

Motivations of Pilgrims Participating in Religious Pilgrimage During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring the Connection Between Taiwan's Folk Beliefs and the Tourism Industry

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Abstract:

Taiwan's Mazu culture originated from the belief of Chinese immigrants in Mazu, the goddess of the sea. Passed down through religious traditions and inspired by this culture, Mazu pilgrimage celebrations are held in various regions. Among these, the Mazu procession in March has become the most iconic ceremony, with Dajia Zhenlan Temple serving as a benchmark. The grand Mazu procession held every March has grown into one of the world's three major religious events, recognized for its well-planned route and vast number of participants. In 2009, it was designated a World Intangible Cultural Heritage by the United Nations. This annual nine days and eight nights cross-county and cross-city procession not only generates significant tourism and economic benefits but also symbolizes the maritime cultural heritage passed down through generations of immigrants. In this context, Zhenlan Temple has carefully considered the future development of multi-religious processions. Dajia Zhenlan Temple hosts the Mazu procession every year. Effectively mobilizing organizational forces, planning the procession route, and managing the event as a whole have become very challenging tasks. Especially after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, the Dajia Mazu procession was successfully held with the support of government regulations, achieving a careful balance. This success was not only due to the faith and trust of the management team and pilgrims in Mazu, but also to the effective implementation of event management, which ensured the smooth completion of the entire procession. This study employs fieldwork methods and quantitative data, along with semi-structured interviews with relevant scholars, to explore how temples can effectively manage

pilgrimage activities during the COVID-19 crisis. Additionally, by analyzing statistical samples from questionnaires, we examine the perspectives, backgrounds, and motivations of both devotees participating in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage and tourists visiting the event. The aim is to understand the reasons and interactive relationships between devotees and tourists during the pandemic. Through this research, we also explore the core values of participants in the annual Mazu pilgrimage organized by Zhenlan Temple.

Keywords: Dajia Mazu, World Intangible Cultural Heritage, COVID-19, pilgrimage management

1. Introduction

Religious processions in Taiwan are a ritual associated with folk beliefs. In this ritual, devotees invite the deity's statue from the temple and place it on a ceremonial palanquin for a procession. This is seen as a symbolic visit of the deity to observe their domain, or "territory." During the procession, large numbers of devotees or pilgrims gather to participate, either by joining the procession or by burning incense and praying on the roadside. Dajia Zhenlan Temple worships Mazu, the sea goddess of Chinese folk religion. The deity's statue, which is Mazu, is placed on the palanquin and paraded, constituting the Mazu procession. Every year, Dajia Zhenlan Temple organizes the Mazu procession, which is the largest religious procession in Taiwan.

Mazu worship originated in 1123, when it was granted the "Shunji" temple title and became the main deity worshiped by the imperial court. After being revered by successive emperors of China, in 1738, Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty conferred the title of Queen of Heaven. She was deeply revered by coastal residents and gradually became the patron saint of the sea (Huang, 1990).

As a deity with far-reaching influence, Mazu embodies both the gentle image of a nurturing mother and the powerful ability to rescue those in distress and subdue evil spirits at sea. She has become a symbol of transformation and comfort for all living beings. In Confucianism, filial piety is held in the highest regard, emphasizing deep respect for one's parents. Taoism, meanwhile, venerates Mazu as a Taoist deity, acknowledging her ability to foresee people's fortunes and misfortunes through her divine power. In folk beliefs, Mazu appears as a goddess,

serving as a spokesperson for the gods and acting as a bridge between the divine and humans (Pan, 2020).

Most Han immigrants to Taiwan came from the coastal areas of Fujian, China, and brought with them the religious culture of Mazu, the sea goddess from their homeland. As our ancestors settled and developed the land, the construction of Mazu temples helped preserve and pass down this religious culture from generation to generation. In modern times, this faith has also become intertwined with the tourism industry. According to a report by the international media outlet Discovery, the Mazu pilgrimage ceremony in Dajia is recognized as one of the three major religious events in the world, alongside the Catholic Mass in Jerusalem and the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. Every March, the Dajia Mazu procession gathers between 1.3 and 2 million participants (see Figure 1), solidifying its status as a significant religious event. Dajia Mazu has become a symbol of local faith pilgrimages (Lin, 1988).(Lin, 2015) and a maritime cultural heritage passed down through generations.



