

# The Significance and Crisis of Religious Rituals in Taiwanese Cultural Landscape

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**Abstract.** The local religious territory in southern Taiwan is centered by a primary temple, associated with lots of subordinated temples. The collective rituals of these temples form a worship system called “Gua Xiang”, which is a mutual ritual procession among temples within the territory. The temples and people have been connected by means of this system, and the rituals, celebrations, myths and legends in the system have become one of the most touching intangible heritage of a community. This paper will argue that the “Gua Xiang” worship system reflected the life styles or defense organization of societies in the past. With the help of them, the emotion of people and temples spreading separately had been linked together, and more splendid type of belief, worship activities will be created jointly. In other words, the “Gua Xiang” worship system has become an intangible heritage to reinforce the spirit of a place in a cultural landscape.

## 1. Introduction

In southern part of Taiwan, most people’s religious belief is one of the combinations of folk-religion, Taoism and Buddhism, and there are one or more temples in every settlement. While temples in settlements are worshiped by local people, the larger temple in the town center is worshiped by more people living in settlements located around the town, and had been become the center of the belief. The area which people live in and worship the same God could be called “Ging” (?), which literally means the territory. By the God’s Will and the desire of local people, an inspection will be held, leaded by the God of dominant temple, and accompanied by other Gods and people in the “Ging”.

This process, which crosses lots of settlements and villages, sometimes crossing across different counties, is an important religious ritual in some area called the “Gua-Xiang” system. The original meaning of “Gua-Xiang” came from dividing “incense” from the

dominant temple, while “incense” may symbolize the spirituality of the God in the dominant temple. Since the “divided incense” was spread around settlements, the relationship between settlements and the temple had been connected. Nowadays the “*Gua-Xiang*” system mostly means the religious ritual and process of inspection held by the temple.

## 2. Religious Ritual as a Cultural Landscape

The network of the “*Gua-Xiang*” worship system in countryside of Taiwan could be seen as cultural routes. Sometimes it came from commemorating the legends of God, such as the places or routes consisted by the signs of God. Sometimes it is related to the myth of the belief, for example the story about the statue floating along a stream. The route of a “*Gua-Xiang*” system may represent the legends and myths in the past, and combine the respect of God’s Will today. Most things in a “*Gua-Xiang*” system should be accepted by God, for instance the frequency and date, actual routes, even the major participants.



Figure 1. Sacred Welcome Ceremony in front of a Temple

Because the belief had been passed down for generations, in many places the “*Gua-Xiang*” system became one of the most important religious ritual, which are esteemed greatly and held actively by local people. According to the definition of Cultural Heritage Preservation Act of Taiwan, the “*Gua-Xiang*” worship system may be seen as the combination of cultural routes and religious landscapes under the criteria of Cultural Landscape. While these had appeared steadily and frequently, “*Gua-Xiang*” had become a social

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phenomenon rather than an expression of one particular exceptional incident or moment (von Droste, Plachter, and Rossler 1995,438). Compared with the concept of World Heritage, this kind of landscape would be close to “associated landscape” under the Operational Guideline because of its closely relationship with religion.

