

Enlisting the Divine Farmer, Shennong: Spirituality, Science, and Environmentalism in Taiwan

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Abstract

Taiwan may well be the country in East Asia with the highest concentration of both religious groups and environmental organizations. Some religious organizations are expanding and redirecting their traditional focus on human centred salvation towards a universal transcendent goal of protecting and saving the planet. We take the worship of Shennong, the Divine Farmer, as an example. We show how one Divine Farmer temple has creatively sought to realign the spiritual powers of the Divine Farmer to address new challenges in people's relationship to nature. We discuss how religious institutions seek to mobilise people for the environmental cause responding actively to society's call for action and thereby simultaneously strengthening, or even re-establishing, their own social and emotional relevance.

Keywords: Popular religion; Emperor Yan; environmental activism

Introduction

At this moment, everyone needs to wake up and take action, and return to the earliest era when humans coexisted harmoniously with nature and ecology. That was the era of the Divine Farmer! (Chairperson of the Qingyun Temple Committee in Ruifang, Taiwan; Huang 2020).

There are several reasons why Taiwan constitutes a very relevant case for studying how environmental concerns are increasingly taken on board by religious organizations, not only at the discursive level but in day-to-day activities.¹ First of all, with a modern history of breakneck industrial development resulting in a per capita GDP ranking of seventeenth in the world in 2023 (Ventura 2024), Taiwan has been facing widespread environmental degradation. Many of Taiwan's 23.5 million inhabitants have been living with severe air and water pollution for decades and experienced more frequently occurring extreme weather such as droughts as well

as increasingly stronger and ever more frequent typhoons. Second, Taiwan has one of the most well-functioning democracies in Asia, with a very active civil society that does not hold back when it has grievances over environmental issues. Added to this, the country has a high level of religious pluralism that creates a fertile ground for religions and spiritual movements to keep developing in order to stay relevant in modern society. Third, Taiwan's precarious sovereignty status makes its government institutions eager to support Taiwanese religious institutions in "going global" and making Taiwan more visible and relevant to the world. Finally, we can observe that the Chinese Communist Party since the 1980s has allowed several Taiwanese religious organizations to establish themselves in China and, in addition to acting as traditional charities, to conduct certain social activities such as environmental education and organized recycling. Taken together, this has provided a window for environmentally conscious Taiwanese religions to influence and sensitize a larger population beyond the island. In this chapter, we explore how community temples may enlist divine beings to help create awareness of key environmental issues and, at the same time, enhance the temple's own visibility and relevance.

Several studies have already shown how larger Taiwanese Buddhist organizations have turned their focus toward environmental issues, not only in Taiwan but also in branches in China and other countries.² Socially engaged Buddhist organizations have proliferated since the 1990s (Schak and Hsiao 2005), and, most notably, the Buddhist Tzu Chi organization has become well-known in Taiwan, as well as in China and many other countries, for its (sometimes hotly debated) recycling movement and calls for limiting consumption. It frames vegetarianism not merely as an ethical and morally correct practice, but as a contribution to a more sustainable world. And Tzu Chi is not the only Taiwanese Buddhist organization that has focused on environmentalism and taken its teachings to China and beyond. Master Sheng Yen of the Buddhist Dharma Drum Mountain (法鼓山) has advocated meditation as a way to improve humanity's relationship with nature: "If we want to harmonize with the environment, [we must] first harmonize ourselves," or, expressed in a more Buddhist way: "We must uplift the character of humanity and build a pure land on earth" (提昇人的品質, 建設人間淨土).³

Less research has been done on environmentalism in community temples dedicated to traditional Chinese deities that are not part of the larger institutionalized religions. During a longer stay as visiting scholars at the Academia Sinica in 2015, followed by regular short-term stays before and after the pandemic lock-down, we visited and revisited numerous temples in four distinct areas of Taiwan where we interviewed and talked to staff and visitors.⁴ We collected a corpus of online and printed publications by or about these temples, interviewed activists during environmental protests in Taipei, and talked to academics engaged in environmental activities in temples. We also consulted with environmental NGOs that have

expressed varying levels of spiritual inspiration or motivation in their work and publications. This article draws on diverse forms of data collected over time in Taiwan and on our combined years of experience researching religious, spiritual, and environmental practices and organizations in China.⁵

The chapter will mainly focus on temples dedicated primarily to the worship of Shennong (神農), directly translated as Divine Farmer or god of agriculture. As with temples dedicated to other traditional Chinese deities, such as the earth god (土地公), they are principally concerned with the well-being of the people living in a more or less clearly defined locality. In recent years, however, we have observed a development in which several temples dedicated to Shennong have expanded their horizons and activities toward addressing larger issues that transcend the local community such as global climate change, soil and air pollution, and loss of biodiversity. This chapter will show how this change came about and, maybe more importantly, how such a shift might contribute to a more culturally rooted and thereby more inclusive model of environmental engagement.

