which contained a vast and jumbled collection of artifacts ranging from traditional farm implements and household items to discarded architectural details from temples, antique furniture, old coins and pottery shards collected from the riverbed, and even a carved aboriginal boat. A-Hiu explained the center's purpose:

> The Old River is a place that allows people, both outsiders and locals, to learn about Beigang's culture. Beigang is the oldest settlement on Taiwan's plains, and in its early days it was very wealthy. Beigang used to be a great place. It was a market center for the entire region. Despite the bad roads, everyone came here. Beigang was wealthy and rich in culture. This needs to be shown to people.

Because A-Hiu is well connected in Taiwanese cultural and educational networks in the region, the Old River was a popular stop on school tours and work-place outings until its closing in 2006.[13] Visiting groups were shown into a hall hung with reproduced old photographs of Beigang and featuring changing displays of items related to local material culture as well as various paraphernalia related to local ritual culture.[14] Indeed, A-Hiu derives a crucial portion of his income from providing meals for such groups and from facilitating their visits. Thus, despite having no official status in the township government, through his contacts and position within regional culture work networks, A-Hiu

12 Pseudonym. A-Hiu is a charismatic and entrepreneurial local culture worker in his mid-50s. Trained as a traditional craftsman, he became in involved in culture work in the 1980s and has been extremely influential in the production of local narratives. He has worked with Chaotian Gong, local government, commercial interests and fellow culture workers in numerous projects. Unlike most culture workers in Beigang, A-Hiu's livelihood depends directly on his involvement in the culture-work world.

13 In 2006 A-Hiu's lease on the property expired and he moved his household and collections to a new location, across the county line in Nangang. When I last visited in late 2007, he was still settling in and organizing. According to A-Hiu, the county government has offered to take over the collection and make it an official state-funded museum. He chose to decline in order to maintain absolute control, even at the cost of losing generous compensation.

14 Among the changing displays I saw during my fieldwork in Beigang were collections of old toys and peasant furniture, and also traditional costumes that had belonged to now-defunct Taiwanese opera troupes that were once based in Beigang.

has become an influential cultural broker. He is able to disseminate a particular narrative of Beigang's past and present, over which local elected officials have little control but just the same have come to rely upon. It is not that A-Hiu is considered the most knowledgeable authority, but rather he is acknowledged as skilled and savvy in conceptualizing and presenting cohesive and compelling narratives. Moreover, he is well-versed in local politics and takes care to cultivate cordial relations with everyone in town. As a result, A-Hiu often mediates between factions and is thus able to contribute to and shape a variety of local activities.

Bo-be-a, a Beigang Cultural Icon

Over the last decade, Beigang's culture workers and the town's leaders have devoted much energy to promoting an important local icon—Bo-be-a (報馬仔) —a costumed peasant figure who walks at the vanguard of communal ritual processions, leading the way and announcing the approach of the goddess Mazu.[15] Bo-be-a is unusual in that of all the traditional festival troupes that regularly and officially participate in Beigang's ritual processions,[16] the Bo-be-teng (報馬廳), its ritual guild, is the only one not directly sponsored by or answerable to Chaotian Gong temple leadership. Instead, Bo-be-a performers are affiliated with Hehe Hui, a culture-work association.

At the Bo-be-teng guildhall, a poster explains the significance of each detail of Bo-be-a's complex costume and paraphernalia. Each item has a straightforward significance, emphasizing the hardships the role entails. For example, Bo-be-a wears a bamboo hat against the sun and a sheepskin vest against the cold, and carries an umbrella against rain. He wears only one straw sandal, symbolizing the difficulties of the road, having to go on even after having lost one of his shoes, and one pants leg is rolled up, displaying multiple

15 In Mandarin Chinese he is called *jiaqian xianfeng* (駕前先鋒), the herald ahead of the palanquin. Local oral history traces the origin of Bo-be-a to the Qing imperial period, when Chaotian Gong Mazu's territorial processions purportedly continued for as long as fifteen days and went far out into the surrounding countryside to Yuanzhang, nearly 20 kilometers away. Bo-be-a served as the processions' guide and pathbreaker, like the runners sent out ahead of Qing officials during their inspection tours (Ji 2003).