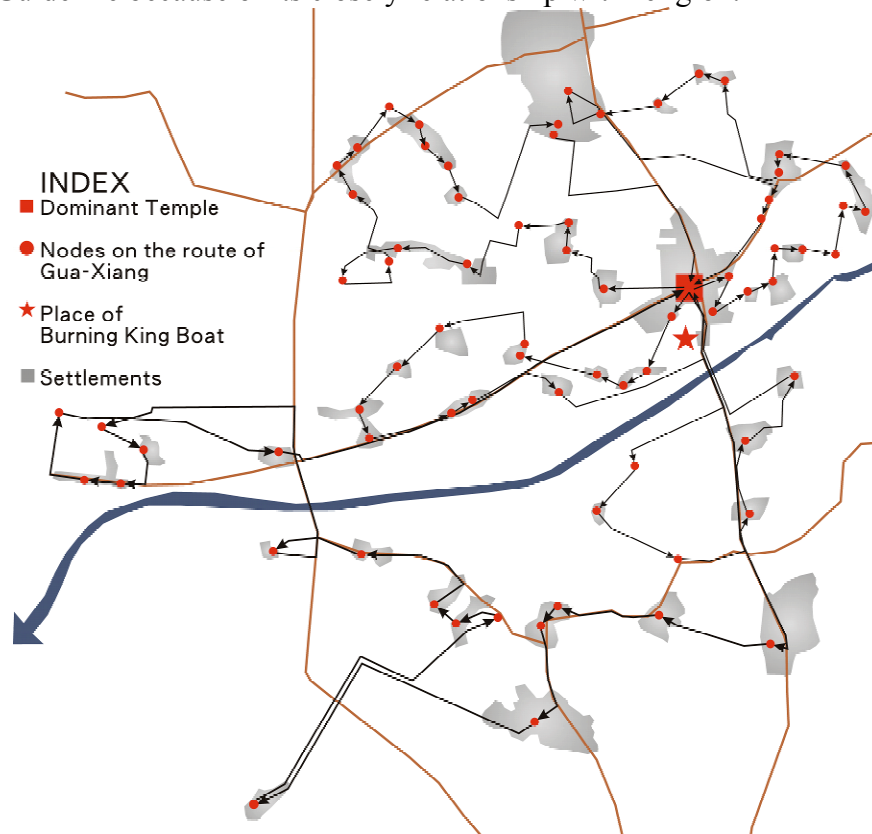


Figure 2. Example Route of A “Gua-Xiang” System

The route is consisted of lots of connected settlements as nodes (the temples in these settlements more specifically). The people and temples in the settlements will be the “host” during the procession of a “Gua-Xiang” system passing through, and welcome the coming Gods (statues) and people from other places. Besides sacred welcome ceremony held by every settlement and temple, the board and lodging for the accompanied people are also provided. The sacred tables would be placed in front of houses along the route of “Gua-Xiang”, which is another specific phenomenon. Local people are the host when the procession coming to their settlement, and they will become guest and be welcomed when they reach another settlement with the procession. People between different settlements had been connected

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closely because of “*Gua-Xiang*” worship systems.

## 2.1. FOLK ART PROCESSIONS IN GUA-XIANG

Besides the Gods (statues) in a “*Gua-Xiang*” system, the folk art processions consisted of accompanied people in settlements represented the custom of pastoral life in the past, and sometimes transformed from the defense organization of settlement. The Plow Procession, for example, simulates the plow and sow on the farm by people playing a cow, had been transformed into an interesting form of performance. The Drum Procession is another example representing the leisure time of pastoral life, which is characterized by carrying drum in front of chase and swaying while beating.



Figure 3. The Plow Procession with Cow and Plow

Another folk art procession closely related to the “*Gua-Xiang*” system is “Song-Jiang Battle Array”. Song-Jiang Battle Array which consisted of people in the settlement, originally came from the martial protection, and trained during the rest time of farming. The device used in the array transformed from simple weapons for attack and defense, and the array may be various by people’s move. Although the security of the settlement had not depended on the array anymore, it has become one of the important intangible cultural heritage, and may represent people and settlement in the “*Gua-Xiang*” system.

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*Figure 4. The Song-Jiang Battle Arrays in Service*



*Figure 5. The Song-Jiang Battle Array Dedicated to the God in front of the Dominant Temple*

### 2.2. “KING BOAT” CEREMONY IN GUA-XIANG

The most significant symbol in some “*Gua-Xiang*” systems is the King Boat and its related ritual. The ritual of King Boat originated from the ceremony of driving out pestilences, and the King Boat itself had become the most important holy instrument (Huang 2000,18-21; Chiu 2006,4). While the shape of King Boat is quite like a real sailing vessel, it can not really sail in the water. The ceremony would end at burning the King Boat, which means all kinds of diseases and demons would vanish during the burning. The symbolized meaning of King Boat ceremony had been changed slightly. In a King Boat ceremony people pray for peace and free from disasters, and the faith inside



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people and the respect to supernatural had been conveyed and symbolized by the form of King Boat itself (Chiu 2006,5).



Figure 6. The Burning of King Boat



Figure 7. The King Boat and Its Marching

The King Boat would be constructed at the dominant temple, and at the end of the “*Gua-Xiang*” ritual it will be towed by local people, marched through the street to an open space. It will be burned after lots of symbolized goods are loaded, and joss paper donated by people rounded aside. While the “*Gua-Xiang*” and the King Boat ceremony had become a significant ritual in a place, the respect to the Gods had also been represented by means of enthusiastic participating of local people, and the identification of place and sense of proud inside people’s minds had been forming gradually. It makes people more expecting to join into the ritual, and the scale of the ritual had been broadened, no matter the area it would cover or the resources and

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money would be spent.