In the following, based on other scholars' research, we first outline the history of Shennong in Chinese and Taiwanese tradition and place the temples dedicated mainly to Shennong in the broader religious landscape of Taiwan. We then turn to a discussion of the reasons behind the changing role of the Divine Farmer in contemporary times, and of the ways in which temples are adjusting and reactivating themselves in the face of the climate and environmental crisis. We suggest that a growing sense of urgency over issues such as changing weather patterns and health concerns due to environmental pollution have triggered spiritual leaders and other actors connected to temples to engage the Divine Farmer in strengthening awareness and spurring to action. We argue that the popular perception of the era of Shennong as a time of "harmonious coexistence between humans and nature," and the Divine Farmer's role as the father of agriculture and the use of plants makes him well-suited for grassroots initiatives to redirect religious and spiritual needs toward present-day threats to human well-being, be it through devastating typhoons, life-threatening air pollution, or contaminated soil. But equally important, we find, are the ongoing efforts of Taiwanese urban intellectuals—academics, artists, writers—who seek to address the global environmental crisis by repurposing local religious and spiritual traditions, and in doing so also contribute to the revitalization of Taiwanese culture.

The Divine Farmer in Chinese Tradition

Shennong is also known as the Shennong Emperor (神農大帝) and the Yan Emperor (炎帝 or "Flame Emperor").⁶ As with many other deities in Chinese traditional religion, it is assumed that the Divine Farmer is a deity that has developed from

different figures in Chinese mythology and merged into a single entity. Together with the Yellow Emperor, Huang Di, he is considered the most important ancestor of the Chinese people, supposedly having lived several thousand years ago in China's distant and mythical past. Chinese people refer to themselves as "descendants of Yan and Huang" (炎黄子孫; Wugu Xiandi chongjian jinian beizhi). As discussed further below, in his identity as the Yan Emperor, Shennong plays a role in nationalistic discourse today in China as a proud symbol of Chinese identity and ethnic unity. The Divine Farmer, however, is mainly worshipped throughout the Sinitic world, including Taiwan, as a cultural hero, accredited with a long list of inventions and discoveries for the benefit of the Chinese people: He taught the people agriculture, including the use of fire to clear the land, irrigation, ploughing and the domestication of animals; he taught them to drink tea and use other plants, either as food or for medical purposes, how to practice trade, weave cloth and even how to make and play musical instruments.

In his role as the inventor of agriculture he is often called the Ancestral Emperor of the Five Grains (五穀先帝)—hence many temples dedicated to Shennong, especially in Hakka areas, carry the name "Temple of the Five Grains."⁷ Through tasting the different plants in nature, Shennong discovered which ones were edible, which ones were poisonous and which ones had medicinal effects. In some of the stories told about him, Shennong was able to do this by having a transparent skin that allowed him to observe the workings of the plants within his own body. When he noticed a plant was having poisonous effects, he quickly ate an antidote to neutralize the poison. In this way he managed to catalogue hundreds of plants according to their potential use for human beings until, eventually, he perished after eating a poisonous plant for which he did not find an antidote in time. It is especially this aspect of self-sacrifice that bestowed the Divine Farmer with the reputation of a selfless savior of humanity who has power over the weather and can assist in healing the sick.⁸ As such, his help is traditionally prayed for by farmers needing appropriate weather for their crops or by people who are either sick themselves or have relatives that are sick.

Shennong is depicted either as a saint with a long black beard and imperial attire or as a human-like figure with small horns, pointy ears, a bare chest and dressed only in leaves around his neck and waist and holding a sheaf of grain. In temple statues and paintings, the Shennong dressed in leaves appears in three versions: red-faced, in his role as protector of agriculture (his face being red because he is mostly working outside in the sun); black-faced, representing his medicinal role (his face being black as the result of all the poisonous plants he had to taste); and green-faced in his role of the eliminator of evil and demons. Some temples contain statues of all the versions, some only one. Temples dedicated to Shennong commonly also house statues of other Chinese deities, popular-religious, Daoist or

Buddhist. Because of the close connection between land and agriculture, one of the other deities most likely to be worshipped in a Shennong temple is the territorial earth god (Hsieh 2012).

Shennong is first explicitly mentioned in the fourth and third centuries BCE in polemical texts in which he is associated with the philosophical school of “The Tillers” or Nongjia (農家) (Hsieh 2012; Graham 1979, 104). The Tillers are presented in several of these texts as naïve utopians who want to recreate an “empire of farmers” living in perfect peace with each other and the natural world, in a society where there are no punishments and where even the king must work in the fields (Graham 1979, 67–68). This era in Chinese history, known as the Warring States (475–221 BCE), was a period of great political fragmentation and conflict, but also one with competing philosophical and ideological views of how a well-functioning society could be achieved through implementing the best possible way of ruling it. While we have no surviving texts that can be attributed to the school of The Tillers itself, its ideology associated with the mythical ancient emperor Shennong is revealed in the writings of the other philosophical schools. The Confucians, for instance, criticized the Tiller model for its egalitarianism and lack of hierarchical structuring of society, while Legalist writings acknowledge the value of agricultural wisdom produced by the Tillers but condemn as unworkable a political system without punishment. In a few texts from the Warring States period the “empire of farmers” is upheld as a model by which the practices of current institutions are criticized (Graham 1979, 69).

In the centuries that followed, that is from the later Han Dynasty (25–220 CE) onwards, we find more mentions in texts of Shennong’s medicinal role as the “taster of the hundred herbs” (Henricks 1998, 107). China’s famous first pharmaceutical handbook, the *Shennong Bencaojing* (神農本草經) is attributed to him. It is often translated as Shennong’s Herbal Classic and was probably compiled from different oral sources during the late Han. It lists 365 medicinal plants, divided into three categories according to their effect and their treatment for over one hundred diseases (Ruifang Qingyundian n.d., 5). Robert Henricks holds that within historical texts, Shennong came to be first and foremost associated with his contribution to herbal medicine, rather than as the farmer with the five grains (Henricks 1998, 107).

