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From Diffusion to Rhizome: A Systematic Review of Transnational Mazu Belief

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Abstract

The present research aims to provide a theory-driven reconceptualization of Mazu belief as a dynamic system of Chinese popular religion with transnational dimensions. Although scholarly interest in the topic under investigation has been expanding beyond disciplines, geography, and research methodologies, the existing theories remain inadequate and fragmented to account for the multidimensional nature of Mazu belief. With such problems in mind, this research employs a systematic literature review methodology, based on PRISMA criteria, which analyzes 80 peer-reviewed academic publications (from 2000 to 2025). As a result, the analysis reveals that Mazu belief can be explained through nine related fields includ-

ing symbolic construction, ritual practice, affective experience, identity construction, transnational spread, political economy, communication networks, digital mediation, and material culture. However, when applied to the identified data, both diffusion theory and network theory prove to be unable to explain the complexity and multidimensionality of Mazu belief. As an alternative theoretical framework, this paper proposes a rhizomatic approach to the issue in question, which treats Mazu belief as a multiplicative and deterritorialized assemblage in a state of perpetual reconfiguration.

Keywords: cultural globalization, mazu belief, rhizome theory, systematic literature review

1. INTRODUCTION

Mazu worship (also known as Tianhou) is often cited among the major popular religions of China, whose origins go back to the Fujian coastal region during the Song dynasty [1, 2]. Over the years, Mazu developed from a local deity to a regional, and ultimately international cult system [3–5]. The evolution of Mazu worship is intimately connected with the development of international maritime trade and the emergence of migratory culture during the Ming and Qing dynasties, which contributed to the spread of this faith beyond the borders of China proper [4, 6].

Nevertheless, over time, her sphere of influence transcended the realm of maritime safety and came to include other domains, such as health, prosperity, and harmony [7, 8]. Thus, while being a religion, Mazu worship should be viewed in the context of larger socio-historical processes [9–11].

Throughout the many years of Chinese emigration and the formation of diasporas around the world, Mazu worship has become widespread in East Asia and Southeast Asia, playing an integral role in Chinese cultural/religious identity in regions like Taiwan, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Japan [12, 13]. Moreover, the sphere of influence of Mazu worship has come to extend beyond the religious sphere itself, being increasingly integrated with such areas as culture, tourism, governance, and information technologies [11, 14]. The inscription of Mazu worship as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage marks a pivotal moment of institutionalization for this belief system, which turned it from a local folk tradition into a globally recognized cultural legacy [2, 15].

Finally, religious tourism became a powerful force that transformed Mazu worship into an economic resource [9, 16–18]. For instance, pilgrimage practices, such as the famous Dajia Mazu Pilgrimage in Taiwan, attract thousands of pilgrims annually, creating substantial economic value [19].

The growth in social networking sites, cyber rites, and digital icons of Mazu has led to the increased popularity of the belief system, making the creation of transnational virtual communities possible [11].

Therefore, Mazu belief can no longer be studied from only a conventional perspective, which necessitates innovative theories that can understand its changing nature [20, 21].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Within the past two decades, academic interest in Mazu belief has become increasingly vibrant, generating an expansive and interdisciplinary body of knowledge [5, 16, 22–24].

Building upon this dispersed yet burgeoning corpus of research, more and more scholars begin to pay attention to the role and functions of Mazu temples [14, 25–27]. Mazu temples frequently take on a pivotal role in community organization as places for social interaction, decision-making, and interpersonal networking [25, 28]. They are also essential sites for the transmission and preservation of language, culture, ritual, and morality [29]. In multicultural societies, particularly in Southeast Asia, these temples assume an important role in identity mediation, allowing community members to reconcile their ethnic and local identities [30].

However, in spite of the rapid expansion of this field of inquiry, the current literature on Mazu belief is marked by several structural limitations [5, 26, 31]. The research on Mazu belief has been carried out across multiple disciplines, ranging from anthropology, sociology, religion, to tourism and even political science [32]. For example, studies within the discipline of tourism focus on topics such as visitor satisfaction, pilgrimage experience, and behavioral intention, adopting predominantly quantitative approaches [33]. In contrast, anthropological and cultural studies of Mazu belief are focused on ritual practice, symbolic meaning, and cultural contextuality, adopting predominantly qualitative methods such as ethnography, textual analysis, and participant observation [34].

Likewise, more and more political and economic scholarship on Mazu belief has emerged recently [35]. Within the Chinese-Taiwan context, Mazu culture has been used as a cultural medium that transcends political boundaries, serving as a symbolic link in cross-strait interactions and cultural diplomacy initiatives [3, 36].

Economic-oriented studies, meanwhile, stress the connection between Mazu belief and tourism and local development, demonstrating the role of pilgrimage events and temple activities in generating economic flow [37]. Thus, a unifying theoretical perspective that could account for both the religious, cultural, political, and economic dimensions of Mazu belief has yet to be developed, hindering cross-disciplinary cumulation [31].

Second, there exists segmentation in terms of geography. Studies in Taiwan tend to focus on themes of ritual intensity, pilgrimage network, and temple organization, highlighting the religious importance of Mazu belief in Taiwanese society [9, 19]. In contrast, those carried out in Southeast Asia pay more attention to the topic of diaspora and the processes of localization of Mazu belief in multicultural settings [38–40]. Meanwhile, studies carried out in Japan and other East Asian countries illustrate the process of religious transformation and syncretism, involving incorporation of Mazu belief into local religious tradition such as Shinto [13, 31, 41]. Yet a systematic comparison has not been made, thereby failing to provide a comprehensive picture of Mazu belief on the global stage [42, 43].

Third, there is inconsistency in terms of methodology, which remains relatively underdeveloped. While quantitative

methods have been used more and more frequently, they have mainly applied to tourism-related research and behavioral study [24]. Recent studies have started to adopt certain measurement scales and models, identifying various factors, including spirituality, learning, embodiment, and social interaction [44].

Moreover, little attention has been paid to micro-level analysis, specifically the experiences of ordinary believers.

In view of these gaps in the current literature, it is evident that a holistic approach is needed in investigating Mazu belief. To this end, this paper employs systematic literature review (SLR), with PRISMA guideline.

In particular, this study addresses the following questions:

1. What are the major thematic structures of research on Mazu belief?
2. How has Mazu belief been conceptualized across different fields and geographical contexts?
3. What theory can incorporate diverse perspectives on Mazu belief?

First, it conducts a systematic synthesis of current knowledge, bridging gaps among various disciplines and geographical areas. Second, it offers a new conception of Mazu belief as a transnational rhizomatic religious system, stressing its decentralized organizational form and adaptive capability. This novel conceptualization contributes not only to theory-building but also to future research on transnational religions, globalization of culture, and identity formation.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. RESEARCH DESIGN

For this paper, a systematic literature review (SLR) based on PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) will be used.

