

Bridging the Gap: Methodological Challenges in the Study of Taiwanese Popular Religions

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This paper will attempt to critically assess key works on Taiwanese popular religion published during the past decade, including by historians of religion (Philip Clart, Fan Chun-wu 范純武, Lee Fong-mao 李豐楙, Li Shih-wei 李世偉, Wang Chien-chuan 王見川, etc.) and social scientists (Avron Boretz, Chang Hsun 張珣, Chen Weihua 陳緯華, C. Julia Huang (黃倩玉), Kuo Cheng-tian 郭承天, Richard Madsen, Marc Moskowitz, Steven Sangren, Ting Jen-chieh 丁仁傑, Tsai Yen-zen 蔡彥仁, Robert Weller, etc.). In doing so, it will pay special attention to the challenges (and opportunities) provided by Taiwan's vibrant religious traditions, which have produced a wealth of textual materials yet can also be studied by using ethnographic methods and collecting survey data. Apart from the well-known penchants of historians to rely on text-based methodologies and social scientists to favor surveys and ethnographies, an even greater conundrum that scholars of Taiwanese popular religions face involves how to effectively utilize the ever-increasing body of data about religious life in modern Chinese history and among contemporary Chinese communities around the world. In general, historians of Taiwanese religions tend to be more open to using broad source bases, but often lack the necessary conceptual frameworks to tease out the significance of their data, while social scientists tend to employ stimulating theoretical frameworks but rely on a more limited source base, rarely considering data from outside of Taiwan. As China's religious revival continues to gain pace, and as more sources about twentieth-century religious history come to light, how to bridge these methodological gaps may become one of the thorniest trials scholars in both fields will face in the near future and beyond.