Soon after the Chinese started to settle in Taiwan during the seventeenth century, the first temple dedicated to Shennong was built in Tainan and primarily dedicated to the worship of Shennong as the Medicine King (Hsieh 2012). However, in the following centuries, with more Chinese settlers opening up new land for cultivation, Shennong’s role as protector and helper in agriculture became the most significant one (Hsieh 2012). Kuei-wen Hsieh argues that the worship of Shennong became particularly important in Taiwan precisely due to the large farming settler communities. He holds that, at least at the time of his study, Shennong was still

mainly prayed to for help in agriculture rather than for help in treating disease, even though he was also increasingly worshipped in urban areas.

During our studies, we also expected to find that the Divine Farmer's help was mainly invoked to help farmers and provide assistance for agriculture, especially in rural Hakka areas. This, then, would have made him potentially relevant to enlistment by farmers in combating the negative effects of climate change and environmental degradation. However, our observations from temples and conversations with worshippers and staff suggest that Shennong's most sought-after powers today are still his medical powers, which are only partly and indirectly related to environmental issues. His medicinal role may even have been further strengthened due to the physical and psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Several temples had pharmacological services in which visitors pray to Shennong before drawing lots that correspond to pieces of paper with a short (rather cryptic) text that requires interpretation by a member of the temple staff. This, in combination with other information provided by the worshipper, would be used by a staff member who had pharmacological knowledge to prepare the appropriate herbal medicine. Temples that offer the services of a medium who communicates directly with Shennong are very popular. One can ask for advice on a particular issue, solicit more general life guidance (問事) or ask for help related to one's own or a family member's health issues (問病). In the last case people may bring a piece of clothing belonging to the sick family member and present it to the medium.

This does not mean that Shennong worship has diminished overall, or, as we shall show later, that he does not play a meaningful role also in addressing environmental issues. The number of temples that are dedicated to or include Shennong did not decline after Taiwan's democratization in the 1990s, and as recently as 2017, Chang Hui Ting counted 195 temples in the whole of Taiwan that were primarily dedicated to the worship of Shennong (Chang 2017, 29).⁹ While temples are rather evenly spread over the island, there is a larger concentration in the south and in areas with a large Hakka population. Many Hakka people migrated later and in lesser numbers to Taiwan than the Hoklo settlers from the Fujian area who had taken the best lands first. Being often poorer than the Hoklo, they were forced to practice agriculture in the more mountainous and remote area (see e.g., Wu 2012, 134). Hsieh (2012) suggests that they therefore needed "more blessings from the Divine Farmer Emperor to pray for smooth agricultural development and a bountiful harvest."

Since the end of the Civil War in 1949, the Chinese Shennong Association (中華神農大帝協進會) has provided a network for all member temples in Taiwan. They meet biannually in one of the temples, chosen through divination by casting so-called moon blocks. They also organize joint events, including cross-strait exchanges between Shennong temples in Taiwan and cultural or research organizations in China related to Emperor Yan, as the Chinese Communist Party prefers to name Shennong.¹⁰

Local Community Temples in the Taiwanese Religious Landscape

The establishment of the Shennong Medicine King Temple in Tainan was part of a comprehensive religious colonization of Taiwan that started in the middle of the seventeenth century and expanded steadily in the following centuries. Emigrants from the Fujian and Guangdong areas in Southern China carried with them some ashes from the incense burners of their home temples that were Buddhist, Daoist, lineage temples or temples dedicated to one of the many folk-religious cults of South China such as that of the sea goddess Mazu. They used the ashes to set up and consecrate places of worship in their newly established villages on the island. Some also brought statues of deities and of deified humans as well as ancestral tablets, and placed them initially in a part of a house or a simple temple. Migrants had few resources when they arrived and could not afford to build large, expensive structures. They would often place the statues belonging to different traditions within a temple that was primarily dedicated to one deity (Jones 1999, 7–8). A Shennong temple, for example, could also house statues of the Buddhist Guanyin Bodhisattva, Mazu and the local earth god. This has remained the practice, and, as is discussed below, East Asian religious practitioners often do not see contradictions in parallel worshipping of deities or deified humans belonging to different religious traditions. Studies on Taiwanese religion suggest that the larger extent to which this is the case in Taiwan in comparison to China is precisely related to the different historical trajectories of the establishment of temples in the two regions (Jones 1996, 20).

Not all local community temples were primarily dedicated to the deities of popular religions. The larger institutionalized religions, such as Buddhism, also started off in the first centuries of Chinese colonization as humble local temples in Taiwan with often only one monk or novice who was mainly responsible for funerals and divine protection. Ordination was only possible in China, and few had the resources to travel there and become fully ordained (Jones 1999, 9–11). It was not until the Japanese takeover that monastic Buddhism took off in Taiwan.