Such diversity can be an advantage, but it also creates fragmentation in the field and constrains cumulative knowledge-building. Consequently, there is a need for a systematic process that can help to analyze scattered information.

In our case, it will facilitate the detection of prevailing thematic patterns.

3.2. SEARCH STRATEGY AND DATA COLLECTION

Three leading academic databases were used in the review: Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar.

The above keywords were then combined through the use of Boolean connectors (AND, OR) in order to ensure maximum coverage of possible variations in terminology. The example below shows how some search queries could look like: "Mazu OR Tianhou" AND "pilgrimage OR religion" AND "China OR diaspora". Table 1 demonstrates the keywords used to find relevant papers in three academic databases.

Table 1. *Keywords and searching information strategy*

Databases	Keywords
SCOPUS	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("Mazu" OR "Tianhou" OR "Matsu" OR "Lin Moniang") AND ("religion" OR "belief" OR "ritual" OR "worship" OR "pilgrimage") AND ("identity" OR "diaspora" OR "culture" OR "tourism"))
Web of Science	TS = (("Mazu" OR "Tianhou" OR "Matsu" OR "Lin Moniang") AND ("religion" OR "belief" OR "ritual" OR "worship" OR "pilgrimage") AND ("identity" OR "diaspora" OR "culture" OR "tourism"))
Google Scholar	((("Mazu" OR "Tianhou" OR "Matsu" OR "Lin Moniang") AND ("religion" OR "belief" OR "ritual" OR "worship" OR "pilgrimage") AND ("identity" OR "diaspora" OR "culture" OR "tourism"))

The literature review was restricted to studies published within the time frame from 2000 to 2025 in order to concentrate on current trends in the field. This period is especially important due to the ongoing institutionalization and globalization of the Mazu cult in recent years, as seen by its declaration as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, as well as its incorporation into cultural and tourism sectors. After searching, 500+ entries have been obtained. After eliminating duplicate studies (n=254), there were 323 papers left for screening according to inclusion/exclusion criteria. At the end of the screening process, the number of remaining studies was 104.

3.3. INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

The inclusion and exclusion criteria had been clearly defined before conducting the screening procedure in order to achieve quality, relevancy and comparability of the studies chosen.

The inclusion criteria used during data collection include the following:

1. *Peer-reviewed journal articles*: All data collected were limited to peer-reviewed journals only.
2. *Specificity of the research topic*: Only studies that have investigated on Mazu belief, Tianhou worship, or something similar were chosen.
3. *Contributions in an empirical or theoretical manner*: Either empirical or theoretical contributions towards the research topic were included provided they add significant information about the topic.
4. *Language requirement*: The articles were chosen from English- language sources.

During the literature search, the following exclusion criteria were used:

1. *Non-academic papers*: Such documents as books, book reviews, and conference papers were excluded to maintain academic integrity.
2. *Peripherality of research findings*: All those documents where Mazu belief is mentioned just briefly without any significant information added are excluded.
3. *Duplicate entries*: Any duplications found between databases were excluded.

The selected documents then were subjected to further full text examination for eligibility for this research paper. Finally, a total number of 80 peer-reviewed articles are chosen. Figure 1 demonstrates PRISMA flow diagram of studies chosen for this research paper.

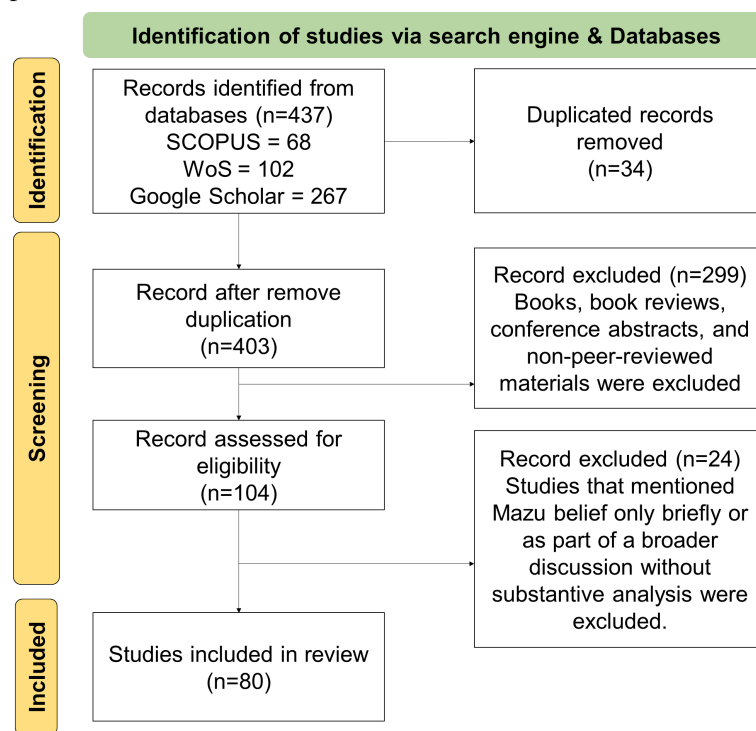


Figure 1. Flowchart of PRISMA flow diagram of studies

Additionally, backward and forward citation tracking was carried out in this research to find other sources that cite or are cited by those sources which have been chosen at first place.

3.4. DATA ANALYSIS

The identified articles were analyzed using thematic analysis assisted by NVivo software for qualitative data analysis. It is very appropriate for systematic review of diverse bodies of evidence.

The thematic analysis involved a three-phase coding procedure:

Phase 1: Open Coding

A thorough reading was conducted and key themes and concepts were extracted inductively without any predefined classification of codes, thus staying close to the primary source material.

Phase 2: Axial Coding

Similar codes were categorized together through identification of relationships between them (i.e., pilgrimage and rituals as part of “ritual practices and embodiedness” category).

Phase 3: Selective Coding

Main themes were synthesized in an analytical framework. The following nine domains emerged: symbolic construction; ritual practice; emotionality; identity formation; transnational diffusion; political economy; communication networks; digitization; and material culture.

4. FINDINGS

Through thematic analysis of 80 directly related scholarly literature, nine important core themes emerge. They comprise: (1) Myth-symbolic construction, (2) Ritual practice and embodiment, (3) Emotional and experiential dimensions, (4) Identity production, (5) Transnational diffusion and localization, (6) Political economy and governance, (7) Communication networks, (8) Media and digital transformation, and (9) Material culture and space.

