

Interpreting Plague Deities in East and West: Paul Katz Highlights How Religious Rituals Soothe the Human Spirit

Campus focus

The College of Liberal Arts hosted an International Master Lecture, where the Department of History invited Dr. Paul R. Katz, Distinguished Research Fellow at the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, for a special talk. The lecture, titled "Plagues, Sin, and Rituals of Suffering: Perspectives on the Wangye Belief in Modern Taiwan," was held at 10 a.m. on April 10 at Ching-Sheng International Conference Hall. Katz explained that Eastern and Western societies have adopted different interpretive approaches and solutions when facing large-scale epidemics, and introduced Taiwan's various plague deity beliefs. He emphasized, "Good deeds bring good rewards, evil deeds bring retribution—faith serves as a spiritual comfort that can have a positive impact on people's hearts."

Katz, a scholar specializing in Taoism and folk religion, continuously explores new research areas. His academic work combines historical documents and field research findings. In this lecture, Katz cited the example of the 17th-century European plague, when society was overwhelmed with depression, isolation, and fear. To cope, religious rituals emerged as one of the community's key responses.

He explained that in the West, major disease outbreaks often led to the scapegoating of certain groups, with suffering rituals such as witch-burning becoming common. Meanwhile, in Chinese folk beliefs, large-scale epidemics were often attributed to plague gods poisoning wells. Thus, while the West turned to "witch hunts," the East focused more on attributing illness to supernatural causes.

Another focus was on "rituals of repentance." In the West, people practiced self-flagellation to seek forgiveness from God. In Taiwan, rituals such as the Wangye Worshipping Ceremony in Donggang involve processions and patrols to ensure the peace and safety of households. One particularly symbolic ritual is the "carrying of the cangue," where participants wear paper-made

shackles around their necks and carry incense burners, physically experiencing pain to pray for the recovery of sick family members. Katz concluded that these rituals mainly serve two functions: dealing with potential wandering spirits and resolving the social conflicts and tensions that could lead to spiritual unrest.

Looking across Taiwan's temples, almost all hold rituals aimed at "disaster mitigation and disaster removal," such as the Keelung Mid-Summer Ghost Festival and the Wanhua Qingshan King Procession. Katz pointed out that these ceremonies and festivals not only soothe people's hearts but also represent a force that cannot be ignored. Today, many such rituals have also become important aspects of local tourism development, attracting enthusiastic participation from the public. Katz remarked, "It's better to believe than to doubt. Speak good words and do good deeds—this is the greatest form of reverence toward spirits and gods."

Shu-Chi Chen, a senior student from the Department of History, shared that the lecture gave him a new and deeper understanding of Taiwan's religious rituals, especially finding the introduction to the Wangye Worshipping Ceremony in Donggang vivid and fascinating. "In the past, when visiting temples with my family, I simply followed the rituals without realizing the deeper meanings behind them," he reflected.

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