With the growing economic development in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries many temples were rebuilt, enlarged, refurbished and embellished by the contributions of local users expressing their gratitude for divine assistance and displaying the prosperity and prominence of their locality to their surrounding communities. In Fujian and Guangzhou where most migrants were from, local temples and ancestral halls constituted the site of power of a single local family or clan. However, those who migrated to Taiwan often traveled without their families and settled down in villages together with people who originated from different hometowns in the mainland. In this way, newly established temples provided social and political functions for migrant communities made up by different families (Jones 1996, 21).

This historical development might help explain why in Taiwan today community temples—including those primarily dedicated to Shennong—are characterized by being locally embedded but at the same time broad and inclusive. Taiwanese people worship mostly at home and in their local temple (Weller 2006, 106). They are not so concerned with which deities end up in the temple, as long as they have access to the necessary ritual services and divine assistance. Furthermore, such community temples are not administered by a large, institutionalized religion and the worshippers are not compelled to adhere to strict doctrines and liturgical practices. This makes the temples relatively adaptable and open to change where it concerns the needs of its users. As such, as we shall see, they provide an enabling space and vehicle for local communities to both address local problems and mobilize to make themselves heard in the larger society.

According to statistics from the Ministry of the Interior, at the end of 2021 there were 15,186 registered religious buildings—that is, temples and churches—in Taiwan (Liu 2022). Registration is mandatory for active temples and churches if they want to be exempt from paying taxes. Compared to, for instance, the Netherlands which has 5,400 churches in use for 17.7 million people, Taiwan has approximately twice as many religious venues per inhabitant, indicating the important role of temples in society today. In a media article commenting on these findings, the journalist ironically points out that there are more religious venues available for Taiwanese people than convenience stores (Liu 2022). Of these religious buildings, 65 percent were officially registered as Daoist, 15 percent as Buddhist and 18 percent as Christian. Temples for popular religions, including those dedicated to Shennong, are not registered as a separate category but are included under Daoist temples. To fully grasp the position of the beliefs and practices of popular religions in one of Asia's most developed countries, we have to turn to a 2018 survey by the Institute of Sociology of the Academia Sinica which shows that 49.3 percent of respondents consider themselves believers in “popular religion” (民間宗教), while only 12.4 percent consider themselves to be Daoist, 14 percent Buddhist, 6.8 percent Christian, and 13.2 percent state that they have no religious beliefs (Fu 2020, 161).

According to the same survey, about two thirds of the population believe to a varying degree in an immortal soul that needs to be worshipped by surviving kin to be able to find peace (Fu 2020, 176–77). Ancestor worship is one of the central aspects of Chinese cosmological beliefs and imported religious teachings such as Buddhism have had to accommodate these beliefs before becoming widespread among Chinese people. Some Christian missionaries, for instance, considered ancestral worship as a major obstacle in spreading Christianity in China (e.g., Coe 2016, 9). Another impediment to the spread of Christianity has been its universalist claim of exclusivity in addressing all spiritual, moral, soteriological, or other social or transcendent needs people might have. Most East Asian religions, including the

highly institutionalized ones such as Buddhism, do not aspire to fulfill all such needs and can co-exist with other religions and belief systems (see e.g., Gellner 1997 and Teeuwen 2003). From the vantage point of the Taiwanese believers, it follows that ceremonies honoring ancestors or for asking them for help and protection can be held at temples for Buddhism, Daoism or any popular religion alike. According to the above-mentioned statistics, 80 percent of Taiwanese respondents state that they adhere simultaneously to different beliefs (Liu 2022).

Fengping Temple, dedicated to Shennong, is a good example of the mobilizing capability of folk-religious temples. When visiting the temple in the beginning of 2024, little indicated to us that it had been at the center of intense environmental protests from 1987 to 1990, and again in 2004. It is situated in Houjin, a suburb of Taiwan's main port city of Kaohsiung, in a residential area close to a park full of trees. The name of the park—Kaohsiung Refinery Green Belt—provides a hint to the recent past, and all along the length of the park, for about 500–600 meters, stretches a high wall with faded paintings of birds, elephants and other animals. This signals a contrast to the area behind the wall which is marked on Google maps as a cultural heritage site named the Original Location of Taiwan China Petroleum Kaohsiung Refinery (台灣中油公司高雄煉油廠原址).

In 1987 the government announced that a new plant would be added to the China Petroleum Refinery in Houjin. The area was already suffering from heavy air pollution and residents feared that the new plant would make the situation even worse. Despite heavy protests between 1987 and 1990, including people traveling to Taipei to protest in front of the Legislative Yuan, the government went ahead with the construction, though it did make several concessions. Most importantly, it promised to shut down the most polluting parts of the existing refinery, and close and relocate the entire refinery by 2015 (see Lu 2009 and Hsieh 2012). The case is rather famous in recent Taiwanese political and environmental history because it coincided with—and was to some extent part of—the democratization process of the country. The initial protests took place a few weeks before martial law was abolished in 1987, and the large media focus on the ensuing blockade turned Houjin into a symbol of the fight against the authoritarian ruling Kuomintang party (Lu 2009, 58). Environmental protests were one of the very few forms of civil disobedience that were tolerated by the regime at the time and such protests were therefore able to galvanize the population in demanding overall political change. Some have argued that precisely through furthering local interests, community temples played an active role in the democratization of Taiwan (see e.g., Katz 2003, 405).

