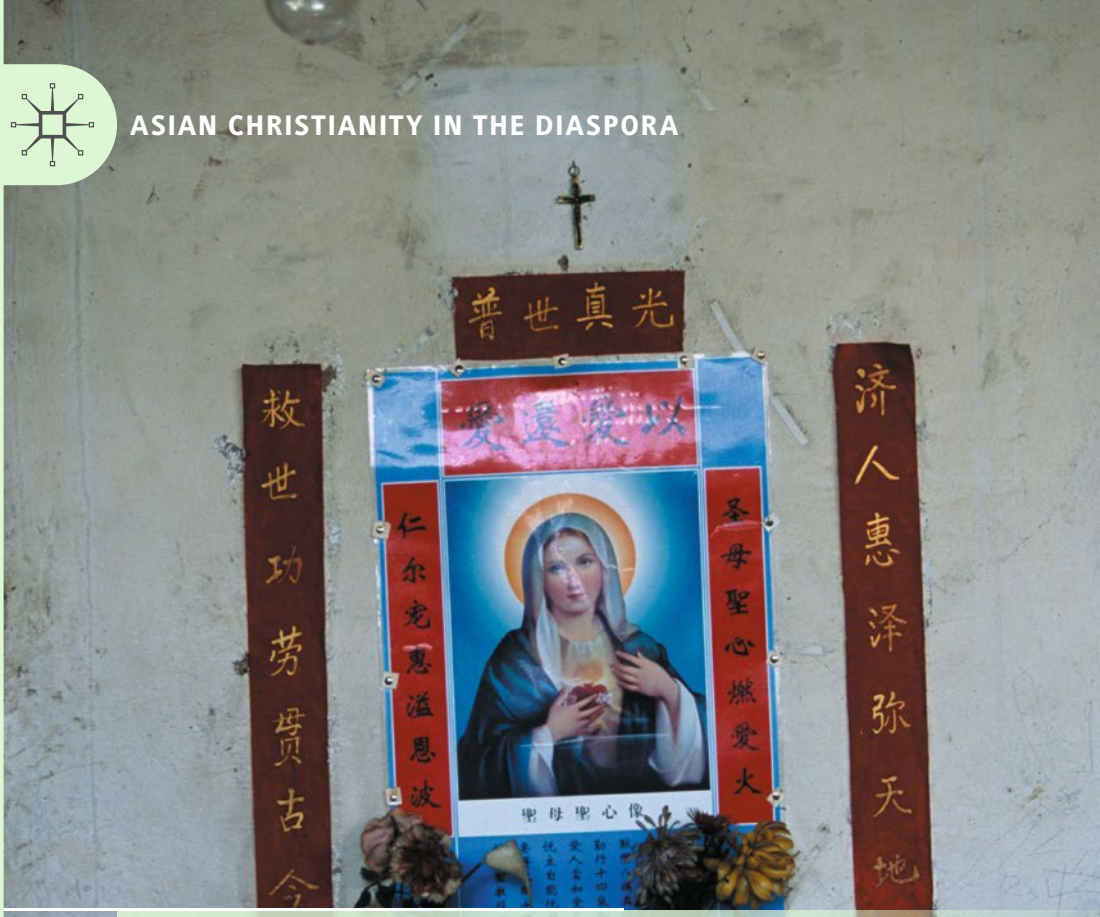

ASIAN CHRISTIANITY IN THE DIASPORA

Place, Alterity, and Narration in a Taiwanese Catholic Village

Marco Lazzarotti

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Asian Christianity in the Diaspora

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To my wife and my son,
without whom I would have finished this book many years before.
But without whom my life would have been
much more empty and meaningless.

Foreword

It is a particular pleasure for me to write these lines to accompany the publication of a book that began as Marco Lazzarotti's PhD thesis.

Since the inception of ethnography as part of the anthropological discipline, villages seemed to be the natural places to study. They were the sites where people conducted face-to-face sociality, they spoke to romanticist ideas about cultural authenticity in the countryside, and they were the places where most people lived in the colonial universe of early anthropology. With the rise of the postmodern critique of anthropological epistemology, with multisited ethnography reacting to globalized socialities, and with urban anthropology, the age of village studies seems long gone. Quite a number of authors have thus questioned the validity of the village as a unit of study.