4.1. MYTH-SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION

Studies invariably point out the process of Mazu's mythologization from Lin Moniang into a regional divinity through cultural stories, imperial patronage, and institutional endorsement [45–47]. This is an instance of grassroots worship as well as top-down standardization [48]. Symbolisms in the context are dynamic and continually undergo interpretation based on historical and cultural conditions [14, 26, 49]. Symbolic elements also encompass the architectural design of Mazu temples as representations of cosmological and social stratification [36, 50]. In transnational contexts, such symbolisms are localized and become hybridized forms of expression. The flexibility inherent in the symbolic construction is proof of the belief system's continual evolution in a changing environment. Therefore, the Mazu worship should be understood as a symbolic construct rather than as a static ritual practice [4, 31, 51, 52]. This sector functions mainly at the micro level (symbolic–material production) through which religious meanings are created by means of narrative, icons, and space. This is the one that is most instrumental in facilitating the process of translation because symbols are constantly being interpreted and reinterpreted in history and culture. This way, the religion maintains its identity while still having room for change. Here follows Table 2 of Axial Analysis of Myth-Symbolic Construction.

Table 2. Analysis summary for myth-symbolic construction

Axial codes	Initial codes	Frequency (n)	Literature content	References
Deification & myth-making	Lin Moniang narratives	42	Mazu's transformation from a local historical figure into a widely venerated sea goddess is constructed through myth-making, narrative production, and processes of cultural legitimation rather than purely spontaneous religious evolution	[47, 48, 53, 54]
Symbolic standardization	Imperial canonization	35	The canonization of Mazu through imperial titles and state endorsement reflects the institutional incorporation of local cults into broader political and religious systems, contributing to the standardization of belief	[14, 16, 27, 49]
Visual representation	Iconography; paintings	31	Visual representations-including statues, paintings, and contemporary digital imagery-play a central role in sustaining and transmitting religious meanings, shaping collective identity and symbolic recognition of Mazu (Ruitenbeek, 1999;	[39, 55, 56]
Cultural reinterpretation	Modern adaptation	27	The symbolic meanings of Mazu are continuously reinterpreted across historical periods and socio-cultural contexts, reflecting processes of localization, modernization, and transnational adaptation	[12, 30, 52, 57]
Sacred space symbolism	Temple cosmology	24	Temple architecture, spatial layout, and material design encode cosmological beliefs and social hierarchies, transforming sacred space into a symbolic system that embodies religious and cultural meanings	[50, 58, 59]

4.2. RITUAL PRACTICE AND EMBODIMENT

The rituals including pilgrimage, festivals and performances constitute the core of Mazu belief practices as the primary ways of enacting the religion [1, 9, 60]. The large-scale events like the Dajia pilgrimage highlight these practices through participation and coordination [33, 61]. The current scholarship on this theme involves new quantitative metrics to assess aspects like spirituality, sociality, and well-being, thus moving beyond traditional qualitative measures [9, 62]. In addition, there is an increasing overlap between ritual practices and tourism and cultural economy [2, 63]. This subtheme is focused on the micro-level aspects (embodied practices and performance enactment) where the meaning of religion is generated through embodied actions, sensory engagements, and group participation. Simultaneously, it is an important aspect of circulation because pilgrimages and ritual performances and coordination allow the reproduction of practices and meanings. Table 3 presents the analysis summary for ritual practice and embodiment.

Table 3. *Analysis summary for ritual practice and embodiment*

Axial codes	Initial codes	Frequency (n)	Literature content	Reference
Embodied ritual practice	Walking; palanquin carrying	38	Mazu rituals involve embodied participation, where physical engagement such as pilgrimage walking and ritual labor generates emotional attachment and collective belonging	[64–66]
Pilgrimage system	Dajia pilgrimage	34	Large-scale pilgrimage events function as organized religious systems that integrate mobility, ritual coordination, and collective participation	[1, 33, 67]
Ritual performance	Performative meaning-making	29	Rituals produce meaning through performative action, creating liminal spaces and shared religious experiences	[34, 66, 68]
Quantitative measurement	Experience scale	26	Multidimensional scales enable systematic analysis of pilgrimage experience, including spirituality, learning, embodiment, and social interaction	[19, 24, 62]
Tourism hybridization	Sacred–secular overlap	31	Pilgrimage increasingly intersects with tourism, generating hybrid forms of participation and economic activity	[1, 2, 69]

4.3. EMOTIONAL AND EXPERIENTIAL ASPECTS

The current literature on the subject matter shows a “turn toward the experience” in terms of researching the rituals of Mazu and placing emphasis not on institutional organization but on emotions and lived experience [64, 65]. Awe, gratitude, and the feeling of belonging are some emotions that are crucial for the participation in the ritual, which improves the quality of involvement [24, 70]. Several empirical studies have shown that taking part in rituals associated with Mazu can improve psychological well-being and result in increased purposefulness, social connectedness, and overall life satisfaction [62, 64, 71]. Moreover, from the perspective of religious tourism, positive emotional experiences enhance people’s intentions to return and make recommendations, thereby promoting the sustainability of the belief [32, 72]. This area is concerned with the meso-level aspects of social-affective construction, since individual emotions get integrated into common affective structures. This sphere functions at the meso-level (social–affective formation) in which individual emotions are collected into collective affective structures that support collective engagement. This sphere makes the greatest contribution to the sphere of reconfiguration since experiences that are embedded emotionally support the belief system by shaping engagement patterns and generating commitment in constantly changing social contexts. Emotional and experiential analysis summary is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. *Analysis summary for emotional and experiential dimensions*

Axial codes	Initial codes	Frequency (n)	Literature content	References
Emotional experience	Awe; happiness; gratitude	36	Emotional responses such as awe, happiness, and gratitude are central to shaping religious experience and enhancing perceived authenticity and meaning	[15, 42, 73]
Embodied affect	Ritual emotion; immersion	30	Emotional experiences are produced through embodied participation and ritual engagement, creating immersive and affective religious environments	[34, 62, 64]
Psychological well-being	Life satisfaction; mental health	28	Participation in Mazu-related activities contributes to well-being, restoration, and social connectedness, reinforcing mental and emotional health	[42, 71, 74]
Behavioral outcomes	Revisit intention; loyalty	32	Positive emotional experiences significantly influence behavioral intentions, including revisit intention, recommendation, and long-term engagement	[33, 63, 75]
Identity & belonging	Cultural identity; place attachment	27	Emotional attachment to Mazu strengthens identity formation and cultural belonging, especially in diaspora and transnational contexts	[43, 76, 77]

4.4. IDENTITY PRODUCTION

The Mazu belief system acts as an important factor in identity formation on local, ethnic, and national scales [43]. In Taiwan, network structure of the temples influences collective memory and identity creation through pilgrimage paths and ritual calendars [66, 78]. Across the boundaries of nation-states, Mazu represents a symbol of Chinese diaspora identities in connecting scattered communities [39, 77, 79]. However, identity creation is not solely influenced by cultural beliefs but may be affected by power relations and governance. The state-led process of institutionalization through heritage designation can influence identity formation through homogenizing certain practices while subordinating local variations [14, 80–82]. The field of operation operates at the meso-level (identity construction and social integration), whereby meaning constructed through rituals and emotion is institutionalized to create collective identity. The field has a direct relationship with reconfiguration, as identity is constantly negotiated and reconstructed under changing circumstances. Table 5 outlines the analysis summary for identity production.