Fig

In 2009, Mazu belief was listed as an "intangible cultural heritage of

humanity," and the annual nine days and eight nights itinerary generated a pilgrimage tourism economy valued at up to NT\$4 billion (Lin, 2015). The "scented oil money" donated by devotees amounts to approximately 560 million yuan, and these religious donations go directly to the temple. Thus, temple leaders are more easily invested in the procession and the management of Dajia Mazu, gradually fostering the development of Zhenlan Temple within this context (Chang, 2012). By 2017, the Mazu pilgrimage had evolved beyond a purely religious event. Participants came from diverse cultural and national backgrounds, and the meaning and nature of the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage had undergone significant changes from the past (Chen, 2017).

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, the Mazu pilgrimage event, which is usually held in March every year in Taiwan, faced a significant disruption. In June 2020, following government regulations, a smaller pilgrimage group of 800 people was formed by Dajia Zhenlan Temple. This group traveled through four counties and cities near Taichung, arriving at Fengtian Temple in Xingang Township, Chiayi County, before returning to Dajia Zhenlan Temple in Taichung. The entire route spanned 330 kilometers, passing through more than 100 temples, with mutual support and cooperation along the way (see Figure 2). Although the COVID-19 situation in Taiwan was relatively stable at the beginning of 2021, allowing the Mazu procession to attract 4 million pilgrims, another outbreak occurred in May 2021, which significantly impacted religious culture and tourism.

In light of this situation, several questions are worth exploring: Based on the experience of 2021, can effective epidemic prevention measures be implemented to successfully hold Mazu pilgrimage activities? How can the religious and cultural significance of the pilgrimage be enhanced to provide a source of stability for all people while also promoting the revitalization of tourism benefits? (Chang, 2021).

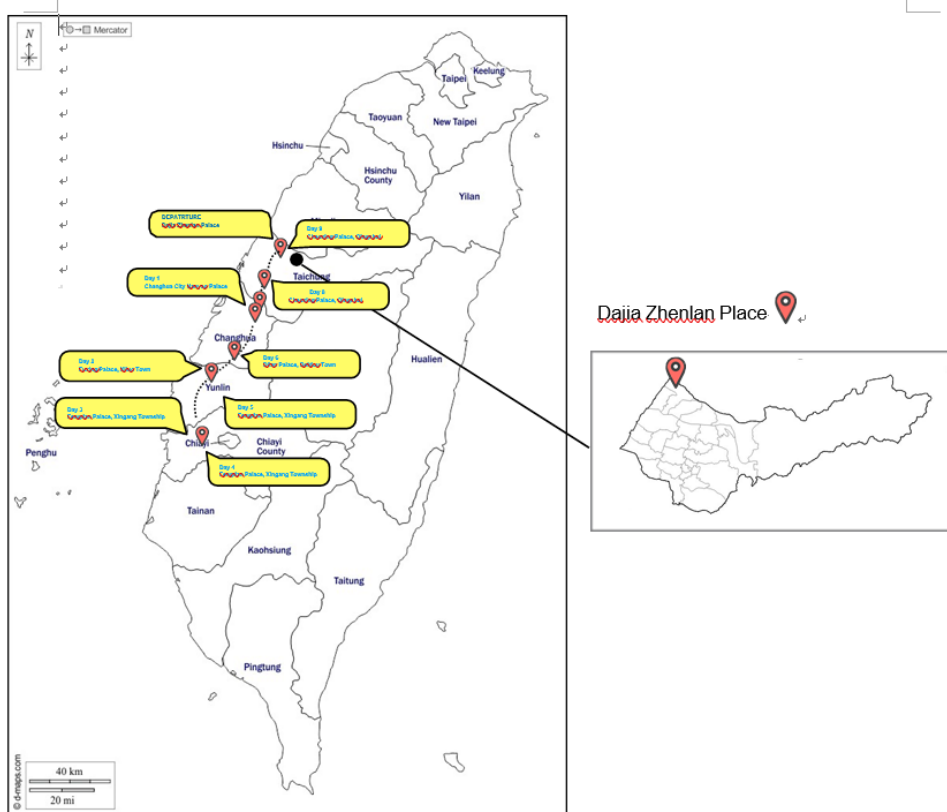


Figure 2. Map of Dajia District, Taichung, Taiwan (drawn by the author)