16 Chaotian Gong affiliated gods' associations, such as palanquin carrying associations and festival troupes, are obliged to participate in the temple's annual territorial processions and have a set place in the procession. Other local and regional festival troupes, as well as delegations from other temples and shrines, also participate in the processions, but more provisionally; most only come for one day, or parts of one day's procession, and not every year.

Figure 3 Two Bo-be-a waiting for the annual procession to begin. Beigang, April 2003. Photo by author.

mosquito bites. At another level, many of the items Bo-be-a carries for sustenance on the road are also elaborate puns in Taiwanese evoking long life, happiness, and moral virtues. For example, a tobacco pipe, which is homonymous with piety, or a pig's foot, a play on words evoking endurance.

In present-day Beigang, two or three members of the Bo-be-a guild, dressed identically down to the minutest detail, including a long fake moustache and round glasses, stand aloof and separate in front of Chaotian Gong in anticipation of the goddess' emergence to begin her tour of inspection of the town (Figure 3). When the brightly colored doors of the temple open to cries of "*Jinho, jinho!* " Bo-be-a begins his solemn walk ahead of the procession as the other accompanying festival troupes gradually take their place and set out after him. To local culture workers and to ordinary residents, the Bo-be-a figure is a demonstration of Beigang's uniqueness in adhering to traditional values and its role as a bastion of authentic Taiwanese culture. The men who perform as Bo-be-

a in Beigang proudly told me that they follow the strictest rules of avoidance in advance of their sacred duty, eating only vegetarian and abstaining from sex for at least ten days before any ritual. Other culture workers reminded me repeatedly that this was once the norm for all pilgrims and participants in rituals, and they lamented the loss of real faith and devotion.[17]

In contrast to their emphasis on Bo-be-a as an exemplar of tradition and piety, culture workers often derided the extravagant and ever-evolving festival troupes now associated with Taiwanese popular religion as lacking in authenticity and true devotion. Indeed, the issue of authenticity was a recurring theme in my conversations with Beigang's culture workers and other residents. Numerous conversations that took place as we watched processions of visiting pilgrimage groups included evaluations and critiques of their festival troupes' performances as spurious or fake.[18] Bo-be-a is evoked in contrast with contemporary festival troupes as a symbol of the olden days when people supposedly felt true awe before the goddess Mazu, an imagined past when religious ritual was not a carnival but rather something that united the community around shared values of morality and faith.

In many ways, this fixation on Beigang as a bastion of authentic traditional culture and the attendant critique of the commodification of and innovation in ritual practices at other pilgrimage sites is ironic. Chaotian Gong might be said to have pioneered this very practice of innovation with the unprecedented island-wide tour by Beigang Mazu in 1911 to raise funds for temple renovations. It was precisely when Chaotian Gong abandoned the more extensive ritual processions that incorporated the countryside into the goddess Mazu's realm in the early 1950s, that the figure of Bo-be-a underwent a process of sacrilization and standardization in Beigang. It was only then that he was transformed

17 Indeed, another explanation I was given for the original function of Bo-be-a emphasized his duty to go ahead of the procession and remind people to remove offensive items such as laundry from the goddess' path and prepare to welcome her with the proper reverence.

18 People in Beigang did not use the term "authentic" (真實). Nonetheless their opposition of real and fake or traditional and invented reflects the discourse of authenticity as it manifests elsewhere (see Chipman n.d. for further discussion of tradition and authenticity in Beigang). When evaluating pilgrimage festival troupes people used the term *jiade* (假的). At the same time, however, locals always acknowledged their contribution to the carnival (*renao* 熱鬧) atmosphere of the town, which is part of its attraction today.

from the most practical and straightforward element of ritual processions to an icon of local uniqueness.[19]