4.5. TRANSNATIONAL DIFFUSION AND LOCALIZATION

The other unique characteristic of Mazu belief is its transnational diffusion and high degree of localization capabilities [50]. In the past, Mazu belief spread via maritime trade and migration during the Ming and Qing dynasties [45]. Temples built by overseas Chinese immigrants served as socio-cultural centers and helped integrate into the local environment to develop new hybrid beliefs [13, 51, 65]. For example, in Japan, the worship of Mazu was integrated into Shinto religion [41, 53]

Table 5. *Analysis summary for identity production*

Axial codes	Initial codes	Frequency (n)	Literature content	References
Multi-level identity	Local; ethnic; national	34	Mazu belief contributes to identity formation at multiple levels, including local, ethnic, and national identities, through ritual practice and cultural narratives	[12, 43, 76]
Temple as identity site	Ritual space; community hub	30	Temples function as socio-cultural spaces where identity is constructed and reproduced through ritual, interaction, and symbolic practices	[25, 54, 80]
Diaspora identity	Overseas Chinese identity	28	Mazu belief acts as a marker of diaspora identity, maintaining cultural continuity and transnational connections among overseas Chinese communities	[30, 51, 77]
Localization & hybridity	Cultural adaptation	25	Identity processes are shaped by local contexts, resulting in hybrid and localized forms of Mazu belief across regions	[13, 57, 83]
Inclusive belonging	Emotional & social attachment	27	Participation in rituals fosters inclusive forms of belonging that transcend ethnic and national boundaries	[60, 70, 71]
Power & governance	State influence; heritage politics	26	Identity construction is influenced by state policies, cultural heritage frameworks, and political agendas that shape and regulate religious expression	[32, 82, 84]

while in Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand [12], Mazu performs different functions depending on the local context. As such, Mazu belief is continuously undergoing cultural negotiation and adaptation serving as a form of cultural translation [5, 57, 59]. Thus, Mazu belief cannot be explained by classical static diffusion approaches, and therefore, it is necessary to recognize Mazu belief as a dynamic system characterized by a balance between common symbolic meaning and local variations [5]. This field functions on the macroscopic level (expansion of the system into other spaces and cultures), in which Mazu religion spreads through immigration and intercultural contacts. This sphere is mainly concerned with translation, that is, the transformation and incorporation of religious symbols and beliefs into new social contexts. In other words, Table 6 contains results of the axial coding in relation to Transnational Diffusion and Localization.

Table 6. *Analysis summary for transnational diffusion and localization*

Axial codes	Initial codes	Frequency (n)	Literature content	References
Transnational diffusion	Maritime routes; migration	33	Mazu belief spread through maritime trade networks and migration flows, particularly during the Ming and Qing dynasties, linking coastal regions across East and Southeast Asia	[42, 47, 53]
Diaspora transmission	Overseas temples; networks	30	Migrant communities established temples that function as religious, social, and organizational hubs, sustaining cultural continuity across regions	[30, 51, 77]
Localization & hybridity	Cultural adaptation	28	Mazu belief is reinterpreted and integrated into local socio-cultural systems, producing hybrid religious forms and localized practices	[12, 57, 83]
Religious transformation	Syncretism (e.g., Japan)	24	In certain contexts, such as Japan, Mazu belief is incorporated into local religious systems, demonstrating processes of syncretism and transformation	[13, 41]
Flexible system	Adaptive belief structure	26	Mazu belief operates as a flexible and evolving system capable of maintaining core symbolic meanings while adapting to diverse contexts	[5, 57, 77]
Cultural translation	Reinterpretation; negotiation	27	Transnational diffusion involves continuous cultural negotiation and reinterpretation, rather than simple replication, reflecting adaptive and dynamic processes	[5, 31, 44]

4.6. POLITICAL ECONOMY AND GOVERNANCE

Politically, the temple acts as an arena for interaction and symbol creation.[16]. Ritual participation enables political actors to acquire legitimacy, gather support, and consolidate communities [35]. In state politics, Mazu worship is frequently promoted-as in the case of China-by cultural diplomacy, governance of heritage, and soft power, creating a connection between the country's identity and the overseas Chinese diaspora [32, 85, 86]. From the perspective of economics, Mazu worship becomes incorporated within the tourist industry and cultural sectors [2]. The money earned through pilgrimages and festivals can be regarded as a source of profit and regional marketing; however, this approach may lead to the commercialization of religion and changes in its meaning [87]. This sphere falls within the scope of the macro level (institutional structuring and systemic regulation). In addition, this area directly impacts reconfiguration due to political goals, economic integration, and heritage management impacting religious authority, institutional forms, and meanings of the practice. Therefore, Table 7 provides an analysis of axials related to Political Economy and Governance.

4.7. COMMUNICATION NETWORKS AND RELIGIOUS CIRCULATION

The literature underscores communication networks as essential ingredients in the development, transfer, and perpetuation of the belief in Mazu through rituals, institutions, and transnationally [88]. An important mechanism of this is *fexiang* (incense division), which connects temples through lineage networks, thereby facilitating the transfer of ritualistic knowledge and authority [60, 68, 88]. Apart from ritual connections, temples also act as communication symbol systems with festivals and pilgrimage as time and space, respectively, being part of the system [25]. In addition, migration serves to expand such networks as merchant and diasporic communities transfer beliefs, thus creating transnational religious networks [51, 53]. The rise of digital media has also extended such efforts in recent times with the dissemination of the practice virtually [89]. Such processes occur at the meso level (connectivity relations and networks), where temples,

Table 7. *Analysis summary for political economy and governance*

Axial codes	Initial codes	Frequency (n)	Literature content	References
Political interaction	Ritual participation; legitimacy	31	Mazu temples function as sites of political interaction where actors engage in rituals to gain legitimacy and strengthen community ties	[14, 35]
Symbolic capital	Religious legitimacy	27	Participation in religious practices generates symbolic capital that enhances political authority and social influence	[14, 49]
State governance	Cultural policy; heritage	29	Governments promote Mazu belief through cultural policy, heritage designation, and soft power strategies to construct national and transnational identities	[32, 36, 86]
Economic integration	Tourism; festivals	34	Mazu belief is integrated into tourism and cultural industries, generating economic benefits and supporting regional development	[2, 17, 33]
Commodification	Religious consumption	26	Religious practices are increasingly commodified, transforming rituals into consumable experiences within market frameworks	[15, 87]
Authenticity tension	Sacred vs commercial	24	The coexistence of religious authenticity and economic development creates tensions between spiritual meaning and commercial practices	[1, 62]

people, and other communities are connected through ritualism, institutions, and migration. Therefore, Table 8 highlights the findings of the axial analysis in this regard.