What makes the Houjin events even more relevant to our study is the role played by the Shennong Fengping Temple in the protests. Not only did it provide an organizational platform, but, maybe more importantly, it offered divine and moral support to the protesters. Leading up to the large protest in 1990, people burned incense to

Shennong at the temple, and they only went out to protest after they received his approval after having cast divination blocks and interpreted other divine signs (Weller 2006, 105). The following year several women reported getting divine messages in their dreams telling them that construction of the plant would lead to a catastrophe in Houjin (Lu 2009, 63). Weller (2006) argues that it is precisely the temples' concern with the well-being of the locality that has the potential to generate and support social action, including environmental activism. People belonging to a community temple expect the deities associated with the temple to stand up for the benefit of the community when it is threatened by outside forces. This includes also safeguarding the livelihood of future generations. Threats to the natural environment are not only harmful for those living now but due to the moral duties associated with filial piety, they are conceived as threats to the very continuation of the lineage (Weller 2006, 122). Since people protest out of local and personal concerns, such as their health or that of their children and grandchildren, this form of environmentalism centered on community temples works well, for example, to oppose pollution. According to Weller, it is less effective in mobilizing for more "abstract and universalizing ideals" like biodiversity or nature for its own sake. He contrasts this to the environmental consciousness and activism displayed by globalized urban elites in Taiwan who, for example, participate in Taiwanese environmental NGOs (Weller 2006, 122, 134).

Weller provides a convincing analysis of environmentalism and community temple engagement in Taiwan in the first decade of the democratization period. In the following two decades, Taiwan, like the rest of the world, experienced a widening realization of the threat of irreversible global warming, but, in comparison with many other parts of the world, it has also seen the growing development and sophistication of its civil society. Several popular surveys about views on climate change, renewable energy and other issues carried out by the Taiwan Institute for Sustainable Energy suggest a high level of environmental acknowledgment and awareness of these issues in the Taiwanese population.¹¹ Visiting temples across the island and talking to people working or worshipping there indicated to us that many people, regardless of social status or religious belief, are well aware of global environmental threats and their local consequences, and, not the least, of the need to address them. And, in doing so, community temples and associated deities can be instrumental. When we asked one of the leaders of Fengping Temple about the Divine Farmer's relevance as god of agriculture in a contemporary urbanized community faced with the effects of industrialization and global warming, he answered: "Shennong is in our daily lives, we have been brought up with him, we have this temple and can use it for whatever we need it for ... What the people want is also what the temple wants!"

As we discuss below, our research suggests that concerns about local environmental problems and their possible solutions have gradually broadened to include more general issues of environmental destruction, loss of biodiversity and climate

change. The awareness of connections between the local and the global were reflected in many people's descriptions to us of their environment and experiences. They were for instance, experiencing typhoons that have increased in strength and frequency, more droughts and flooding and a discourse in the media that is more likely than before to situate such events in the context of much larger planetary changes. Simultaneously, the government has made a point of communicating the need to step up the efforts to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and, at the same time, combat pollution. Of particular relevance to our study, a number of environmentally engaged urbanized intellectuals have started to consider community temples as a valuable repository for culturally appropriate inspiration and assistance in solving the global environmental crisis.

We discuss this further in the next section in which we also introduce Operation Shennong (神農計畫) by the Lovely Taiwan Foundation as a case in point of how a Shennong "brand" may also be used by a secular NGO attempting to revitalize the Taiwanese countryside by funding teaching of ecological farming at primary schools.

Shennong's New Role

Community temples cater to the needs of the community, such as providing a space for social life, for worshipping one's ancestors and for supplicating for divine support when encountering existential or everyday problems. Historically, the Divine Farmer, as the god of agriculture and inventor of medicine, was worshipped by a settler population whose basic existence was contingent on successful harvests and surviving diseases. Our conversations with worshippers and temple personnel provide evidence that, in line with Shennong's historical credentials, health issues are still a major reason for people to seek divine help at their local temple.¹² When everything else has failed, or simply to supplement modern medical science, people will seek help and comfort in their local temple. When we asked people about their need for his assistance in agriculture, however, we found little to suggest that people, even in rural areas where most of the Shennong temples are situated, expected his help in this respect. Increased urbanization of the countryside and modernization of farming methods were obvious reasons for the Divine Farmer's assistance in agricultural matters having become redundant. The caretaker of a Shennong temple in an area with significant strawberry production that was facing huge challenges due to drier weather told us: "We have our phones for checking the weather, so we do not need Shennong for this anymore." What people do need Shennong for, in addition to solving individual health issues, is similar to what many people pray for at other temples in cities and in the countryside: help for themselves or their children to pass examinations, find a spouse, win in the lottery or pick the right company to invest in.

However, as we have discussed above, Chinese popular religion has shown great flexibility when practitioners' needs have changed in a changing world. From the point of view of the people going to the temples to worship, it does not seem to matter that Shennong in earlier times was especially worshipped as an agricultural deity, as long as he can help solve their present-day problems. One elderly worshipper expressed it this way: "You just need to believe deep inside that your individual problems will be solved."