2. Literature review

Mazu culture has been deeply rooted in the Dajia area for hundreds of years. Dajia Zhenlan Temple was originally carried by villagers with the surname Lin, who brought the Mazu deity across the sea to Taiwan. Over time, it evolved from private worship into a public temple, becoming the central hub of local religious beliefs in the Dajia area (Chang, 2019), (see Figure 3). As the iconic temple of Mazu worship in Taiwan, Dajia Zhenlan Temple demonstrates significant religious influence. Mazu culture has millions of followers in Taiwan, with pilgrimage activities reaching their peak every March, highlighting its profound impact.



Figure 3. Dajia Zhenlan Temple Mazu (taken by the author)

As early as a hundred years ago, the Dajia Mazu procession began with a journey from Taichung's Dajia Zhenlan Temple to Chiayi's Beigang Chaotian Temple to offer respect, requesting incense as a ritual. Although the exact starting year is difficult to verify, records from April 8, 1914, show that Dajia's sacred palanquin requested incense (Chai, 2006), proving that the Mazu pilgrimage has a history of over a century. Taking Dajia Zhenlan Temple as an example, prior to 1988, devotees from Zhenlan Temple would annually, in March, bring incense burners to Beigang's Chaotian Temple, collect ashes from its incense burner, and bring them back to Zhenlan Temple. This act symbolized the connection between the incense ashes and the merging of the incense at Zhenlan Temple. After 1988, the procession route changed, with participants traveling to Fengtian Temple in Xingang to perform the Mazu pilgrimage ceremony (Chang, 2009).

To this day, the annual nine days and eight nights pilgrimage, or a ritual procession, is a time when devotees hope to receive Mazu's blessings and fulfill their wishes through this practice. This cultural asset encompasses the historical knowledge and rituals of various ethnic groups, with Mazu belief playing an extremely important role. Through the inheritance and practice of Mazu beliefs, people have not only preserved myths, legends, and religious rituals but also integrated these elements into daily life, forming a unique cultural identity and lifestyle. Internationally, similar folk culture to Dajia Mazu's procession is referred to as a pilgrimage (Chang et al., 2011).

The Dajia Mazu pilgrimage differs from traditional religious beliefs in that it is not only about seeking redemption and repentance but also represents a collaborative activity that integrates religious myths, geographical space, and local community participation. This has made the Dajia Mazu belief one of the most

vibrant cultural landscapes in central and southern Taiwan (Hou and Lee, 2014). The value of religious ceremonies lies in their ability to provide solace for participants while fostering a deeper understanding of the cultural context and significance of each region. These ceremonies reflect not only folk beliefs but also a combination of local culture, historical heritage, and lifestyle. They also witness the entire development of Taiwan's Mazu culture during the centennial pilgrimage of Dajia Mazu.

3. Sightseeing tour along the pilgrimage and intangible cultural heritage

In recent years, the Mazu pilgrimage culture has increasingly integrated into tourism, promoting local cultural tourism as an important regional feature, such as the "kneeling and crawling under the palanquin" in the Dajia Mazu procession (see Figure 4). Pilgrimages have made tourism-related activities an important feature of the region, combining religion with tourism. "Kneeling and crawling under the palanquin" is part of the pilgrimage ritual, where pilgrims pray to Mazu for protection, blessings, disaster relief, and good fortune. This belief not only has religious significance in practice but also contributes to cultural heritage. Ancient practices of spiritual therapy are also reflected in Mazu belief, regarded as one of China's traditional folk beliefs, and play a role in spiritual religious healing within Taoist thought. For example, during the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage, pilgrims can crawl under the palanquin and receive Mazu's powerful blessings, which bring good fortune. This folk belief not only integrates mythological stories but also meets religious needs, providing rich tourism opportunities around the procession area.



