

WALK WITH MAZU

與媽祖同行：藝術家朱朱的 信仰生活實踐記

In religiously cosmopolitan Taiwan, Sea Goddess Mazu enjoys the largest following. This book describes the growth of a young artist as she joins Mazu pilgrimages, paints religious idols, accompanies temple idols on sacred journeys, and shares everyday life with her divine protector.

Following the spiritual and creative blossoming of artist Huang Chu-Ping, *Walking with Mazu* opens a rare window into the Mazu faith as practiced in Taiwan today. The author conveys in thoughtful words and delicately executed illustrations the merits, insights, and stories gleaned from fifteen years of Mazu pilgrimages and visits to over two-hundred Mazu temples. More than a religious testimonial, this introspective work reflects one woman's quest to project goodness into every aspect of the human experience.

This work is divided into four chapters: Seeking, Creating, Settling In, and Traveling. "Seeking" opens on her chance encounter with Mazu worship as a young, rudderless college senior and narrates the whirlwind of experiences and encounters associated with her early Mazu pilgrimages, including a very memorable round-the-island pilgrimage on foot. In "Creating", Huang invests faith into her creative efforts, painting over two-hundred illustrations of Mazu while circling Taiwan on foot that are subsequently exhibited and published to share Mazu culture with a larger audience. "Settling In" plumbs her thoughts and experiences as an artist-in-residence at various places forging connections with local cultural and artistic communities. The final chapter, "Traveling" memorializes her travels with a Mazu idol to temples across Taiwan as well as in Japan and Bhutan, showing how religion not only reflects shared human values but can also promote cross-cultural communication and camaraderie.



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Following the author on her journey of self-exploration and discovery, this unembellished, touching narrative offers substantive insights into Taiwanese folk culture and history. The author's empathetic, artistic perspective on the cultural reverberations of Mazu religion and worship shows how religious mores may offer a psychological salve for the confusion and disquiet of modern society.

Huang Chu-Ping 黃朱平（朱朱）

Born in Taitung, Huang Chu-Ping is a self-taught artist specializing in religious-themed works, including over two-hundred paintings of Sea Goddess Mazu. She wrote *Walking with Mazu*, one of her several published books, with the aim of helping preserve and promote understanding of Mazu culture.

WALK WITH MAZU

By Huang Chu-Ping

Translated by Jun Liu

“Then Let Me Go on Pilgrimage with You.” – That’s How It All Began.

As schoolchildren, we were all handed the inevitable essay, “My Ambition”. Our pens filled page upon page and, when our teacher read out the submissions, there were doctors, scientists, postmen, even future presidents in the mix. But mine was the only one to expound upon dreams of becoming a “painter”. I can’t have known what it took to become one – was it simply a matter of drawing and drawing? Watching my grandfather, an architect, sweating over blueprints must have fired my imagination.

Only later did I learn there are many kinds of painters, all of them artists. Who could have guessed I would, quite by accident, become an artist who travels with Mazu?

“Do you remember the very first thing you ever said to Mazu?”

Mom says that, when I was little, Grandma presented me to Mazu as a god-daughter, asking for her protection. Years later, I encountered Mazu again one afternoon in my final year at university.

For two consecutive years, I chaired both the Classical Chinese Studies Society (a departmental association) and the College of Liberal Arts Student Council at Fu Jen Catholic University in New Taipei. Most people throw themselves into clubs as freshmen, but I didn’t plunge in until my senior year. Everyone grumbled about the departmental association’s inefficiency, yet no one wanted to shoulder the job.

“Why must things be this way?”

“Must it be done like this? Aren’t there other ways?”

As a child, I brimmed with questions about the world. But the answers seldom came at once; they fermented over years until, step by step, most of them found their answers. Yet still, progress on some questions stalled right at the brink of insight, as though a vital channel in me wouldn’t open until I stepped outside my comfort zone.

“If we can’t stand the way things are, is carping from the sidelines all we can do? Is doing nothing really acceptable? Why don’t I give it a try?”

I still remember voting day. It was a Wednesday just after a mandatory course attended by everyone in the same year as me. Perhaps everyone thought I was a bit mad, but one person, one vote carried me in. Fired by sheer enthusiasm, I took up the chair. I was a blank sheet with no prior club experience learning everything from scratch.

For months afterward, I would linger on campus long after class, planning events and filing for reimbursements. Most of our budget came from first-year departmental fees, and orientation camp had already eaten up the lion's share. With the Department of Chinese Literature's cherished traditions to keep up – poetry recitals, film nights, weekly meetings – I had a queue of expenses looming large over me.