However, this very situation allows for a reconsideration of the village as a theoretical and cultural construct. The insight that the village is not a self-explanatory category of human life raises the question: What is a village? How do people there turn the places they live in into villages? What kind of differences, what kind of practices does this involve?

Here is where Marco Lazzarotti's work provides a fresh approach. He explores the village as a spatial, social, and ontological entity that emerges through the practice of storytelling. The village he is concerned with is a peculiar one: Shuiwei in Taiwan is home to a majority of Christians who started converting in the early twentieth century. Thus, it sticks out from its environment that is dominated by the mix of Daoism, Buddhism,

Confucianism, and folk practices that is characteristic of Chinese religion. In particular, Lazzarotti highlights the difference from Chinese folk religion: The elaborate rules of geomancy and astrology that come with it are ignored by Shuiwei Christians, and the festive processions by which the gods visit neighboring temples steer clear of the village. As Lazzarotti describes for numerous events, told in and around Shuiwei, the village receives its identity through the absence of folk religious rules. This applies to both the space it occupies and the people it is home to. This also comes with other digressions from Chinese standards, like the accounts of genealogy, the layout of homes, or the relations with the ancestors. The internal order of village society and its external representation intersect, and both together produce a sense of a boundary that is both spatial and social. It is through little anecdotes and events that people tell to each other that this specific world is narrated into being. Remarkably, this does not appear to come with ostracization, which may be due to the important relationships Taiwan has with Christian countries, predominantly the USA. Still, it is important to point out that this profound difference is managed in a peaceful way. There are even signs of the kind of cosmological complementation found in other parts of Asia, like Laos or Indonesia. Due to their ontological disparities, neighbors can solve each other's problems. Like Laotian Buddhists who ask their animist neighbors to perform animal sacrifices that would affect their karma, adherents of Chinese folk religion give pigs with inauspicious birth defects to their Christian neighbors. Here, the diversity of ontologies does not create incompatibility but maps out digressing options for practice.

It is in this respect that Shuiwei is not the village of classic anthropology that represents a larger ethnicity. Shuiwei's specificity is a result of globalization, the spread of world religion, the alliance of Taiwan with the West (their East), the interlinkage of faraway places. It does not necessarily represent Taiwan or Chinese Christianity. But it is an exemplar of the way people create their specific communities through a sense of difference that permeates the nitty-gritty of the everyday and the place of human beings in the cosmos. Marco Lazzarotti skillfully introduces us into this local world, with a lively eye for detail and an empathic sense for the cosmological diplomacy that his interlocutors manage, their wit and their humor.

With his unique theoretical approach, he explores the analytic richness of the stories he has heard and experienced, and there are no signs that he

is going to run out of stories anytime soon. In any case, I hope you will enjoy his book as much as I did.

Heidelberg, Germany
February 2020

Professor Dr. Guido Sprenger

Acknowledgments

This book has been made thanks to the constant and joyful inspiration from my beautiful wife Joo Young and my son Antonio. They followed all the steps of this project, and now we arrived together to see the conclusion of it. This project, which began many years ago, took somehow the form of a journey that led my family and me to travel across three continents and I no longer know across how many countries.

The longer the journey, the longer the list of people we met along the way. I would like to thank all the people who helped me when I started this project in Taiwan. First of all I want to thank my former Master and PhD adviser, Prof. Yeh, Chuen-Rong. He introduced me to the Catholic community of Shuiwei village. It is because of him that I started this project. I will always be grateful to him. Apart from Prof. Yeh, there are few persons who concretely helped me by finding materials and giving me any kind of support. Hao-Yu Cho and Chun Yu Chen helped me to collect extra materials and information during the writing process. But there is a person who supported me in a very concrete way, my big friend Martin Chouinard. Without him and without his purple sofa, my PhD studies would have been almost impossible. I want to thank also all the professors and the staff of the Department of Anthropology at the National Taiwan University, where I first discussed and started to be interested in the topic of this book.

