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Magic Lanterns

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In the midst of this year’s bitter winter, a glimmer of hope shines through: the Lunar New Year is rapidly approaching: New Year’s Eve (除夕) is on January 25, followed by New Year’s Day (初一) on the 26th. In Taiwan, one of the main events marking this holiday is the annual Taiwan Lantern Festival (台灣燈會), which is now entering its twentieth season. This year’s Festival is timed to start on February 9, which also happens to be the date of the traditional Lantern Festival (元宵節, also known as 上元節 or the more popular 小過年), celebrated on the fifteen day of the first lunar month. It will be held in Yilan County over a two-week period, marking the first time that this event has been staged on the island’s east coast.

Visitors to the festival (as well as the mass media) pay special attention to the Festival’s main theme lantern (主燈). Because next year will be the Year of the Ox, the new theme lantern is a movable golden-colored statue of the Taiwanese Water Buffalo (台灣水牛; representing the perseverance and dedication Taiwan’s citizens), which towers over 14 meters in height atop a 4.3 meter high pedestal. This particular theme lantern will also be measured against its mighty predecessor of 12 years ago, a giant ox that weighed in at 13,950 kilos, earning a place in the Guinness Book of World Records. However, one wonders if the fate of this year’s theme lantern will be any different from those before it, most of which have ended up being left to rust and rot. In addition to the theme lantern, approximately 130,000 handheld lanterns called Starlight Ox (星光牛) will be distributed to visitors, especially children.

Apart from all lanterns great and small, one conspicuous feature of the Taiwan Lantern Festival is corporate sponsorship (and the accumulation of symbolic capital). For example, this year’s theme lantern has been sponsored by Chunghwa Telecom (中華電信), while lanterns at previous festivals have been donated by the Grand Hotel (圓山大飯店), the Grand Formosa Regent (台北晶華酒店), and the Fubon Group (富邦集團). Another aspect of the Festival involves marketing. This year’s event, for example, will promote sales of renowned products like Pinglin Baozhong Tea (坪林包種茶) and Dragonfly Glazed Beads from Pingtung (屏東蜻蜓雅築). Similar phenomena have marked the staging of earlier Taiwan Lantern Festivals, the first of which was organized by the Tourism Bureau (觀光局) in 1990 as part of a set of activities known as Tourism Week. The festivities have grown exponentially over time, with celebrations like the 2007 Lantern Festival in Chiayi and the 2003 Lantern Festival in Taichung attracting tens of thousands of people (resulting in massive traffic jams), not to mention leading politicians who take part in the lantern-lighting ceremonies. The cost of a theme lantern has risen as well, and now exceeds NT$10 million (approximately US$300,000).

All this indicates that the Taiwan Lantern Festival is both a major celebration and big business. Even more interestingly, however, it represents one instance of how Chinese officials and elites have attempted to "secularize" what had originally been a highly religious
Standard representations of the Lantern Festival today tend to emphasize the importance of children carrying decorative lanterns, games of "guessing lantern riddles" (猜燈謎), and the consumption of dumplings known as yuanxiao 元宵 (after 元宵節) or tangyuan 湯圓. Such depictions also feature legends about the Festival's origins, the most commonly cited of which involve tricking the Jade Emperor (玉皇大帝) into believing that a village had been punished by fire, or a means of showing respect for the Buddha by a historical emperor. The religious aspects of the Lantern Festival continue to thrive in Taiwan, however (see below).

It also striking that recent news reports claimed that the Tourism Bureau was planning to terminate its role in hosting the Taiwan Lantern Festival. Such reports were quickly denied, with leading government officials announcing instead that plans were in the works for encouraging local groups (including non-governmental ones) to assume sponsorship of the Festival. If this proves to be the case, it would signify a remarkable shift of the Lantern Festival back to its origins, when it was a "popular" ritual in every sense of the word. For example, as John Lagerwey and his Chinese colleagues have shown in their path-breaking Traditional Hakka Society Series (客家傳統社會叢書), the traditional Lantern Festival consisted of numerous religious events (including enormous dragon lantern processions (遊龍燈)), most of which had as their goal the rejuvenation of vital yang 陽 forces, with the word for lanterns (燈) being roughly homophonous with that for sons (丁) in numerous southern dialects, including Cantonese, Hakka, and Minnan.

For hundreds (if not thousands) of years then, the Lantern Festival was a radiant ritual held to celebrate light and life. All this changed during the early years of the twentieth century, with recent research by Prasenjit Duara, Vincent Goossaert, Rebecca Nedostup, and David Palmer showing that one aspect of KMT and CCP campaigns against "superstition" (迷信) involved the suppression of most traditional festivals, with a select few (including Lunar New Year celebrations like the Lantern Festival) being bestowed modern connotations and incorporated into a new Gregorian calendar enacted in 1912. In fact, prior to the Tomb-sweeping Festival (清明節) and Mid-Autumn Festival (中秋節) being declared public holidays in China just last year, the Lunar New Year had the distinction of being the only traditional festival that had continuously enjoyed government recognition. The religious aspects of the Lantern Festival declined over time, and it became instead merely an occasion for lanterns to be displayed on the streets and in temples, or carried around by children.