Money was tight. Before each activity, we tramped the neighborhood, asking shopkeepers for donations. A proposal for a creative market earned a small grant from the Xinzhuang City Office (today the Xinzhuang District Office in New Taipei City). One afternoon after the event, I handed in the receipts; once the grant was disbursed, we finally broke even, and I breathed again.

My first brush with art markets was sheer chance. While preparing the Chinese Week series, I fretted that student events all looked the same. As chair, I needed a fresh idea.

Strolling through Ximending – a lively youth quarter in Taipei – I ducked into the Red House, a century-old theater just becoming known for its weekend craft markets. The stalls offering illustrations, metalwork, jewelry, leather, and textiles set my imagination racing. I plucked up the courage to ask if the vendors might consider coming to our campus. To my surprise, the market organizers were all for it.

We themed Chinese Week around the “patrons of learning” across three traditions: Wenchang Dijun, the Taoist God of Literature; Manjushri, the Buddhist Bodhisattva of Wisdom; and St. Thomas Aquinas, the Catholic patron of students. At our help desk, you could write prayer cards and draw lots, each with a different poetic blessing. Local brush shops and vendors of salty kopia – traditional Hokkien buns – joined forces with campus club performances, book and film fairs, and a bustling market. The event spilled out from the Chinese Literature Department's Wenhua Building and stretched all the way to Splendor Square, with close to fifty stalls welcoming well over 1,000 visitors during the week – a campus record. Who would have thought a complete novice could pull that off? This was a world away from those early budgets and proposals that kept being knocked back.

I wasn't trained, and was not yet a maker – just incurably curious. Later, when a creator needed time off, I would mind their stall, selling at places like National Taiwan Normal University and Taipei's Shilin District, and discovering even more kinds of work. Each weekend, vendors would arrive one after another to set up display stands and greet the crowds. When things got so busy that there was no time to eat, we would share snacks in stolen moments. These markets ran on the weather's whim: bustling under clear skies, slipping into a drowsy camaraderie among stallholders when the rain came. The friendships forged then have lasted; we still follow one another's work and remain connected in spirit.

Perhaps it was because of my immersion in the exchange that I began making small things myself. I evolved from participant into practitioner. The conversations around this transition were the rough ground of my creative path. Only after meeting Mazu – when She became the focus of my quest – did my casual making gather direction and aim. It's no exaggeration to say She led me toward creative maturity.

With reimbursements finally off my mind, I strolled across to Xinzhuang Old Street.

Xinzhuang Old Street is home to several centers of faith. I stepped first into Wusheng Temple, dedicated to Guan Yu, to pray for success in study and then proceeded to Ciyou Temple to seek Mazu's blessing. I love the atmosphere of traditional architecture – perhaps an architectural soul runs in my blood. While an undergraduate, I sought out many temples, especially the small, quiet, timeworn ones. I didn't follow any one deity closely back then; I simply "took incense and bowed" at festivals, continuing my family's way of belief.

In the early days of searching for meaning, as a student at a Catholic university, I also prayed to God. I fretted over rejected proposals and unfunded budgets, muttering petitions as I walked. More than once, between the Truth–Goodness–Beauty–Holiness Square at the gate and the campus within, my phone rang with news that our club's funding had been approved. This subsequently happened another two or three times – uncanny. In the end I didn't enter the arms of Jesus, I think my view of the cosmos leans more toward an Eastern sense of mutual arising and interdependence.

Where the heart inclines, the Divine reveals. I've come to believe that prayers in every tradition carry real power.

Because of its proximity to campus, I often visited Ciyou Temple on Old Street. Mazu sits enthroned there, and the serenity of the place relaxes my body and mind. After lingering awhile, I knelt in front of the offering table and poured my heart out.

"Our generation has material plenty and, it seems, endless opportunity; yet no one has taught us how to choose..." I laid out my troubles – from the departmental association to decisions about graduate school and work – hoping Granny Mazu would part the clouds and show me a way through the fog.

When I finished, even with the fence still partitioning the statue off from the worship area, I felt a slow current of warmth welling from the shrine, gathering heat until it held me close. "So Granny Mazu did hear me!" I've never forgotten that embrace.

"Then let me go on pilgrimage with You." It was a thought that came naturally and unbidden. I'd grown up ignorant of religious pilgrimages. Why that idea surfaced right then I still can't say.