Figure 4. Kneeling and crawling under the Mazu palanquin (taken by the author)

The Dajia Mazu procession not only features rich parade formation culture, but also integrates modern internet technology. Through an online system that provides real-time updates on the location of the Mazu palanquin, devotees and tourists who cannot participate in person can track the palanquin's location at any time. This saves time and alleviates concerns about missing the procession and causing anxiety. To achieve this, Dajia Zhenlan Temple has equipped Mazu's palanquin with GPS receivers, digital cameras, and video recorders. Through the internet, it provides real-time location updates and live video of the palanquin, offering pilgrims, tourists, and viewers around the world the opportunity to watch the entire procession. Devotees may view Dajia Mazu as a brand, but the significance lies in leaving a profound impression through participation in the procession.

It is worth noting that the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage emphasizes the diverse contributions of intangible cultural heritage to human creativity. In June 2009, Taiwan's Mazu belief passed the qualification review by UNESCO and was officially listed as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This has made the Dajia Mazu culture an important representative of intangible cultural assets (Lin, 2015) and underscores the calming effect of religious power on the spirits of those participating in the procession. Religious tourism is a significant part of Taiwan's economy. Although the participants in the procession are diverse, the pursuit of spiritual relaxation remains a constant truth. Abroad, there is a special type of travel similar to the Dajia Mazu procession known as pilgrimage, involving preaching, following missionaries, seeking scriptures, and engaging in pilgrim activities, which are performed as "pilgrimage journeys" after leaving one's permanent residence (Chang et al., 2012).(Chang et al., 2011)

The core value of the Dajia Mazu procession primarily lies in the preservation of folk culture, with folk belief being its main purpose, followed by religious tourism. The impact of the Dajia Mazu procession not only promotes local tourism and generates substantial economic benefits (see Figure 5) but also addresses various psychological and physiological needs of the participants (Lai, 2017).



Figure 5. Shops on both sides of the Mazu procession (taken by the author)

4. Research methods

This study used a random sampling survey method to collect data during the 2022 Dajia Mazu procession. The questionnaire responses were then analyzed using SPSS statistical software to better understand the backgrounds and primary motivations of tourists and pilgrims participating in the pilgrimage.

4.1. Questionnaire design and sample collection

In order to design the questionnaire, in addition to collecting relevant data, we conducted on-site interviews at Taichung's Dajia Zhenlan Temple with people preparing to participate in the Mazu procession. This was done to understand why they continue to participate in this event despite the pandemic. After compiling the information, we developed the "Motivations for Participating in the Mazu Pilgrimage" questionnaire, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Questionnaire on the Motivations for Participating in the Mazu Pilgrimage

Item	Motivation content
1	I participate in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage because I saw the promotion information of the event.
2	The purpose of participating in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage during the pandemic is to worship the gods.
3	The purpose of participating in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage during the

Table 1. Questionnaire on the Motivations for Participating in the Mazu Pilgrimage

Item	Motivation content
	pandemic is for local sightseeing.
4	The reason for participating in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage during the pandemic is due to my family's religious beliefs.
5	Participating in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage during the pandemic makes me feel very moved.
6	I am very interested in religious activities.
7	During the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage, I believe that the wishes I pray for will come true.
8	When participating in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage, I will visit nearby tourist attractions.
9	When participating in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage, I will purchase specialty merchandise such as hats, T-shirts, figurines, etc.
10	After participating in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage, I would want to become a volunteer at the temple.
11	I participate in this annual celebration every year.
12	Participating in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage is to fulfill a vow.
13	I really enjoy lively and bustling celebration events.
14	I participate in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage celebrations every year because I am from Dajia.

Source: Compiled by this study.

The questionnaire uses a five-point Likert scale for scoring, with responses of "Strongly Disagree," "Disagree," "Neutral," "Agree," and "Strongly Agree" assigned scores of 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, respectively. A higher score indicates a stronger motivation for pilgrims to participate in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage, while a lower score indicates weaker motivation.