Beigang's Bo-be-a thus also plays a part in the notorious rivalry between Chaotian Gong and Dajia's Mazu temple, Zhelan Gong 大甲鎮瀾宮.[20] For many years, a Bo-be-a from Beigang was sent to Dajia to escort its famous pilgrimage procession to Beigang. However, after relations between the two temples soured in the late 1980s, and Zhenlan Gong changed its pilgrimage destination from Beigang to the neighboring town of Xingang 新港, Zhenlan Gong leaders created their own Bo-be-a (supposedly modeled on the Beigang figure). This promotion of Dajia's own Bo-be-a is a source of great irritation to Beigang patriots who see this as no less than the theft of a symbol of their identity.[21] Indeed, it is likely that the subsequent focus on promoting Bo-be-a as a local icon of Beigang can be linked directly to this rupture. Local culture workers have since diligently collected oral histories and published accounts of Beigang's Bo-be-a in local journals and in the Taiwanese popular press to bolster their claims to exclusive possession of Bo-be-a (Ji 2003; Xu 1997).[22]

Culture work in Taiwan takes different forms depending on the specific locality. In Beigang, because of Chaotian Gong's local importance, culture work is intimately tied to inter-temple and inter-communal competition. One of the principal ways in which Beigang's leaders and patriots seek to establish their claims to superiority is by present-

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19 Although Beigang's culture workers claim Bo-be-a is a figure unique to Beigang, it seems that this figure was common in other parts of Taiwan as well, even if named otherwise. P. Steven Sangren, for example, saw a similar figure in processions at Daxi 大溪, in northern Taiwan in the 1970s (personal communication). Under the aegis of Chen Yiquan 陳義泉, the founder of the *Bo-be-teng* in 1958, the various components of Beigang Bo-be-a's costume and his paraphernalia were inscribed and linked directly to the gods (Xu 1997). Thus, it is the standardization and sacrilization of Bo-be-a which is unique to Beigang rather than the figure itself.

20 Taiwan's infamous inter-temple disputes and rivalries are often played out in the national media. Chaotian Gong has, in accordance with its self-designation as the locus of Taiwanese authenticity, chosen to present itself in these disputes as the true preserver of traditions, in contrast with innovations at rival temples, which are largely presented as commercialized and insincere.

21 During my stay in Beigang in 2003, a documentary about Dajia's Bo-be-a aired on television. Local culture workers were incensed that the program's producer had come to Beigang and interviewed them at length about the figure, and then went and ascribed the details they provided to Zhenlan Gong's Bo-be-a.

22 Interestingly, in response to these perceived incursions into their own culture domain, Beigang's Bo-be-a guild has recently began dividing incense (*fenling* 分靈) to affiliated temples – in other words, licensing their own distinct version of Bo-be-a – in an effort to maintain control and claim to the figure as a unique element of Beigang's ritual culture.

ing the town as the locus of authentic tradition and laying exclusive claim to identity symbols such as Bo-be-a.[23] The interests and goals of culture workers and local leaders thereby usually dovetail in the context of trans-local relationships. The temple's board of directors struggles to maintain Chaotian Gong's ascendancy in the Taiwanese Mazu cult and fend off aggressive efforts to supplant it made by Dajia's Zhenlan Gong and other temples. Culture workers have actively supported these attempts by crafting narratives of Beigang's rich cultural and ritual traditions that justify its position as a central pilgrimage destination of great cultural significance. One tack in this effort has been to document Beigang's various specific claims to historical or ritual precedence (Sangren 1988), as in the case of Bo-be-a.

From a trans-local perspective, cultural production activities in Beigang appear to be aligned with the goals and vision of temple and town leaders. Beigang's cultural workers collaborate with and contribute to a narrative that positions Chaotian Gong as the heart of the town and its source of authenticity. However, when examined more closely, these activities reveal additional subtexts that complicate this apparent harmony: Most notable is their emphasis on the imaginary past of morality and devotion that often frames critiques of power structures in the town as it is today. These discourses on morality and piety, juxtaposed with criticisms of the commodification of Beigang's own rituals and of the emphasis on display over devotional practice, highlight a nostalgia for aspects of the Mazu faith which have supposedly been lost. Even more importantly, by juxtaposing a moral past with the present, they highlight the perceived immorality of contemporary local society and specifically the allegedly corrupt practices of town leaders.