All this changed in Taiwan beginning in the late 1980s due to this nation's democratization, economic development, and increasing recognition of the legitimacy and value of indigenous cultural traditions. The realization on the part of officials and local elites that festivals could enhance the tourism industry provided an added incentive for their revival. As a result, many ritual events held on the date of the traditional Lantern Festival have experienced phenomenal growth in popularity.
One example is the *Fireworks Festival* held in the village of Yenshui (Tainan County), which is said to have been first staged back in 1875 as part of plague expulsion rituals involving the deity Guangong (關公). The most renowned aspect of this festival is the “bee hive” fireworks (蜂炮), which consist of bamboo frames holding hundreds of bottle rockets that are set off simultaneously, providing an opportunity for thrill-seeking tourists to test their bravado (not unlike the running of the bulls during the festival of San Fermin in Pamploma).

Another fiery Lantern Festival rite is Taitung’s “Blasting Lord Handan” (炮炸寒單爺), held in honor of the local God of Wealth (財神). As Avron Boretz has shown, this festival is especially noteworthy for its powerful expressions of the yang (陽) forces of masculinity and virility, as it features the participation of half-naked young men (many of whom have gangster backgrounds) who impersonate the god. Riding atop open palanquins, they are subjected to being bombarded with firecrackers thrown by the locals, all ostensibly in the interest of a prosperous New Year.

The renowned Pingsi Sky Lanterns (平溪天燈) festival of northern Taiwan, also held on the traditional date of the Lantern Festival, further emphasizes the importance of fire, albeit in a less obviously religious context. Legend has it that during the Qing dynasty this area suffered from attacks by robbers and aboriginal peoples, prompting residents to use sky lanterns as a form of signaling to their friends and relatives. This local custom has now grown into a major international event attracting tens of thousands of people who release countless sky lanterns covered with wishes for good fortune, despite concerns about their environmental impact (see below).

The religious aspects of the Lantern Festival are also making a comeback in parts of China. One example involves the revival of a centuries-old festival in the town of Pucheng (Zhejiang Province), which I describe in an article originally published in the *Journal of Ritual Studies* and subsequently reprinted in the volume *Asian Ritual Systems*. Pucheng’s festival is timed to overlap with Lunar New Year festivities, particularly the Lantern Festival. Although it is generally referred to as the “Nocturnal Battle” (ba wugeng 拔五更) after a nighttime exorcistic rite and
relay race held near its conclusion, the entire festival lasts two weeks, from the 4th to 17th days of the 1st lunar month. Banned during the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution, the festival was revived in the early 1980s and has grown more elaborate by the year.

In Taiwan, the revival and breathtaking growth of traditional festive events coinciding with the Lantern Festival has not been without its challenges. In Taitung, for example, the prominence of gangsters (as well as the brothels that helped sponsor the event) prompted the authorities to ban the Blasting Lord Handan festival between 1983 and 1989, and it was only allowed to be performed after local leaders signed an agreement to oversee the behavior of potentially problematic participants. These rites gained added legitimacy beginning in 2001 as a result of their performance at state-sponsored cultural events, as well as in the presence of visiting dignitaries from Taiwan’s remaining diplomatic allies like Palau. In the case of Pingsi, a fascinating article published last year in the International Herald Tribune details how Taiwan’s Environmental Protection Agency (行政院環境保護署) set up its own “virtual sky lantern” website in order to encourage people to release digital lanterns rather than real ones, a decision prompted by the fact that many sky lanterns end up littering the countryside. One particularly misguided missile ignited a blaze near the Taoyuan International Airport, with the smoke forcing officials to temporarily close down a runway. This policy, which resembles efforts to ban Mid-Autumn Festival barbeques (see my previous post), promote the burning of “virtual” paper money, and discourage the slaughter of divine pigs (神豬), also represents the on-going tensions between “modern” ideals and “traditional” practices, which in the case of Pingsi is further complicated by the fact the sky lanterns represent a sizeable source of income for local residents.

Even the state-sponsored Taiwan Lantern Festival is not immune from the influence of popular beliefs. One report recently published in the China Times cited as an example the ”Flying Tiger” theme lantern (飛天虎主燈) of 1998. When this lantern was first lit, its glowing green eyes were viewed by many as an ill omen, and sure enough once it was moved to the east coast following the festival the area was plagued by a series of air disasters. Local officials then pulled the tiger’s teeth, but this was followed by numerous auto accidents, so a geomancer was brought in to remedy the problem (which ceased to be a problem once the lantern was shredded by the mighty winds of Typhoon Bilis in 2001). A second example occurred in 2001, the first time the festival was held outside of Taipei (in Kaohsiung). The theme lantern for that year (the Year of the Snake) was a mythical creature known as an aolong (鰲龍, part dragon, part sea turtle). Some were reminded of the Qing military commander Oboi (1610?-1669), and wondered if that lantern would shape the career of then mayor Frank Hsieh (謝長廷). His presidential ambitions have yet to be realized.

So enjoy the beauty of the Lantern Festival, as well as the guessing games and of course the dumplings. But do keep in mind the ritual facets of this holiday, especially what they can tell us about the power of light to overcome darkness and despair.