At the same time, in publications by Shennong temples and several Taiwanese academics we can see a trend to actively make Shennong worship relevant, consistent and fitting for people living in today's Taiwan. When Shennong's mythological past as a benevolent mediator between nature and humans is invoked, his role is consciously refashioned into a culturally rooted ally in combating the environmental crises of our time. This rationalization of religion whereby people try to make their practices and ideas more systematized and coherent is part of a global process of religious change. Referring to Max Weber's rationalization concept, Weller explains how religions in China and Taiwan accommodated and adapted to this worldwide trend of religious rationalization that

contributes to the extraction of religious belief from the general experience of daily life to the change from a taken-for-granted religiosity/life to a self-conscious and reflective "religion." Religion becomes something most clearly represented by its texts, rather than by the repetition of contextual practice. (Weller 2015, 16)

The most comprehensive project of refashioning Shennong worship into a religion that is relevant in addressing the environmental crises both locally and globally is taking place in Qingyun Temple in Ruifang, a forty-five-minute drive to the east of Taipei. The temple, primarily dedicated to Shennong, moved to its present location sixty years ago. It is built in the traditional style of southern Chinese temples and is surrounded by forested hills on three sides. The impressive building is made up of several connected sections, with a low main hall in the front part and a large section rising six stories high at the back. All the roof eaves are elaborately adorned, and the entire building is red and white throughout, giving it an aesthetically appealing appearance. Extensions and renovations have been carried out recently and on our last visit in January 2024, construction work was still going on. Qingyun Temple is only a short walk from Jiufen, a small, picturesque town perched on a steep mountainside, which until 1971 was dependent on goldmining, but in recent years has been attracting many tourists. According to the Ruifang Qingyundian booklet (Ruifang Qingyundian n.d.), many miraculous discoveries of gold were attributed to Shennong's answering of prayers, which has made the temple both popular and famous.



Figure 1.1: Qingyun Temple in Ruifang. (Photo by Koen Wellens)

Besides Shennong, who is represented by red, black and green-faced statues, the temple also houses other deities, including the earth god, and it contains a dedicated Buddhist wing. What is striking when visiting the temple on almost any day of the week is the various types of activities taking place: people individually or in small groups burning incense, drinking water from the sacred Shennong source, standing in queues to consult the medium; groups of uniformed volunteers with the name of the temple on their backs praying, reciting scriptures, or listening to lectures; and the occasional tourists taking selfies in front of the temple. On weekends and certain other days larger rituals take place in which men in red trousers and bare upper bodies dance, accompanied by drumming, apparently in a trance. Worshippers are purified by temple staff burning paper over their heads, and visitors may put their fingerprints on a wall painting representing the tree of life. The temple attracts visitors and volunteers from all over Taiwan. The reason for this success, according to the temple's website is that it is "the most complete and comprehensive temple in the Shennong system in the world," including its well-developed and popular "questioning ceremony" (問事) in which worshippers can communicate with Shennong through a medium to obtain his advice (Ruifang Qingyundian n.d.).

However, another important factor in the success of Qingyun Temple, is, undoubtedly, its charismatic female leader. She has been very ambitious on behalf of the temple, and both made and attracted large financial donations. This has allowed its expansion, of the physical temple structure, but, not the least, of the scope and popularity of its activities. As one of only four female leaders of Shennong temples and teamed up with a female medium, she might be seen as representing a new and more appealing form of traditional popular religion, including the revamping of the social functions of the community temple. We were often told by visitors that they kept coming back to the temple because its welcoming and friendly atmosphere made them feel at home.

The website and Facebook pages of Qingyun Temple are aesthetically very attractive, with stylish designs and professional photographs of statues, ritual dancers and other temple scenes. Nevertheless, it is only when reading some of the content on the sites that one starts to grasp the conscious, well-argued and consistent reasoning that lies beneath the project of making Shennong relevant in modern times. One telling example is this prayer by the temple head at the start of the COVID pandemic in 2020. First she links the epidemic to the necessity of respecting the natural ecology (自然生態), and how it has brought everyone's attention to environmental factors such as climate change, the need for a new level of ecological balance and "symbiosis between all beings" (萬物共生). And here we can ask Shennong for help, she writes:

Shennong invented agriculture, personally tasted hundreds of herbs for medicine, bartered goods at the market at noontime, taught people to build houses, weave hemp for clothing, make musical instruments, make pottery for utensils, drill wood to make fire, and use magnificent wooden drums to drive away insects. Consequently, human life took a step further and moved toward the light. The spirit of the Eight Achievements of Emperor Shennong is closely linked to today's life and has made great contributions to mankind. It is the ancestor of human ecology that provides us with beautiful living conditions. Today we pray here to Emperor Shennong to lead us back to our original aspiration, to return to the harmonious coexistence between human beings and nature, and to the original aspiration of ecological balance. We pray that Emperor Shennong will bless lost mankind with the glory of his vast and mighty divine favor. We pray that the turbulent and unstable popular feelings will be stable, that they will cooperate with each other, unite with nature, and be in symbiosis with all things. Let the Earth that cannot carry the heavy weight anymore regain its ecological balance. We wish here that all people around the world will get through the epidemic disaster safe and sound! (Ruifang Qingyundian n.d.)