Beigang's Political-Economy and Culture Work

While local religion in Taiwan is largely autonomous, it is at the same time intricately linked to national political and social arenas.[24] Temples and popular religion are an important expression of cultural authenticity and therefore also a source of political

23 For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see Chipman 2007, chapter 6.

24 Traditionally, territorial temples played a dual role, as both communal ritual centers and centers of local social-political-economic organization. Even today, temples maintain aspects of this dual traditional role, especially in rural areas. The Japanese at times courted and at other times suppressed influential temples such as Chaotian Gong as part of their effort to control the island's population (Weller 1999), but it was the ruling Guomindang party which revived the old imperial tradition of co-opting popular cults (Duara 1993; Watson 1985) as part of its policy of nativization.

and social legitimacy (Jordan 1994; Katz 2003; Sangren 1987; Weller 1999). As Prasenjit Duara (1988) noted, particular domains within the cultural nexus of power, such as territorial cults, have a particular legitimating capacity because the state and other forms of orthodoxy are already symbolically represented in them. Thus, supra-local attempts to intervene and harness the local often do so through the domain of religion. President Jiang Jingguo, for example, made a historic visit to Beigang in 1967, foreshadowing his move towards political liberalization and "nativization" (*bentu hua* 本土化) of the Guomindang (Chu and Lin 2001). More importantly, this co-optation worked both ways: although Chaotian Gong was an important island-wide pilgrimage destination as early as the 1870s, it was Jiang's repeated visits in the 1960s and 1970s that transformed Beigang and its Mazu temple into symbols of Taiwanese authenticity in the national imaginary. Ever since, but especially after democratization began in 1987, politicians have been making appearances at popular religious pilgrimages and other festivals to prove their Taiwaneseness and connection to the island's authentic culture and ethos.[25]

Acutely aware of their limited economic options and marginalization in the modern nation, the people of Beigang and their local leaders have embraced their role as "preservers of tradition," structuring their vision of the town and its future around these notions of authenticity, with the temple as its focus. Temple leaders and grassroots activists in Beigang, like others elsewhere on the island, are local collaborators in the nation-building project; they support the revised ideological foundations of the state through their cultural and ritual productions.

At the same time, Beigang is remarkable in that its temple has a larger budget than the municipal government and a greater influence on local politics and economy than any other body. The chairperson of the temple's board of directors is better known and wields far greater social, economic, and political power than the township's mayor or local assemblymen. Thus, the way Chaotian Gong and religiosity are framed in local discourse is a response to this particular constellation of local power. With the lifting of martial law and democratization, temples in Taiwan became a source of power at the local level as well as a legitimating tool for the center. They are no longer simply the focus

25 In the run up to the 2004 presidential elections, for instance, Lien Chan, the candidate of the Blue camp, came to participate in the 2003 annual *raojing* (繞境) procession of Beigang Mazu as part of his campaign tour. After a dinner in his honor, he donned a "traditional" jacket and was given the honor of carrying Mazu's palanquin as she set out from the temple to continue her inspection tour of the town. Although a mainlander by birth, and a member of the Guomindang elite which traditionally disdained popular Taiwanese religion and culture, by carrying Mazu's palanquin, Lien was symbolically transformed into a native Taiwanese who could appeal to Taiwanese voters.

of local social organization or symbols of authenticity and righteousness, but have also become a palpable and easily manipulated material resource; in other words, they are a source of real political and economic power.

Even before full democratization in the 1980s, the Guomindang had allied itself with small-town "big men" (and women) across much of the coastal plains and other parts of the hinterland as a means of extending power into the ethnically Taiwanese countryside—not a natural constituency. As early as 1951, the Guomindang ensured its continued control by playing local factions off one another, and buying allegiance through campaign financing, kickbacks, and outright bribes (Bosco 1994; Chin 2003; Tien 1989). This practice set the tone for local politics ever after, and, with the exception of the big cities, local elections remain corrupt by Western standards in much of Taiwan. Local politicians are influential intermediaries between the localities and the state center, and they receive kickbacks and reciprocal favors from above and below while disbursing patronage and favors locally and collecting votes towards higher-level elections. Temples with large coffers and high profiles, like Chaotian Gong, are thus attractive to aspiring politicians who contrive to take over their management and thereby gain access to their very significant budgets and prestige as resources on the path to a national-level career.