Table 8. *Analysis summary for communication networks and religious circulation*

Axial codes	Initial codes	Frequency (n)	Literature content	References
Ritual network	Fenxiang; temple lineage	29	The practice of fenxiang establishes lineage-based temple networks that circulate religious authority and ritual legitimacy across regions	[68, 88]
Institutional network	Temple affiliation	27	Affiliated temple systems form hierarchical yet flexible networks linking local sites to broader religious structures	[5, 88]
Symbolic communication	Narrative; ritual meaning	26	Mazu temples function as media systems that organize meaning through ritual, narrative, and symbolic structures	[25, 70]
Spatial-temporal network	Pilgrimage; festivals	28	Festival calendars and pilgrimage routes create temporal and spatial connections between communities	[25, 66, 68]
Migration network	Diaspora circulation	30	Migration and mobility facilitate the transnational diffusion of Mazu belief and the formation of diaspora religious networks	[30, 51, 77]
Digital communication	Online dissemination	24	Digital media extends religious communication beyond physical temples, enabling new forms of participation and cultural transmission	[89, 90]

4.8. MEDIA, DIGITALIZATION, AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION

The media facilitates the broadcasting of rituals, thus increasing accessibility and creating virtual religious communities that go beyond the physical temples [39][11]. The digital media plays an important role in facilitating the globalization process by fastening the spread of imagery and narratives relating to Mazu [56, 91][11]. The media category entails the macro level of the study, since it includes the expansion of the religion through technology that enables people to practice their religions regardless of location. It not only involves the circulation through fastening the spread of religious symbols and rituals but also reconfiguration, whereby digital mediation changes perceptions regarding authority and authenticity. Therefore, Table 9

Table 9. *Analysis summary for media, digitalization, and cultural production*

Axial codes	Initial codes	Frequency (n)	Literature content	References
Digital mediation	Online rituals; virtual participation	26	Digital platforms enable the online transmission of rituals, expanding participation and creating virtual religious communities	[89, 90]
Media communication	Social media; video platforms	24	Digital media reshapes how Mazu belief is communicated and experienced, transforming modes of religious engagement.	[89, 90]
Visual digital culture	Animation; digital imagery	22	Visual and digital representations play a key role in transmitting religious meaning and attracting younger audiences	[11, 39]
Global circulation	Online dissemination	23	Digital technologies facilitate the global spread and popularization of Mazu belief across cultural contexts	[11, 56]
Authenticity transformation	Mediated experience	21	Digital mediation reshapes ritual meaning and raises questions about authenticity and experiential change	[62, 89]
Cultural industries	Design; tourism; media production	25	Mazu belief is integrated into cultural industries, contributing to economic value and symbolic reinterpretation	[29, 32, 92]

4.9. MATERIAL CULTURE, SPACE, AND MODERN TRANSFORMATION

The last theme is concerned with the material and spatial aspects of Mazu religion, with an emphasis on temples, material culture, and architecture as media for symbolism and social relations [59]. The architectural design of the temples represents a constant interplay between tradition and modernity by incorporating new materials and technologies while retaining the symbolic meanings of religious rituals [59, 93]. Moreover, the organization of space such as temples, altars, and pilgrimage routes shapes the dynamics of movement and ritual performances that reinforce the rituals and their collective significance [34]. On the other hand, ritual objects and cultural commodities mediate between the spiritual and profane spheres of life, while transmitting religious identity [29, 61, 85]. The domain is mainly focused on the micro-level processes (material and spatial anchoring of meaning) through which religious beliefs are transmitted through objects and architecture. It has both an impact on translation (material transformation of belief objects) and reconfiguration

(technological innovation in sacred spaces). Hence, Table 10 represents the axial analysis of Material Culture, Space, and Modern Transformation.

Table 10. Analysis summary for material culture, space, and modern transformation

Axial codes	Initial codes	Frequency (n)	Literature content	References
Material symbolism	Artifacts; ritual objects	28	Religious objects embody symbolic meanings and serve as tangible expressions of belief and cultural identity	[24, 40, 53, 61]
Temple architecture	Design; construction	30	Temple architecture reflects the integration of traditional symbolism with modern materials and technologies	[50, 58]
Spatial organization	Layout; pilgrimage routes	27	Spatial arrangements structure ritual movement and shape religious experience and perception	[59, 66, 68]
Sacred space production	Cosmology; hierarchy	25	Sacred space encodes cosmological beliefs and social hierarchies through spatial and architectural design	[16, 34].
Cultural commodities	Souvenirs; products	24	Material culture extends into cultural products and commodities that facilitate the circulation of meaning and identity	[29, 61]
Modern transformation	Technology; innovation	26	Mazu belief adapts to modern contexts through technological integration, aesthetic innovation, and cultural industry development	[32, 39]

Further, based on the systematic synthesis of 80 studies, the results are categorized into nine related themes that constitute the structure of the contemporary belief in Mazu as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Thematic structure of mazu belief identified through systematic review

These are nine related but analytically distinct themes regarding Mazu belief. Each one constitutes a unique dimension of the phenomenon and provides an empirical basis for the next part of the analysis—the synthesis of a new theoretical model.

Each domain captures a particular aspect of the phenomenon including symbolic construction, ritual practice, emotional experience, transnational diffusion, political economic relations, media, communication, material culture, among others. Yet, there is a need for developing a more coherent theory of the complex interaction between them.

Instead of being analytically separate, these aspects are empirically interrelated, mutually constitutive, and dynamically interacting at multiple levels. Ritual practice, for example, involves the generation of experience and identity formation. Media serves not only the transmission of religious belief across the globe but also produces meaningful transformations. Digital media changes not only the pattern of participation but the production of religious authority too.

Unfortunately, most of the existing theoretical models that include media-diffusion models and network-based theories have failed to capture such dynamics and complexity. Most of these models tend to assume linear processes, structural stabilities, or bounded relational structures.

Building upon the empirical structure outlined above, the following part develops a new theoretical model that conceives Mazu belief as a dynamic and relational phenomenon. Instead of conceptualizing the phenomenon as nine distinct themes, the study develops a framework that brings them together in an interconnected and evolving way.