Other big thanks must be addressed to the Xaverian fathers in Taipei and Makeni, who helped, encouraged, and gave me support during the time of my research. Another special thanks is for the professors and the staff of the University of Makeni, among them my brother Guliver, who followed my family and me and the development of my work. I am especially in debt to

the students who attempted my courses at Unimak. It is because of them that I started to feel again the passion of the anthropological research.

Following the route of my life, it is time now to thank some important people in South Korea. Especially my parents-in-law who always encouraged me and helped my family and me to reach this important goal. I dedicate a special thought to Chang Ik Hoang. Knowing how much he loved my family, I believe he will be very happy to know about this book.

At the end of the journey (but just for the moment), I would like to thank my adviser at the University of Heidelberg, Prof. Dr. Guido Sprenger. He has been—and he still is—not only an adviser but a constant opportunity to learn and better understand what I was doing.

Apart from Guido, I want to take this opportunity to thank Prof. Philip Clart. He helped me by reading my thesis and giving me precious suggestions and advices. During my studies in Germany, I feel so lucky to have the opportunity to mention Eva Sevenig, Carmen Grimm, Frauke Mörike, and Elizabeth Rauchholz. Their kindness and generosity have been really remarkable. I am not afraid to say that they are the best PhD group I could even dream to find.

I want to reserve a special mention to Dr. Yves Menheere. He is the one who accompanied me—sometimes concretely, sometimes virtually—along all of my long journey. His help, his ideas, his support meant a lot to me. If the saying "who finds a friend finds a treasure" is true, it is because there are people like Yves.

Last but not least, I want to thank all my friends in Lunbei and in Shuiwei. When Fr. Chao introduced my wife and me to this community, I could not imagine that I would spend three beautiful years there. Three years in which the people of this wonderful Catholic community—and non-Catholic people as well—welcomed us into their families. My wife and I arrived there by chance few months after our wedding, and, when we left, we had an almost two-year-old small boy with us. Those wonderful people have opened their homes and their hearts to us. I hope this book can be a tribute to them.

Thanks to all these people and also to those who, because of my ingratitude, I forgot to mention in these pages. May my gratitude arrive to them, wherever they are.

A Note to the Reader

Before reading this book, the reader should know some important notes on language, romanization, and the use of Chinese characters.

This book is based on fieldwork carried out in Taiwan, more specifically in 水尾 Shuǐwěi, a small village located in 雲林縣 Yúnlín Xiàn, in western Taiwan. I conducted almost all the interviews in Chinese Mandarin and a few in Taiwanese with the help of some translators.

Apart from the names of the places (counties, cities, townships, and villages),[1] throughout this dissertation, I have chosen to give priority to the Chinese characters and to their transcriptions in pinyin with tones. Further exceptions have been made for the names of authors who already have a transcripted name.

I hope this choice will help both those who approach the Chinese writing for the first time and the Chinese native speakers.

I decided to change the name of the persons I met during my fieldwork, apart from those who explicitly—and even with a certain insistence—asked me to be named in my work.

[1] The names of the places follow the romanization made by the Taiwanese government. <http://www.moi.gov.tw>.

Contents

List of Figures

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 The Narrative Construction of Reality

"When a 演戲 *Yǎnxì* traditional performance takes place in 水尾 Shuiwei, I will give you back your money." This is one of the first sentences I heard about Shuiwei village. The meaning of this joke is that you will never get your money back, because in Shuiwei village no *yǎnxì* is ever performed. As Taiwanese people know, a *yǎnxì* performance is offered to thank the deities for a gain, or because one has been released from a vow, or because of a happy event within the family. Usually a "stage-truck," a truck that carries a stage for performances, is parked in front of the temple or in front of the house where the *yǎnxì* is to be offered. Since the stage is positioned just in front of the main door of the temple, and since these shows are followed by few if any spectators, it is clear that the recipients, the real audience for these performances, are the deities and not the people.

The meaning of this joke derives from the fact that Shuiwei village is, for the most part, inhabited by Presbyterians and Catholics.[1] Consequently, no such performances are offered to any deity. Shuiwei is located in the

[1] I will refer to the Christian communities of Shuiwei by using the specific terms Catholic 天主教 (*Tiānzhǔjiào*) and Presbyterian 長老會 (*Zhǎnglǎohuì*). When I use the term Christian 基督徒 (*Jīdūtú*), I will refer to both Churches.