The new grassroots organizations discussed here are driven largely, but not exclusively, by local educated elites—teachers, professionals, and local businessmen—the class that has traditionally served as local leaders in the countryside. These are rural literati in classical Chinese class structures, or "traditional intellectuals," drawing on Gramsci's definitions (1971). It is significant that Taiwanese grassroots organizations came into being in the late 1980s, at the very moment when this class of people was being displaced in the local cultural nexus of power (Duara 1988). They were supplanted by another group of people with stronger political ties to the state center and ambitions on a trans-local scale, people such as Zeng Cai Meizuo 曾蔡美佐, who rose to power in Beigang through her service as Chaotian Gong's chairwoman.[26] Moreover, this change in local structures of power has had implications for local communal identity: When local educated elites served as leaders in the local communal temple, the identification of the locality with its

26 Zeng, locally known as "big sister," rose through the ranks of the Guomindang in the Fishermen's Association in the neighboring rural township of Kouhu 口湖鄉. She translated local political connections into real power and renown after she was elected chairwoman of the Chaotian Gong board of directors, a position she held between 1991 and 2001, and again, since 2005. During this time she was also elected to the Legislative Yuan, where she served between 2000 and 2004. She is believed by many to have links to gangsters and to have enriched herself through kickbacks from temple construction projects.

temple was nearly absolute. When these traditional elites were shunted aside together with older business leaders by a class that had stronger ties to the state center, the identification of the town's people with the temple suffered.

One local activist affiliated with the DPP (Democratic Progressive Party 民進黨), drew a parallel between the town's geomancy and its political state, expressing a common critique of the local leadership:

> The influence of politics on the temple is too great. In the past the Beigang River made a long slow arc around the town, but now it is straighter and flows fast, and thus money flows through and out of the town fast too. Because the river's water is now polluted, this has also had an influence on Beigang. It has become polluted by gangsters (*hei shehui* 黑社會), and bad things happen.

Chaotian Gong's recent chairpersons (Zeng Cai Meizuo and her brother Cai Yongchang蔡永常) are outsiders who moved to Beigang and entered local politics with the backing of the Guomindang. Together with other new leaders of the temple and town, they have brought their own perspectives and interpretations into temple activities, making them more extravagant, emphasizing the nation-wide community of the faithful over the local one, and using ritual to extend their own power in what is generally perceived as a more obvious and cynical way than their predecessors. In addition, reforms and changes in the temple's management system, combined with a changing economic environment, have transformed Chaotian Gong's local ritual spheres (*jisi quan* 祭祀圈; Chipman 2007), and its place in the town's social structures. Ties to traditional associations that once served as intermediaries between the temple and local society have been weakened, and temple events are no longer perceived as the community-affirming rituals they were in the past.

These changes have combined to bring about a reorientation of local social structures and have alienated Chaotian Gong from the local faithful. With traditional elites replaced and power becoming concentrated in new and fewer hands, people have less confidence in the management of the temple, and are less inclined to identify with it as an institution representing the town. Territorial temples are communal property, communal public space, and the symbol of community all in one. The takeover of the town's preeminent communal temple by a particular group has been interpreted by many as the dispossession of the community (Nazpary 2002). As one friend put it, "Mazu is still Mazu, but the temple has changed. They don't care about the town anymore."

The explosion of grassroots activism in Taiwan since the 1990s is the result of political transformations in the wake of democratization. It also mirrors the growth of NGO

activity worldwide (Hsiao 2005). The particular intensity and specific shape of local grassroots activity in Beigang, however, is also at least partially a response to the perceived changes in local structures of power; old elites with a tradition of community service have redirected their energies into other activities. Thus, the rise of Beigang's grassroots organizations and their involvement in cultural production—once the exclusive domain of the temple—can be seen as alternative attempts to shape their community, still anchored in the temple and Beigang Mazu, since this continues to be the core of local identity, but contesting and subverting their meaning.