5. DISCUSSION: TOWARDS A THEORETICAL RECONFIGURATION OF MAZU BELIEF

Based on the empirical findings and to formulate an integrated theory, Figure 3 provides a rhizomatic framework of Mazu belief as a transnational religious assemblage. The proposed model integrates the thematic framework developed in Figure

2 through reconceptualizing the nine domains as analytically distinct components connected in a non-hierarchical system. While the need for this transition has been justified earlier, it should be noted that Figure 3 is not merely a visualization of the domains listed in Figure 2 but rather their reconfiguration within a relational, process-oriented conceptual framework.

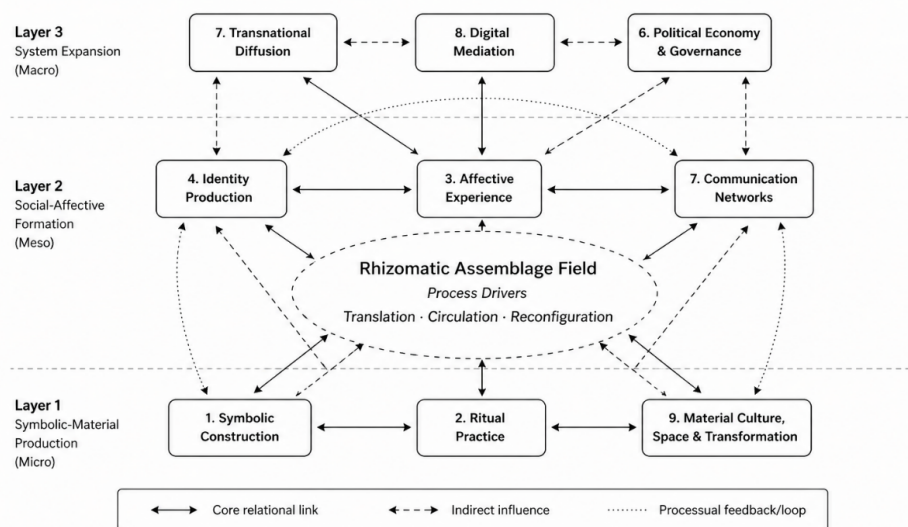


Figure X. A Rhizomatic Model of Mazu Belief as a Transnational Religious Assemblage.

Note: The model consists of nine interrelated domains organized across three analytical layers. These domains interact through dynamic processes of translation, circulation, and reconfiguration, constituting a non-hierarchical and continuously evolving religious assemblage.

Figure 3. A rhizomatic model of mazu belief as a transnational religious assemblage

The proposed framework of Mazu belief as a rhizomatic assemblage reinterprets the thematic framework presented above by explicitly incorporating the nine domains into a multi-scalar analytical perspective that distinguishes between three analytically separable but dynamically interconnected levels: micro (symbolic-material production); meso (social-affective formation); and macro (system expansion and transformation). Each domain of the thematic framework is included in one of these three levels, each of which encompasses the empirical dimensions of the belief system and can be explained through specific processes of religious assemblage.

At the micro level, Mazu belief is constituted by myth-symbolic construction, ritual practice and embodiment, and material culture and spatial forms. These three domains represent generative spaces where religious meaning is constructed, enacted, and stabilized. While symbolic narratives, ritual performances, and sacred artifacts do not merely reflect belief but constitute religious meaning by embedding it in embodied experience and material form, the micro-level represents the ontological basis of the religious assemblage. Thus, at the micro-level, meaning emerges from the relationship between the symbolic and embodied/spatial experience of ritual.

The second level, meso (social-affective formation), combines emotional and experiential dimensions, identity production, and communication networks and religious circulation. The individual act is converted into social structures by the processes of affective intensification and relational connectivity. Thus, emotional experiences generated in the context of ritual practice become a means of reinforcing and developing individual and group identities, while the formation of communication networks, such as temple affiliations, pilgrimage routes, and lineages, enables religious circulation. Overall, the domains on the meso-level operate as mechanisms of social embedding of localized practices in broader relational fields.

The third and final level represents the macro processes of assemblage: transnational diffusion and localization, political economy and governance, and media and digital mediation. In other words, the domains on the macro-level account for the expansion of Mazu belief beyond its local contexts into larger, institutional, and transnational networks. By relying on migration, tourism economies, and governance regimes, as well as on modern communication technologies, the system expands across regions and transforms itself into new forms, structures, and practices.

It is important to note that the three levels of Mazu belief are not arranged hierarchically. On the contrary, these levels are continuously activated through three interconnected dynamic processes: translation, circulation, and reconfiguration, which are also empirically observable in the domains.

Translation involves the transformation of symbolic meaning within cultural and geographic contexts and is best visible in myth-symbolic construction and transnational diffusion.

Circulation refers to the movement of religious rituals, individuals, objects, and messages across networks, which occurs primarily through ritual practice, communication networks, and digital media.

Finally, reconfiguration stands for the continuous restructuring of religious identities and authority, which takes place during identity production, political economy, and digital transformation.

Thus, under the influence of continuous interaction between the nine domains, each of them functions not as a stable component but rather as a node in the emerging assemblage, which constantly recombines these components at various scales. Thus, by shifting attention from static structure to dynamic process, the framework of analysis demonstrates that Mazu belief is neither transmitted nor structured as a network of relations but constantly reconstructed by multi-scalar processes of interaction between symbolic, social, and systemic dimensions.

Explicitly grounded in empirical findings, Figure 3 thereby develops the thematic framework of Section 4 into a coherent theoretical architecture, thus facilitating the investigation of transnational popular religion as a relational and reconfiguring system.

5.1. CONTRADICTIONS BETWEEN EMPIRICISM AND CURRENT PARADIGMS

Three key empirical contradictions undermine current paradigms.

First, transmission without reproduction. Despite the ability of Mazu belief to spread from region to region by virtue of migration and networks of pilgrimage, its meanings, rituals, and institutions continue to be transformed all along the way. For example, in Southeast Asia, it is both an ethnic identity, a localized deity, and a culture of hybridity. This challenges diffusionist approaches, which assume that transmission involves reproduction of relatively consistent cultural content. According to Appadurai, globalization results in disjunction and reinterpretation, and not simply in reproduction of cultural content [94]. Similar ideas are expressed by James Clifford who stresses the significance of movement rather than of replication in cultural transmission [95]. As regards the Chinese context, scholars have convincingly shown that such deities as Mazu are always reconstructed according to local socio-political conditions [96, 97].

Second, relationality without structural stability. Although the network paradigm correctly recognizes the importance of connections- such as the affiliation with temples and the ritual associations- it tacitly takes the nodes and the links between them for granted. However, the empirical data indicate that those connections are continuously being renegotiated in the process of ritual innovation, the emergence of online platforms, etc. While classical network analysis emphasizes the significance of connections [98], it often takes their persistence for granted. Bruno Latour offers another conceptualization of networks as an ongoing process of association [99]. From a ritual perspective, one can also say that the rituals are constructed and reconstructed as social action [100].