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northern part of 崙背鄉 Lunbei Township, just south of the 濁水溪 *Zhuóshuǐ* Stream that marks the border between the counties of 彰化縣 Changhua and 雲林縣 Yunlin.

This small village was the first village in Lunbei Township to accept the Christian religion. A majority of the villagers are still either Presbyterian or Catholic (廖救玲 2005). This large Christian community has had more than 100 years of interaction with the population of Lunbei. The evidence of these interactions can be found in the expressions, the words, and the stories that non-Christian people use in order to describe and contextualize the Christian community of Shuiwei. In the same way, this long interaction is also perceived in the words and stories told by the people of Shuiwei to describe both themselves and the non-Christian members of their community.

I had the opportunity to live in Shuiwei for three years, from August 2008 to October 2011; or more accurately, I spent one year in Lunbei and two years in Shuiwei, during a ten-year period living in Taiwan. Early in June 2008, my wife and I, hopeful and curious, arrived in this village almost by chance. At the time I was doing research into the effect of Catholicism on the tradition of ancestors' rites in Taiwan, while my wife was looking for a suitable place to carry out her fieldwork on Hakka people.[2] We spent the spring of that year visiting all the Hakka communities in both the north and south of Taiwan. Finally, my MA supervisor introduced us to his former classmate who was living in Shuiwei and to the parish priest of that little community. He presented Shuiwei village to us as a place where most of the population were Christian and where the inhabitants introduced themselves as Taiwanese people, but with Hakka ancestors. After a couple of visits, we decided to settle in Lunbei and, as my wife started her fieldwork, I started to think about what kind of project I could undertake for my PhD.

My project, and therefore this book, was born in the field. I had arrived in Shuiwei without a study plan and without a research project. The fundamental reason I had come was to follow my wife during her fieldwork. I did not create an abstract model that had to be verified (or disproved)

[2] Hakka people, whose Chinese name 客家人 *Kèjiā rén* literally means "guest people," are a subgroup of the 漢 *Hàn* Chinese that originated in Northern China. In a series of migrations, the Hakkas moved and settled in their present areas in Southern China, and from there, substantial numbers migrated overseas to various countries throughout the world.

through research in the field. The topic somehow made its own way to me during the time I spent in Shuiwei. It prompted me every time Lunbei people told me: "Shuiwei is a different place," or every time they told me: "Are you doing research on religion? You should go to Shuiwei, they are all Christians there." Many, if not all, of the narrations about Shuiwei made by the people of Lunbei spoke about difference. It is because I wanted to understand why and how this sense of diversity was manifested in these stories that I realized that this place was constructed as "a different place" and that it was constructed, above all, by narration.

The aim of my thesis was to show how the narration of stories about this particular place, Shuiwei, attaches to it a special agency. With this book I would like to share with a wider audience the results of this research: that the narration of stories is not only a consequence of the encounter of different cultures, faiths, and traditions but is perhaps the basic way in order to create cultures, faiths, and traditions. By narrating, telling, and naming the world, we substantially create it. We create a Narrative World.

The stories that I have chosen from those collected during my fieldwork include both stories and anecdotes that I have either been told or witnessed directly myself. I want to present both stories and anecdotes because it is through them that, when I was in Shuiwei, I tried to understand how people act or react in and to certain situations. In other words, they will help the reader understand the symbolic context of where people live. I have chosen this way because I consider both stories and anecdotes as narrations, since they have been narrated at least by myself. This choice mirrors the essence of anthropology, which I have always considered a comparative discipline. There is always a comparison going on between the anthropologist and the local culture, between the anthropologist and academia, and also between the outcome of the anthropological work, the text, and the reader. Stories, as well as anecdotes, are always linked to the present and with the practical and contingent situations which both the storyteller and the audience meet in everyday life.

Among the narrations about Shuiwei, the narratives that I heard from people who live outside this village occupy a privileged position. I decided to give greater importance to these stories for several reasons. First of all because in the context formed by the storyteller and the audience, great importance must be assigned to the cultural background of the interlocutors. Within this context, which I call the Circuit of Narration (Locus, Sect. 2.2.1), the cultural background of the interlocutors plays an important role: it selects the facts that create stories and provides the