These marginalized intellectuals in their new organizations focus on documenting and preserving the "old ways" of the town, emphasizing the temple's traditional role as the center of the local community, and thereby implicitly critiquing the newer configurations of power. In this sense, then, the interests of local culture workers diverge from those of temple leaders. Temple leaders work towards enhancing Beigang's fame and attracting visitors (and in the meantime also enhancing their own prestige and power), while culture workers identify themselves foremost as townspeople—Pakkang lang—and are equally if not more invested in shoring up communal sentiments. One local culture worker explained, "This kind of work is very meaningful. And it is important for people to have similar perspectives and understandings, so that together we make this place better."

Most culture workers in Beigang maintain cordial relations with temple staff and board members, but at the same time they are careful to maintain their distance and independence, precisely so that their critique retains its autonomy. Members of the traditional associations, on the other hand, generally view their participation in temple events as another source of livelihood, by which they draw compensation for their time and thus participate more explicitly in local networks of patronage, exchange, and obligation (*guanxi* 關係). In contrast, the newer grassroots organizations do not seek funding for most of their activities from Chaotian Gong, the wealthiest body in town, but rather obtain most of their funding from the township or county governments. This distance has opened up spaces for individual involvement and at least an illusion of the ability to contribute to the shaping of local identity through participation in cultural and social work.

Indeed, this is one way to distinguish between local factions: those tied into local power structures and those who critique it from the outside. Although the actual configurations are more complex than can be represented here, it is possible to draw a parallel between Guomindang affiliation and involvement in local factional politics on the one hand, and between DPP affiliation and critique of these leaders on the other: Local grassroots activists tend to be affiliated with the DPP and are barely represented in the town's political institutions, while most elected officials (both in the township assembly (*minyi*

*daibiao hui*民意代表會) and Chaotian Gong's board of directors (*dongshi hui*董事會)) are members of the Guomindang. Both groups are articulated into large-scale networks of power: Local Guomindang leaders draw their power from hierarchical networks of patronage linked to the center, while grassroots activists tend to be articulated into more formal institutional structures of the state, such as schools, county-level cultural bureaus, and other central government agencies. These networks overlap only partially and reflect different political cultures and modes of operation. Local politics in Beigang are thus enmeshed in a wider trans-local political arena, and they also reflect the difficulties posed by competing understandings of morality, governance, and sociality throughout Taiwan.[27]

In sum, at the local level especially, the seismic shift in politics, economy, and ideology in Taiwan through the 1980s and 1990s brought changes in power relations and elevated new groups into power. Rural intellectuals might have gained cultural capital and ideological legitimacy through the process of nativization and their co-optation into the state cultural nationalist project, but they did not on the whole regain much tangible power at the local level. As noted, most power and access to resources in Beigang remains in the hands of Guomindang-affiliated politicians, such as Zeng Cai Meizuo. Giesen (1998) noted that in Germany, romantic nationalism was the product of a generation of underemployed and underpaid intellectuals who eventually turned to inventing traditions (Boyer and Lomnitz 2005:111). Likewise, in rural Taiwan, intellectuals are underemployed. Beigang's most active culture workers rarely seem to be gainfully employed unless they are school teachers. They, thus, continue to pose a particular danger and challenge to new elites and to the state.

The re-imagined nation-state is now a democratic and pluralistic community of unique vernacular Taiwanese (and aboriginal) cultures, each with its own distinct history and customs—still part of the larger Chinese cultural world perhaps, but distinct from it. Culture workers play a key role in this new nation through the production of its "multi"-culture. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that urban bourgeoisie led the vernacularization of Taiwanese national culture in its early stages, and central state support makes its continuation possible. Rural culture workers in Beigang are enmeshed in and dependant on these trans-local networks which draw their legitimacy and influence from the urban cosmopolitan center, much like the politicians beholden to the Guomindang, who these workers often profess to oppose.

The co-optation of the rural traditional elites into the new national culture project as "culture workers" has turned them into "organic intellectuals" , those that direct the ideas

27 For further discussion of this issue see Chipman 2007, especially chapter 5.

and generate the legitimating ideology of the dominant social class (Gramsci 1971:12). Like the rural elites of the imperial era who produced local gazetteers, culture workers produce narratives of locality which support the central state.[28] Thus, much of the threat they pose to the present order, which is focused on flexible accumulation and increasing integration into the world economy, is disarmed. Through state funding and support, they have become a part of the legitimating apparatus of the state.