Third, multiplicity of heterogeneous logics. The belief in Mazu exists as religion, cultural tradition, economy of tourism, politics, and the product of digital media. Those aspects do not exist separately, forming one integral part of each other, e.g., a pilgrimage that is at once religious, economic and political act. That is what makes contemporary cultural formations multi-centered [101]. This idea resonates with relational approaches that conceptualize social life as a set of overlapping domains [102]. Furthermore, there are several works dedicated to the role of the network society and religion-media interface in relation to religion [103, 104].

In summary, the contradiction between the paradigm and the empiricism is not so much related to the correctness of the former as to its inability to capture the latter. The reason is that the current approach rests upon a number of assumptions, such as stability, boundedness, and linear causality, which are empirically inconsistent. Thus, the problem lies in the ontology rather than in the empiricism [105].

5.2. MOVING FROM ANALYTICAL INSUFFICIENCIES TO ONTOLOGICAL REFORMULATION

Considering these constraints, then, the challenge is not simply that of increasing complexity in models, but that of fundamentally re-conceptualizing the ontology of religion. As the data indicates, Mazu belief is best understood not as a system that gets transmitted, diffused, or even connected in space and time, but as one that is constantly produced through a relational process. This approach bears similarities to both process-oriented and relational ontologies in modern social theory, which privilege being over becoming and relations over substance [99].

Such a reconceptualization demands, first of all, the abandonment of three unspoken premises:

The first is that of stability and transferrability of meaning, implicit in most classical diffusion models. Anthropologists' criticism of diffusionism has long been based on the insight that cultural meanings get re-contextualized and thus changed as they travel between social and geographical contexts [94, 106].

The second premise is that of coherence and stability of relational structures, implicit in most conventional approaches to networks. Although network theory draws attention to connections, it tends to downplay their fluid and contingent nature. Instead, the relational perspective on society offered by actor-network theory emphasizes the constant process of assembly and re-assembly of relations, while relational sociology more generally repudiates any idea of stable structural totality [99, 107].

The third is that of separability of various domains within the religious sphere, including ritual practices, economic activity, political institutions, and media. Research in the anthropology of religion, on the other hand, shows the increasing tendency to study the entangled relationships between the multiple spheres of religion-related activities [108].

In light of this evidence, the new model of religion is characterized by: ongoing transformation rather than mere replication of forms, as suggested by theories of cultural hybridity and global flows [109]; emerging relationality rather than coherent structure, as posited by process theories of social relations [107]; and the co-production of heterogeneous elements rather than separation of distinct levels and domains, as advocated by theories of assemblages and non-linear ontologies [105].

All of the above imply a need to theorize religion in terms of processes, emergence, and multiplicity. Such an ontological turn will necessitate a corresponding shift in analytical framework.

5.3. MAZU BELIEF AS A RHIZOMATIC ASSEMBLAGE

The notion of rhizome serves as such a theoretical foundation by conceiving of religion not as a coherent system but as an assemblage of heterogeneous elements undergoing continuous reconfiguration through interaction. The rhizome was originally elaborated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) as a non-hierarchical and non-linear model of social organization, challenging traditional understandings of social entities as static and homogeneous structures. As a rhizomatic assemblage, Mazu belief does not form an isolated and bounded tradition but represents multiple heterogeneous components, such as rituals, symbols, institutions, media, economic transactions, and emotions. Such understanding of Mazu belief resonates with assemblage theory as it has been applied in anthropology and sociology for the analysis of social phenomena conceived as heterogeneous combinations of different elements rather than coherent systems [110, 111].

The functioning of Mazu belief as a rhizomatic assemblage can be explained through three interrelated processes.

First, the process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization: as it transcends local cultures and geographic spaces, Mazu belief is displaced from its initial context and becomes embedded into other environments. This dynamic leads to the creation of hybrid practices which, while not diverging from the established traditions, serve as constitutive manifestations of the system. These processes are directly relevant to the concept of deterritorialization developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), as well as the ideas expressed in globalization theory as cultural recontextualization and hybridization [94, 109].

Second, circulation and recombination: rituals, stories, images, and objects circulate within transnational networks, yet they do not retain the same meanings. On the contrary, they get recombined in new combinations and generate new forms of religious performance. Understanding of circulation as a transformative process [94] also corresponds to the theories of translocal networks in which mobility leads to emergence of new ritual practices [95]. Furthermore, Mazu belief fits within the scholarship on the materiality of religion, according to which material artefacts are involved in the construction of meaning [103].

Third, distributed emergence of authority and meaning: in Mazu belief, the establishment of religious legitimacy is not concentrated but occurs through interactions between temples, participants, media outlets, and other institutions. The distributed emergence of authority aligns with the concepts advanced by relational approaches, in which agency and legitimacy derive from relations rather than structural positions [99, 107]. Such practices as *fenxiang*, pilgrimage coordination, and digital involvement demonstrate distributed emergence of legitimacy through interaction rather than imposition. Furthermore, within the context of Chinese religion, these processes have been conceptualized as ritual networking and a form of “ritual economy” [96].

Thus, Mazu belief exemplifies three characteristic properties of the rhizome: multiplicity, non-linearity, and constant reconfiguration. Rather than deviating from methodological conventions, this system reveals the need to reconceive religion as a rhizomatic process.

5.4. THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF RITUAL PRACTICE, EXPERIENCE, AND IDENTITY AS RECIPROCAL PROCESSES

Another implication from the above discussion involves recognizing that ritual practice, affective experience, and collective identity are not to be analytically separated as distinct processes. Prior studies have considered ritual as a structural component, experience as a subjective outcome, and identity as a consequence of social processes [?]. However, based on the discussion in the previous section, all three aspects appear to be mutually constitutive. This critique draws from a number of practice-oriented and phenomenological perspectives on religion studies that emphasize the interdependence of structure, subjectivity, and social processes [112, 113].

As noted in the previous section, ritual practices engender affective experiences that contribute to collective identity construction, which, in turn, impacts participation in ritual activities that reproduce the ritual structure itself. Such a recursive process can be viewed in terms of the duality of structure introduced by Anthony Giddens [114]. In his seminal work, Giddens argues that social practices both produce and are produced by the contexts of their reproduction [114].

Additionally, there exists theoretical understanding that ritual practices create meaning in performative and embodied fashion [100], while there are ethnographic accounts on the embodied nature of affective religious experiences [113]. Finally, collective identity is an ongoing process of construction, facilitated by participation in ritual practices [115].