The problems our generation faces are nothing like those of our parents'. Once, hard work led to a clear road; now the world is tangled and noisy. As I weighed my future, I would often wonder: what is study for? I watched classmates study with only a job or diploma in mind, and then bow their backs for a paycheck with little thought for a life aligned with their heart.

What kind of life did I want? One way to find out was to step beyond my frame and follow Mazu on pilgrimage.

Back home I searched "Mazu pilgrimage", and for the first time the sacred names of Dajia Mazu and Baishatun Mazu appeared before me. I skimmed their origins and information. This was an unknown world. "Next year I'm joining the pilgrimage," I thought. I wasn't even planning to ask

for anything; curiosity alone said: go and see. Only on the road did I realize that walking forward isn't simply about reaching an end.

In the Taiyuan era of the Jin Dynasty, a fisherman from Wuling followed a stream and entered Peach Blossom Spring...

“When We First Met, You Were Twenty-Five.” – The Dajia Mazu Pilgrimage

Each year on the day of the Lantern Festival, which falls on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, the Dajia Mazu temple casts poe – crescent divination blocks – to decide the dates for the nine-day pilgrimage across central Taiwan's western coast. That year the divine answer called for the pilgrimage to commence around the Qingming (Tomb-Sweeping) Festival.

I remember my first year. Days before departure, even though I'd already packed to perfection, fear of facing the unknown alone held my feet fast. On TV, crowds were shown setting out; it was that human tide which somehow emboldened me. “Oh, just go, your bag's packed. See how it goes. If it's really too much, buy a ticket home.” My inner theater played out that scene again and again; in the end, stepping out the door still took a little courage.

On April 5, 2008 – the year of Wuzi on the lunar calendar – I boarded a train for Dajia and joined the southbound pilgrimage.

Did it go smoothly? Being a cautious soul, my “longest” journey so far had been moving from Taitung up to Taipei for university. On weekends I would visit friends at their campuses in other cities, whistle-stop sightseeing at best. Does that even count as travel? My unwritten plan was simply “sleep the night in someone's dorm”. In fairness, I did cover a lot of ground – of a sort.

I tried for days to rope in a companion, but to no avail. With no like-minded friend to go with, I still hesitated at the threshold of a new journey.

With each stop at a major station, another tide of people surged inward, packing our carriage like a tin of sardines. With barely room to plant my feet, I swayed like river-weed in the human current.

By the time I reached Dajia Station it was almost time for Mazu's palanquin to set off. I shouldered through the temple with my pack, received my first pilgrimage flag, announced my name and intent to Mazu, tied a safety charm to the flag, circled the incense burner three times clockwise – and then stepped out, heading south on foot.

Online advice urged starting out before the palanquin leaves. While the carriers can rest in shifts; those who follow have only one shift – their own. Set out late and you'll never keep pace. Luckily a steady stream of pilgrims, pushing carts and luggage, showed the way. That advice, I found, was spot on.

Behind us, firecrackers crackled: “Mazu's on the move! She's moving – she's at Shuiwei Bridge now!” Crossing that bridge marks the procession leaving Dajia proper. In those pre-GPS,

pre-livestream days, fellow pilgrims served as a rolling newswire for the palanquin's progress, and I drank in the updates.

Along the route believers craned to welcome the palanquin and crawl beneath it for a blessing. To keep to the schedule, Mazu's palanquin pressed on almost around the clock, and those who walked powered on through day and night. After the send-off, although I only rarely caught a glimpse of the palanquin again, the jingle of its bells and the running commentary around me were like a pocket radio. I never felt alone.

Aunties and uncles, seeing me on my own, would slow to chat. When they learned I was a university student traveling solo, they marveled – “So young, and already on pilgrimage!” – and folded me into their groups, swapping life stories as we walked and looking out for me.

But their real curiosity was my footwear: slippers. “Don't you blister?”

“Two advantages,” I'd say, sounding like a sales rep for Taiwan's classic blue-and-white flip-flops. “On sunny days I wear socks with them – no sunburn, no chafing, no sweaty feet. When rain drives other pilgrims to stuff their shoes with newspaper, I just take off my socks and am instantly dry and comfy. When the soles wear down, I let them go without a qualm and buy a cheap new pair; walking on thick, soft soles feels positively blessed.”

In Taichung's Qingshui Market, I bought my first rolling cart, piled my gear onto it, and felt my steps grow light.