### 3. The Crisis of Gua Xiang

Although the “*Gua-Xiang*” system had become a significant religious ritual in Taiwan and been paid more and more attention on it, some crisis are growing and may cause negative influences, due to the change of social environment and values.

#### 3.1. URBANIZATION AND AGING OF POPULATION IN COUNTRYSIDE

Most of “*Gua-Xiang*” worship systems are located in countryside. According to the population statistic of Taiwan in 2000, the total population is 21,259,202, and 68% among which is in metropolitan area. While the aging-people (more than 65) is 8.26% in metropolitan area, it's up to 10.81% in non-metropolitan area (Directorate General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, Executive Yuan, R.O.C. 2000). It shows that Taiwan had become an urbanized area, and the aging of population in countryside is significant.

Although there are no limits to the age of participant in a “*Gua-Xiang*” system, it will be negative that there are less people in the countryside and most people are aged. For example, to some “*Gua-Xiang*” systems, it may be simplified, frequency may be reduced, and the spirit in it would gradually loss, due to the shortage of people in folk art processions, and lack of young people to continue training.

#### 3.2. COMMERCIALIZATION OF RILIGIOUS RITUAL

Originally, the major spirit in the “*Gua-Xiang*” system is the close relationship which local people had created by participating directly. However, some folk art processions in the “*Gua-Xiang*” system had been changed to employ professional performance group, which substituted for local people due to the shortage as mentioned above. Although these groups may perform much better than local people, it's quite different from the preliminary meaning of “*Gua-Xiang*”.

Some professional performance groups consisted of teenagers, who want to become the focus of people by performing extraordinarily in a “*Gua-Xiang*” system. These adolescents may seek the needs which could not be satisfied in schools or families through performances, such as achievement, identification, and sense of belongingness (Wang 2002,4). However, the traditions, techniques, and meanings

behind the processions may be neglected by them. Some folk art processions with the value of intangible cultural heritage may be threatened to loss their significances.

#### 4. Discussion

To preserve this significant intangible cultural heritage, and raise its specific features, it needs that various means of protection in different aspects, such as education, research, documentation, and legislation.

##### 4.1. HANDING DOWN THE CONCEPTS

It had been implemented that teaching the spirits and techniques of these processions to next generations by managers of processions, local people, educators, and some researchers. The most notable is those on Song-Jiang Battle Arrays. Not only the children join the Battle Arrays in the settlements spontaneously, the training of the Battle Arrays had also been embedded in formal courses of elementary and junior high schools. Besides, though only man could join the training in the past, the girls and women had been welcomed in recent years, so that this intangible cultural heritage may be kept operation.



Figure 8. The young girl in a Song-Jiang Battle Array

Systematic researches had begun, and process and details of many “Gua-Xiang” systems had also been documented. The distribution, styles, and categories of folk art processions had been investigated, and the results of those are rich, such as Fang(1991), Huang(1994, 2000), and Lee(2006) etc. The documentation of process and detail of



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the “Gua-Xiang” system had been done by dominant temples, which will be the basic documents for further research.

### 4.2. PROTECTION FROM LEGISLATION

Some important “*Gua-Xiang*” systems had been listed on tentative list of cultural landscapes, which may be protected under Cultural Heritage Preservation Act in the future. For instance, the significance of 5 examples in southern Taiwan meets the criteria of cultural landscape, while their historicity, scale, and importance are distinguished in Taiwan.

On the tangible part of these cultural landscapes, the nodes of routes of “*Gua-Xiang*” systems, mainly temples with historic or architectural value, may be designated or registered as Monuments and Historic Buildings. On the intangible part, some folk art processions with artistic value may be registered as Folk and Related Heritages or Traditional Art, and artist in those processions may also be listed. By these ways, these intangible cultural heritages may be protected and preserved under the Act, and the assistances from authorities will be applied. The role of being the core of spirit of place could be maintained.

## 5. Conclusion

The “*Gua-Xiang*” system is an important part of religious ritual in Taiwan. It represents the respect of religion and faith from local people, and reflects the spirit of place by means of participating of people. Relationship between people had been connected, and lots of significant intangible cultural heritages had been derived. Besides the preservation on important nodes on the routes of the “*Gua-Xiang*” system, protection and education on the process and technique will be critical for further development.

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