During the 2022 Dajia Mazu procession, the author, in collaboration with the temple organizing the procession, conducted on-site data collection using a random sampling survey method (see Figure 6). A total of 400 participants in the procession were selected, and the returned questionnaires were reviewed individually. After removing invalid questionnaires, 297 valid questionnaires were obtained.



Figure 6. Collecting Mazu Questionnaires(photos by the author)

4.2 Statistical Analysis

Using SPSS statistical software, we performed basic demographic analysis (see Table 2) and analyzed the motivational factors for pilgrims participating in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage.

4.2.1 Demographic analysis of pilgrims participating in Dajia Mazu pilgrimage

Table 2 shows that among the participants in the pilgrimage, an estimated 55.2% are female, while 44.8% are male. Most participants are over 20 years old, accounting for 96.3%, with those under 19 making up only 3.7%. Specifically, 18.9% are aged 20-29; 20.2% are aged 30-39; 25.6% are aged 40-49; 22.6% are aged 50-59; 8.1% are aged 60-69; and 1.0% are aged 70 and above. Regarding experience with the Mazu pilgrimage, 37.7% have participated only once; 15.2% have participated twice; 9.1% have participated three times; 7.7% have participated four times; and 30.3% have participated five or more times. In terms of religious belief, the majority are either Buddhist or Taoist, with Taoism being the most common at 50.2%, followed by Buddhism at 33.3%, other religions at 2.0%, and those with no religious belief at 14.5%. Concerning the number of years of devotion to Mazu, the largest group has been devoted for less than 10 years at 38.7%, followed by 10-20 years at 20.2%, 20-30 years at 17.8%, 30-40 years at 12.8%, and more than 50 years at 10.4%.

Table 2. Basic demographics of the survey sample

Demographic items	Sample size	Percentage
Gender		
Man	133	44.8
Woman	164	55.2
Age		
Under 19	11	3.7
20-29 years old	56	18.9
30-39 years old	60	20.2
40-49 years old	76	25.6
50-59 years old	67	22.6
60-69 years old	24	8.1
Over 70 years old	3	1.0
How many times have you participated in the Mazu birthday celebration this time?		
1st time	112	33.7
2nd time	45	15.2
3rd time	27	9.1
4th time	23	7.7
At least 5 times	90	30.3
What is your main religious belief?		
Buddhism	99	33.3
Taoism	149	50.2
other religions	6	2.0
no religious belief	43	14.5

4.3. Analysis of motivations of devotees participating in Dajia Mazu pilgrimage

The motivation analysis in this study uses factor analysis, with SPSS statistical software first calculating the communality of each item, as shown in Table 3.

Table3 Questionnaire item communality

Variables	Items	Communality
X1	1	0.440

Table3 Questionnaire item communality

Variables	Items	Communality
X2	2	0.680
X3	3	0.614
X4	4	0.571
X5	5	0.585
X6	6	0.624
X7	7	0.446
X8	8	0.569
X9	9	0.604
X10	10	0.566
X11	11	0.621
X12	12	0.552
X13	13	0.446
X14	14	0.667

Items with low communality (usually below 0.5) in Table 3, specifically X₁, X₇ and X₁₃, were removed. The remaining 11 items were subjected to factor analysis again, yielding a KMO value of 0.758, and the significance of Bartlett's test was p=0.000. Generally, a KMO value of at least 0.5, or when the significance of Bartlett test is less than 0.005, indicates that the collected sample is suitable for factor analysis. Using the varimax rotation method and selecting factor loadings greater than 0.5, four factors (F₁, F₂, F₃, F₄) were extracted, corresponding to four new motivational combination variables. These four new variables explained 64.513% of the variance, which is typically considered acceptable when it exceeds 50%. The new variable F₁ is the linear combination of items 2, 5, 4, and 6, each multiplied by its factor loading. These four items all fall under the category of "religious belief," thus motivation 1 (i.e., F₁) is named "Religious Belief." The new variable F₂ is the linear combination of items 9, 10, and 11, each multiplied by its factor loading. These three items fall under the category of "proximity to Mazu," so motivation 2 (i.e., F₂) is named "Proximity to Mazu." The new variable F₃ is the linear combination of items 14 and 12, each multiplied by its factor loading. These two items fall under the category of "fulfilling vows nearby," thus motivation 3 (i.e., F₃) is named "Fulfilling Vows Nearby." The new variable F₄ is the linear combination of items 3 and 8, each multiplied by its factor loading. These two items fall under the category of