Conclusions

I have outlined a process of mutual cooptation whereby Beigang's culture workers continue to support both local and national projects despite being excluded from power structures. They collaborate with local leaders in presenting the town to the outside world as a repository of a traditional and authentic Taiwaneseness by collecting, editing, and reproducing cultural knowledge. Temple and town leaders are glad to have this support for the collective notion of Beigang's uniqueness, especially since it comes at almost no cost. However, by maintaining relative fiscal independence from Chaotian Gong, Beigang's culture workers remain free to critique local power structures and their attendant injustices, and focus on creating a subtly different and also subversive narrative of Beigang—one of a mythical, ideal moral past when things were different (cf. Herzfeld 2005). It is important to emphasize, however, that these culture workers are not challenging the underlying structures that organize the town. They do not critique Chaotian Gong's position as the town's central institution or communal symbol. Rather, they in fact legitimate the present situation by producing an ideal version of it. They critique particular people for subverting what they see as a legitimate structure, one in which they are marginalized, but not the structure itself.

On another level, one reason culture activists invest so much in the production of local identity is that this is a sphere of culture over which they can claim ownership—they are not in competition with national or local powers over authorship of Beigang's authentic Taiwaneseness, but rather the delegated agents of this project. To culture workers, their agenda is a local authenticity that they can imagine as belonging to the town itself. Excluded from most forms of power or social capital, they craft narratives of the local past which critique contemporary distributions of power. Yet, since their work is ultimately the product of a state-driven nation-building project, it is never merely local.

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28 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this continuity.

It is precisely because the meaning of "traditional culture" remains open to competing and varied representations and interpretations that culture work lends itself to these local power struggles. Culture can serve as an ideological tool of legitimation, but as a form of symbolic media it is forever open to competing interpretations. Rituals in particular are saturated symbols, and moreover, they constantly change based on multiple authorship, with input from individuals and groups influencing their form and meaning (Gerholm 1988). The very claim to authenticity and tradition is recognizable only in relation to an other, and thus culture work is a dialectical mutually constituting process involving the nation-state and its localities.[29]

It is doubly ironic that the specific image culture workers paint of the local vernacular past is inherently cosmopolitan and trans-local, emphasizing its place in transnational trade and ritual networks. In recent years, an increasing proportion of the culture work carried out in Beigang no longer focuses on Chaotian Gong and its ritual culture, but rather on the history of the town before its Mazu temple rose to prominence and its role in regional trade networks diminished. Many of these local historians and amateur archaeologists are now equally invested in recovering and promoting a version of Beigang's earlier past, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when it was a prosperous and cosmopolitan entrepôt, moving goods from Taiwan's central plains to points across Asia. They dredge Qing era documents for any mention of the town that would prove that this indeed was the case and carefully chart its gradual decline.[30] The very names they give to their organizations and their publications—Bengang Zazhi (笨港雜誌*Bengang Journal*) and Beigang Xi Zazhi (北港溪雜誌*Beigang River Journal*)—allude to the this narrative of the past by referencing the old name of the town and the river through which this trade flowed.

As argued above, one reason culture activists are working on these narratives of an earlier history is their alienation from the current Chaotian Gong leadership. This is a sphere over which they have more complete control. Through this work they display and manipulate the kind of cultural capital newer elites do not posses, and they are able to even translate it into more tangible resources. Culture workers enjoy the state's support for their recovery of early pioneering history. All across Taiwan culture workers are researching their local histories and producing exhibits and texts recording the "old ways"

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29 Even more ironically, culture workers in Beigang profess and invest in a local particularism when their practices are actually cosmopolitan in the sense that their identity practices assume the universal intelligibility and applicability of particular modes of political identity and the like, which are linked to the nation-state and trans-local processes (Pollock 2002:20).

30 Cai et al. 2001; Cai 2001; Lin and Lin 1995; Yan 2002.

of farming, fishing, trade, and craftsmanship. For their work in creating a legitimating ideology for the state, they earn both material and social compensation.