While the recursive dynamics discussed above cannot be appropriately accounted for by any model that favors agency over structure or vice versa, it corresponds to a processual approach in social theory. In such an approach, meaning is continuously created in interactions between embodied practices and affective engagement [100, 113, 114]. Processual models of social phenomena have been advocated within the relational sociology paradigm that views social entities as relations rather than static entities [107].

Furthermore, digital mediation reinforces the recursive dynamics by allowing participation that extends beyond presence in physical space. The phenomenon of online rituals as well as mediated representation of rituals demonstrates that the experience of religiosity is not necessarily localized but distributed through hybrid physical–digital environments. The scholarship on religion and media has already established that mediation plays an active role in the constitution of religious presence, experience, and authority [103, 116].

5.5. BEYOND DIFFUSION AND NETWORK ANALYSIS: THE NECESSITY OF THE RHIZOME

The rhizomatic perspective is not being proposed as a metaphor, but analytically, it is absolutely necessary because otherwise, certain phenomena observed during this research would be empirically opaque. This idea is based upon the critique of substantialist and linear approaches in the social sciences that are incapable of explaining fluid and heterogeneous social forms [105, 107].

The model of diffusion is unable to elucidate the process by which transmitted elements are transformed rather than reproduced. Although classical models assumed the transportation of relatively stable cultural elements in space, anthropological studies and works dedicated to globalization have made it clear that such transportation is inevitably accompanied by transformation, interpretation and hybridization [94, 106]. In other words, phenomena that could be perceived as "diffusion" are, in fact, instances of transformation in changing cultural and social settings.

Network theory proves useful in visualizing relationships between objects. At the same time, however, it is incapable of explaining the process of transformation in relational configurations and structures because it focuses on the relatively static relationship between stable elements [98]. Actor-network theory, on the contrary, is a processual theory in which networks are viewed as emergent structures that emerge due to practice and are constantly changing [99].

Neither theory explains why it is possible for multiple and partially incompatible logics to coexist within a social system, as is often the case in contemporary society. Religion, globalization, and modernity have taught scholars to recognize a multiplicity of domains—religious, economic, political, technological—in which social phenomena are organized and constructed [103, 104]. Any attempt to impose a unity in this multiplicity will inevitably result in a lack of explanatory power.

Contrary to this situation, the rhizomatic paradigm can accommodate:

multiplicity in itself without necessitating coherence—a feature of a non-hierarchical ontology [105];

transformations without the necessity for an original, corresponding to cultural theories of hybridity and circulation [109]; and

emergence of relational configurations without any structural stability—an idea consistent with the relational and processual theories of society [99, 107].

Therefore, the rhizomatic perspective allows explaining the continuity and transformation of Mazu worship at once, its expansion in new regions and adaptation to new conditions, and its integration of religious, economic, and political logics without unification.

5.6. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS: TOWARDS A PROCESSUAL THEORY OF TRANSNATIONAL RELIGION

With its emphasis on the assemblage of Mazu belief, this paper has a wider relevance for debates on transnational religion and cultural globalization. It proposes a new conceptualization of religion as a processual phenomenon, defined not by fixed boundaries and structures, but by mobility, hybridity, and distributed agency. This approach relies on theoretical insights from globalization studies, including the idea of flow and decentering of cultural hierarchy [94, 104]; however, it extends these concepts through the lens of assemblages [94, 109].

There are three major implications of this approach:

Firstly, it refutes the binary logic that underlies many discussions about globalization. Classical debates are often based on an assumption that globalization results in either homogenization or fragmentation of cultural patterns; however, in light of the findings discussed above, globalization is better understood as a process of constant recombination. The notion of cultural hybridity [94, 109] or global cultural flows [94] captures such an idea quite accurately, suggesting that

globalization implies indeterminate rearticulations between global and local elements.

Secondly, the approach reinterprets the concept of religious authority as an emergent and relational process rather than an attribute of institutional organization. Unlike classical models, the framework described in the present paper locates religious authority in the web of interactions between different nodes: temples, believers, socio-political actors, and infrastructural conditions (including digital media). This point can be related to the theory of relational sociology, which considers social structures as emergent phenomena [107], and actor-network theory, according to which agency is distributed among human and non-human entities Latou [99]. It also has practical implications for the discussion of religious governance, since it helps us grasp the dynamics of legitimate authority in transnational settings.

Thirdly, it shifts the focus onto the role of materiality, media, and affect as intrinsic parts of the religious experience. Studies in the field of material religion and media have convincingly demonstrated that religious beliefs and practices emerge not as self-sufficient entities but rather as products of interaction between humans and the material world. The latter includes various artifacts, images, media content, and embodied activities [108, 113], which play an active part in shaping perceptions and emotions. In this context, the assemblage model makes it possible to incorporate these factors into our understanding of transnational religion, especially in a digitally connected world [116].

Therefore, the assemblage perspective applied in the present analysis can be considered not as an interpretation of Mazu belief but rather as a general theoretical framework for studying transnational popular religions in late modernity. It suggests an alternative approach to religion that conceptualizes it as a processual phenomenon, opening up new research horizons for scholars engaged in this field.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper sought to overcome the issue of fragmented concepts in research related to Mazu belief by conducting a systematic literature review based on 80 articles published in peer-reviewed journals. Through thematic synthesis, nine domains were derived from the analysis which altogether constitute a multi-faceted concept, including the domains of symbolic system, rituals, emotion, identity construction, transnational movement, political economy, communication networks, digital communication, and material culture.

These results illustrate that Mazu belief should be understood not in the light of isolated disciplinary lenses but in terms of its relational nature where various facets interact. However, traditional theoretical frameworks have been ineffective in explaining such processes. This is why it is suggested to conceptualize Mazu belief as transnational rhizomatic religious assemblage.

It will make three contributions. Firstly, it criticizes the dominance of traditional diffusionist theories as well as network-based approaches due to their inability to capture transformation and hybridity of religious beliefs. Secondly, it offers a process-oriented model based on assemblage theory focusing on dynamics of religious change such as deterritorialization, reterritorialization, and multiplicity. Lastly, it combines multiple perspectives including the symbolic, experiential, and structural aspects to provide a new unified framework for analyzing religion.

In general, besides its direct contribution to the field of Chinese popular religion, the current research sheds light on more abstract issues such as globalization of religion and culture. Specifically, it proposes an understanding of religion in the modern era as a flexible and complex transnational phenomenon rather than a rigid tradition.

Still, the current paper is characterized by several limitations. It is focused on English-language scholarly sources which means it may be affected by publication bias and leave out regional research. In addition, the use of secondary data hinders investigation of religious practices at the micro-level, which means that future research should consider comparative fieldwork and qualitative techniques.

Overall, by conceptualizing Mazu belief as rhizomatic system, this study not only provides a new theoretical model for investigating Chinese popular religion but also offers insights into religious transformation taking place in a globalized and mediated world.

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