Daytime walking was oppressively hot, so most people made up for lost distance at night. I devised a rule that if I was more than half a day ahead of Mazu's planned route, I could wash up and sleep properly; otherwise, I would just take a short nap and move on. On good days, a household took me in; otherwise, I would find a pilgrims' hostel.

I have slept on bare ground too. On the return leg, in Changhua City, most of us camped at the county government's administrative building. I arrived late; the hall already teemed with pilgrims who had arrived on scooters and bicycles. I managed to find a scrap of cardboard and lay down outside the main gate beneath the portico.

A cold front swept in that night, bringing a fine rain that drifted around our feet. A veteran pilgrim showed me how to wear two raincoats to blunt the knife-edge wind. I shivered on that cardboard, dozing and waking. The chill that cut to the bone became one of my sharpest pilgrimage memories.

At each major landmark, however tired, I invariably stopped for a photo. When Lunzai Bridge and the signs for Chiayi's Xingang Township finally came into view, the crowd bore me onto the narrow span and I was a third of the way across before I found a pocket of space to stand and breathe. A swell of feeling rose in me – “I've made it!” I pulled my mask up to hide tears that were beyond joy or sorrow, but the sobs came anyway.

It was my first time in Xingang. Compared to those veterans with a decade of pilgrimages under their belt, I was a preschooler. Late at night, down a lane by the post office, volunteers were

sweeping with great bamboo brooms. Beyond the warmth of their welcome, the community's capacity to rally together moved me.

After years of being welcomed, I longed to give back. I still remember the night I washed more bowls than I could count.

During my first few pilgrimages, I knew almost no one. I set out alone with what I thought was a perfectly packed bag. Looking back, it was really a collection of "might-come-in-hand" things rather than what I truly needed.

Dragging a cart behind me, my steps grew heavier and heavier. Even when I was half a day – or a day – ahead of the route, the strain told.

When we reached Qingshui, I was dead on my feet. After dinner I saw dishes piled high at a snack stall and sat to help wash, stealing a rest at the same time. No one came to relieve me; I washed bowl after bowl, they flew back to the dining area and returned in stacks, and before I knew it midnight had come.

Mazu's palanquin had passed long since and crowds were thinning when it hit me that I still had nowhere to sleep. I stayed to help the snack-stall owner – whom I'd only just met – with her final clean-up. She offered me a bed for the night, and at last we had a moment to talk.

Her question was the same one pilgrims asked me along the way: why would a university student choose to walk Mazu's route?

From Dajia to Xingang, pilgrims traditionally keep vegetarian on the outward journey and eat meat again only after the birthday rites. As a vegetarian, I never worried about food; there were plenty of options and, to my delight, unexpected treats – salad, buffets, black coffee, fries. I could almost write a wish-list menu before setting out.

Now, during this season every year, I always set time aside to walk properly with Mazu. It has become a habit – almost a reflex. I've made friends on the road and learned to cherish "once-in-a-lifetime" meetings and then to say goodbye. I've seen more, and I've found my way more easily. Looking back, I truly have grown.

"When we first met, you were twenty-five," said Chairman Ye.

"We haven't seen each other for a few years, and now I'm eighteen," I joked. "Ours is a deep friendship indeed."

I've known Chairman Ye for years. Formerly of Wudi Temple in Changhua, he and his volunteers make 8,000 vegetarian zongzi dumplings every year before the Dajia pilgrimage – eighteen years and counting. After handing them out on the border of Changhua and Dadu, they join the procession the next morning.

He and I walk at roughly the same pace. By chance we fell into conversation on the road from Yuliao to Wucuo in Xiluo Township, Yunlin County, and have kept in touch ever since. At every rest stop there are moving stories of encounters with Mazu; all these offerings of the heart gather into a current of care that carries people on.

When I began, I thought simply, “Since I’ve already set out, I’ll keep walking.” I never imagined I’d return year after year. Over these years, both my life and work have deepened and grown. May I keep that first intention, and keep moving forward!

A friend, hearing I’d joined the pilgrimage, confided that despite devout worship he had never felt protected and was losing faith in the gods. And me?

I grew up following my family’s Buddhist faith and, with age, the burning of incense became familiar routine. News of charlatans trading on religion is never far away. On the road, though, people from every walk of life have shared with me how Mazu had changed and sheltered them – some proclaimed heaven’s will with plenty of hindsight. I believed half of what I heard, and left the other half for time to prove.