But in another sense, this is the very type of cultural production one sees in contemporary settings elsewhere. History is less problematic in that it does not encompass living traditions, such as politics or ritual. It is shallow and infinitely reproducible in a way described in treatments of culture as commodity (Dorst 1989; Guss 2000; Ivy 1995). In *The Written Suburb* (1989), for example, John Dorst identifies a particular selective obsession with authenticity and history as the governing trope of cultural production in a suburban Pennsylvanian town. Much of the local communal identity there is expressed through festivals that celebrate an aestheticized and circumscribed historical narrative. In other places around the world, localized festival traditions have become de-territorialized and swallowed into expanded systems of national and global cultural production (Guss 2000).

In Beigang and elsewhere in Taiwan, cultural production shares some of these characteristics. Local ritual traditions such as territorial processions and pilgrimages are now more clearly embedded in expanded ritual networks. And many grassroots organizations, as well as government agencies involved in the development of local tourism, produce similar narratives of authenticity in what are mainly commercial settings. Yet, for most of Beigang's culture workers the distinction between commercial and noncommercial cultural production is quite clear, and they resist efforts to insert commercial elements into what they regard as authentic cultural activities. This is not to say that the commercial does not frequently intrude into the realm of culture work. Bo-be-a was adopted in 2005 to be the mascot of Beigang's government-sponsored business development association (Xingxiang Shangquan 形象商圈,[31] Figure 4). Moreover, funding for most local culture work is dependent on supra-local agencies and is often attached to state-sponsored performances of national vernacular culture. Yet, as noted earlier, in Beigang the distinction between "traditional" and "commercial" remains clear, at least for now.

In the past two decades, increased economic power and leisure time have combined with convenient transportation to restructure Taiwanese conceptions of time and space, and increase the demand for local recreation (Harrell 1994). State projects responded to these conditions through the promotion of localities and the revival of less urban loca-

31 The Xingxiang Shangquan are local business organizations sponsored by the Ministry of Finance. Select culturally significant travel destinations receive government assistance to expand their business through cooperation and attention to marketing and presentation of the locality, especially of local specialty products. See Lu 2002.

tions as sites of memory (Lu 2002:142).[32] Certainly the hyperactive production of culture and tradition across the island seems to indicate that history and authenticity will continue to be key national tropes and undergo further reification in the future. Chaotian Gong remains a symbol of an earlier form of authenticity and stands for a particular form of morality unrelated to contemporary global ideas about law and democracy. The newer narratives of settler and cosmopolitan pasts are tied to more recent ideas assimilated from the global discourse of nationhood, and they also draw some of their very legitimacy from the global, for instance, the emphasis on documenting Beigang's links to an earlier global network of trade and migration. Thus, cultural production in Beigang sits, often uneasily, at the intersection of these two kinds of authenticity.

Figure 4 Cai Zongzhi, head of the Beigang Xingxiang Shangquan, with the transformed Bo-be-a mascot. Beigang. July 2005. Photo by author.

32 Among the most successful examples of this trend are Yingge 鶯歌, which re-invented and overhauled itself to become a center of ceramic craftsmanship and a day-trip destination for Taipei urbanites (and a very successful one at that), and Lugang 鹿港, now famous for its traditional port-town culture. Unfortunately, Beigang is located too far from the major highways and metropolitan centers to fully benefit from urban cosmopolitan desires for authenticity.

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文化的在地生產：以北港為例

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本文探討雲林縣北港的「文化工作」。「文化工作」作為一種特別的社會行動領域，泛指經過慎思的文化生產，關注記錄和再生產地方歷史與文化。本文將地方文化工作放在修訂過的國家建構意識形態脈絡下，進而探討北港文史工作者特殊的地方性敘事，實為特殊地方和更廣的跨地方政治經濟過程的產物。有些敘事強調過去的傳統和道德，批評鎮內的當代權力關係。發掘媽祖廟（朝天宮）之外的早期歷史的興趣，則反映了地方認同脫離廟宇及其領導階層的轉向。

關鍵字：文化工作，文化生產，儀式，地方性，社群認同