"religious tourism," so motivation 4 (i.e., F₄) is named "Religious Tourism" (see Table 4). The strength of these four motivations, in order, are "Religious Belief," "Proximity to Mazu," "Fulfilling Vows Nearby," and "Religious Tourism." The first three motivations represent expressions of Taiwan's folk beliefs, while the fourth motivation, "Religious Tourism," attracts people who enjoy lively events and sightseeing to participate in the pilgrimage.

Table 4. Analysis results of the motivational factors for pilgrims participating in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage

Factor	Variable	Factor Loading	Variable Content	Factor Attributes
F ₁	X ₂	0.798	The purpose of participating in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage during the pandemic is to worship the gods.	Religious Beliefs
	X ₅	0.717	Participating in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage during the pandemic makes me feel very moved.	
	X ₄	0.676	The reason for participating in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage during the pandemic is due to my family's religious beliefs.	
	X ₆	0.539	I am very interested in religious activities.	
F ₂	X ₉	0.803	When participating in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage, I will purchase specialty merchandise such as hats, T-shirts, figurines, etc.	Proximity to Mazu
	X ₁₀	0.698	After participating in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage, I would want to become a volunteer at the temple.	
	X ₁₁	0.552	I participate in this annual celebration every year.	
F ₃	X ₁₄	0.763	I participate in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage celebrations every year because I am from Dajia.	Fulfilling Vows Nearby
	X ₁₂	0.642	Participating in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage is to fulfill a vow.	
F ₄	X ₃	0.793	The purpose of participating in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage during the pandemic is for local sightseeing.	Religious Tourism

Table 4. Analysis results of the motivational factors for pilgrims participating in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage

Factor	Variable	Factor Loading	Variable Content	Factor Attributes
	X ₈	0.723	When participating in the Dajia Mazu pilgrimage, I will visit nearby tourist attractions.	

Source: Compiled by this study.

5. Conclusion

Religious rituals play a crucial role in providing individuals with peace of mind and important guidance during the pandemic. In ancient times, rulers and gentry confronted plagues by offering sacrifices to heaven, praying for blessings, and embarking on religious pilgrimages to appease the people and provide physical, mental, and spiritual comfort. However, modern governments have classified religious activities as cultural affairs in their anti-epidemic measures, causing traditional religions to face various challenges surrounding these pilgrimages. Devotees of the Mazu pilgrimage traverse four counties and cities every year, eventually arriving at Fengtian Temple in Xingang, Chiayi, establishing a connection through these religious journeys. This is not only a spiritual endeavor but also a demonstration of steadfast Mazu devotion. Every devotee has personal feelings and stories about Mazu. This transcends business opportunities and is a sincere expression of faith.

The pandemic has spurred the rise of online worship, reducing the risk of physical contact and providing a religious experience in the virtual world. However, while this method ensures safety, it lacks the emotional impact of the actual pilgrimage and its associated economic benefits. As a result, the traditional Dajia Mazu procession is facing economic challenges. Although the Taiwanese government successfully controlled the pandemic through scientific and political measures, it simultaneously led to a spiritual void in religious faith. Traditional religious activities like the Dajia Mazu procession were strictly regulated, causing a loss of pilgrims and tourists, halting religious events, and even relegating basic practices such as incense burning and deity worship to temple staff.

After the pandemic restrictions were lifted, careful consideration should be given to how religious activities, particularly large-scale religious processions, are managed. Balancing public health with preserving space for religious faith is a

delicate issue that requires attention. Folk beliefs and culture demonstrated remarkable resilience amidst the challenges of the pandemic era. The Dajia Mazu procession, as a fusion of religious faith and cultural tradition, showcased its unique value during these times. Therefore, while respecting freedom of belief, it is essential to think about how to protect and develop this precious cultural asset safely. Additionally, alongside large-scale religious processions, the development of the tourism industry is another significant topic to consider.

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