Many of the walls in Qingyun Temple have illustrated posters extolling the past deeds of Shennong and the uses of the medicinal herbs he discovered. Some others

contain cartoons about how people today are risking their lives by consuming unhealthy food additives, much in the way Shennong lost his when tasting which plants were edible and which were poisonous. Among the posters there are also announcements of lectures held at the temple on environmental issues or topics related to Chinese history or culture given by academics or other specialists. Most of the lectures are organized by a professor emeritus in close collaboration with the head of the temple. The intended audience are the temple volunteers and the students and colleagues of the speaker. In April 2023 the temple also co-sponsored an international conference on soil, arranged by the professor. Several of the conference panels took place at Qingyun Temple. The online conference announcement contains a reference to a remark made by the head of Qingyun Temple, pointing out that the worship of the Divine Farmer emphasizes the principles of ecological balance and the coexistence of all beings.¹³

The way the temple provides a platform for the interchange between academia and popular religion is, as far as we know, quite unique in Taiwan. Intellectuals and artists are drawn to the temple to present, perform or participate in a lecture, and they meet a vibrant Shennong temple with a charismatic leadership that is set on addressing the pressing environmental challenges of our time while helping people solve their personal problems, all through the help of an ancient Chinese cultural hero, the Divine Farmer. At the same time, Shennong worshippers, whether the more than one hundred volunteers or other regular visitors, may receive state-of-the-art academic input on the challenges facing the planet and humanity, how plants can heal, or how to reduce one's CO₂ imprint. From Qingyun Temple's perspective, this constitutes a double win: the temple and its worship of Shennong make available a spiritual addition to the world of science, while scientific knowledge contributes to the systemization and rationalization of a rather fuzzy and incoherent traditional belief system, making it more relevant and attractive to the believers.

Although Qingyun Temple is exceptional in the range and scale of its activities, it has also served as inspiration to other temples; for instance, the leader of the temple committee of the Temple of Five Grains in the Hakka village of Sanyi told us that they often collaborate with Qingyun Temple and participate in a common ritual initiated by Qingyun Temple called "Love the Planet" (愛地球) that is focused on the environment.

As mentioned above, we visited Fengping Temple because it is rather famous as the place of massive environmental protests in the 1980s and 1990s, and it is no coincidence that this temple today also underscores the Divine Farmer's potential contribution to environmental protection and ecology. In an article on Shennong worship in Taiwan, Hsieh (2012) also uses Fengping Temple in Houjin as a prime example of how communities "assign new roles to the deities" as a result of the development of society and its belief systems. Shennong is portrayed by the temple

as a “pioneer in environmental protection” because he, for example, demanded that people refrain from indiscriminate killing of animals during the Spring and Summer breeding seasons, allowing all beings to proliferate and grow (Hsieh 2012). Hsieh ends his article with a call for further integration of Shennong beliefs and the environmental movement. At the same time, he also exhorts academics to be part of this development by analyzing what is happening as a “paradigm of the revitalization of traditional folk beliefs.”

The Secular Shennong

The legacy of the Divine Farmer has also been evoked to brand and promote environmental projects in a secular NGO, The Lovely Taiwan Foundation. “Everybody—whether young or old—knows the name of Shennong,” one of the headmasters in a primary school told us in early 2024. His school was situated in a rural area of central Taiwan and most of the pupils were Hakka. For nearly nine years they had been part of a project called “Operation Shennong” (神農計畫) aimed at teaching children and their parents about organic agriculture in practice and in theory, while supporting local producers of organic products. The school was chosen as one of the foundation’s ten rural “Shennong schools,” ordinary primary schools, which have integrated the teaching of plants, ecology and small-scale agriculture into their curriculum. The Lovely Taiwan Foundation was founded in 2009 by a private businessman, Ko Wen Chang, who was looking for a way to support rural areas with projects based in local culture that might also help limiting the out-migration of young people to the cities, and in 2015 Operation Shennong was launched. It is a decentralized organization in which a few people in the foundation coordinate the project, while the practical training of teachers is carried out mainly by local farmers.

When we asked the headmaster and one of his colleagues why this project had taken on the name of Shennong, they both laughed and said that it “had nothing to do with beliefs (信仰) or religion (宗教).” Shennong, in their view, was the name of a historical person with strong roots in the Hakka community, famous for his knowledge of plants and agriculture. When people hear the name of Shennong, they immediately think of plants and plant-based medicine; they connect the name to the soil, and therefore also to agriculture, they explained. The leaders in the primary school were very familiar with the local area, and they argued that the Shennong project was well-received in a local population increasingly aware of the long-term problems of heavily polluted soil, and of climate change resulting in warmer and dryer weather negatively affecting their agricultural output. In the Operation Shennong project, the Divine Farmer serves as a familiar culturally



Figure 1.2: Wugu Temple with Shennong overlooking the community and the nearby local school (Miaoli County). (Photo by Koen Wellens)

embedded symbol of concern for plants, health, soil and the ability to act on it. “Shennong was a human being capable of solving problems, and when people hear his name, they are inspired to come up with new suggestions about what we can do in our project; they get ideas because the reference to Shennong can imply so many different things,” the coordinator of Operation Shennong told us. Many parents

and grandparents tell the children stories about Shennong and take them to the temples to worship him for New Year and other festivals. Nevertheless, apart from his prominent position in the title of the project, the Divine Farmer has little to say for the actual organization and the content of it. The teaching material developed by the project focuses on basic science explained in simple ways to children, on practical exercises on small plots of lands within each school, and on stories of people's and other living beings' connections to nature and the natural world. The spirit of Shennong is first of all enlisted as a kind of "protector" of the project to generate feelings of cultural recognition. The only mention of the Divine Farmer in the book describing Operation Shennong is a lyric description in the preface by the renowned Taiwanese art historian and author, Hsun Chiang:

The order of nature and the moral principles of the soil of the Shennong era may not be far away at all. If "little Shennongs" appear one after another in primary schools in the villages and towns of Taiwan, we might see that the hope of redeeming nature and soil is just around the corner. (Chiang 2020, 6–7)

Operation Shennong is a good example of how the spirit and transcendent values of the Divine Farmer and all he is associated with, can attract attention and trigger visions of the future based in an ideal mythical past, also among artists, intellectuals and environmental activists.

Conclusion

As in many democratic countries, environmental concerns in Taiwan today are addressed through both a relatively well-functioning political system and a robust and active civil society. Likewise, as in many other countries, environmental engagements by these two sectors of society often overlap: most leaders of Taiwan's tiny but influential Green Party have a past as environmental NGO-activists, and Taiwan's largest political party, the Democratic Progressive Party, has included a strong environmentalist agenda in its push for democratization and throughout its subsequent participation in electoral policies (Fell 2021, 7, 34). In order to understand the full scope of how Taiwanese civil society addresses the environmental challenges it is facing, we have to look beyond the actions of local and global "classic" NGOs. This article has attempted to contribute to this by zooming in on the activities surrounding the legendary Divine Farmer, Shennong. The Divine Farmer temples we have discussed in this article, differ from the socially engaged Buddhist organizations in that they are not part of larger more rigid institutionalized religions, but are strongly embedded in local communities. Being focused on catering

to the changing needs and well-being of these communities and shaped by their specific Taiwanese historical course, Shennong temples are characterized by a high level of flexibility, adaptability and inclusiveness.

In times when the climate and environmental crises have reached all corners of the planet and a growing number of people have realized their urgency, some Shennong temples are now exploring new ways of letting the Divine Farmer play a role in addressing also these challenges. This is a concerted effort by worshippers who look to their local temple for help and support in a changing world where their well-being and that of their children and grandchildren is threatened; by temple leaders who are determined to keep their institution relevant in the community; and, finally, by some environmentally concerned academics who are looking at new ways to solicit support for their cause in the larger population. For the time being, Taiwanese Shennong temples do not seem to have plans to follow in the footsteps of Buddhist organizations such as Tzu Chi and Dharma Drum Mountain and take the Divine Farmer global.

However, in recent years, we have seen regular visits by Taiwanese Shennong worshippers and temple staff to China. As part of the Chinese Communist Party's attempt at legitimizing its rule through a Chinese nationalistic discourse, the shared role of Shennong in Chinese culture has given Taiwanese Shennong temple leaders and worshippers access to China, and thereby also provided a possibility to propagate the Divine Farmers' potential new environmental role. On a paradigmatic level, the case of the Divine Farmer shows us how local worshippers of a folk-religious tradition can work in partnership with urban intellectuals to address environmental challenges in new ways. This demonstrates how religion and science can complement each other in ways that may help to alter more conventional views that conceive science and religion as belonging to largely separate and autonomous domains; thereby also motivating more people—perhaps including those in power—to strengthen their efforts to solve the environmental crisis.

Notes

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- ² For instance, Chen and Li this volume; Dung 2021; Lee and Han 2015; Chen and Hansen 2022; Lin 1999.
- ³ <https://www.dharmadrum.org/> (accessed June 5, 2024) and Sheng Yen 2023.
- ⁴ In Ruifang District, in Taipei City, in Miaoli County (in the townships of Tongluo, Gongguan, Zhunan and Sanyi) and in Kaohsiung (Houjin).

- ⁵ Wellens 2010a, 2010b and 2017; Hansen, Li and Svarverud 2018; Hansen and Liu 2018; Ahlers, Hansen and Svarverud 2020; Chen and Hansen 2022.
- ⁶ See Henricks 1998 and Hsieh 2006 and 2012 on the identification of Shennong as Emperor Yan in Chinese historical texts.
- ⁷ The Hakka and Hoklo are the main sub-groups within the Han Chinese majority of Taiwan. With 4.6 million people the Hakka constitute approximately one-fifth of the population. They have their own language and to some extent distinct cultural traditions.
- ⁸ Most sources published by temples or found on Taiwanese websites contain more or less similar descriptions of Shennong and his achievements, see e.g., Ruifang Qingyundian n.d.; Ruifang Qingyundian guanli weiyuanhui n.d.; Hsieh 2012.
- ⁹ Chang compiled this number from the “National Directory of Temples, Shrines, Halls, Altars, and Platforms Dedicated to Worshiping the Divine Farmer” (全國奉祀神農大帝宮、廟、殿、堂、壇通訊錄). The leader of the Qingyun Temple in Ruifang suggested that the number of temples where Shennong is the main deity is only around ninety while more than three hundred are temples where he is a deity but not the major one (interview January 2023).
- ¹⁰ One such official Chinese organization is the Research Institute of [Emperors] Yan and Huang (炎黃研究會). For a report on a visit to Mainland China, see Lin 2023.
- ¹¹ <https://www.taise.org.tw/news-view.php?ID=382> (accessed April 24, 2024).
- ¹² On Taiwanese popular religion as healing resources, see Hsun 2006.
- ¹³ https://qyt.tw/images/easyblog_articles/552/Information.pdf (accessed April 26, 2024).

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