

Modernity, Memory, and Local Religion in Taiwanese Children's Literature

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Abstract

Modernity and memory are often in tension, and religion is one site where this tension manifests: Gods, temples, and shrines are places that capture memory and local history, but modernization can mean re-interpreting old traditions, leaving them behind, or even destroying them. Here, children can play an ambivalent role: they are often seen as representing the future, yet they are also the recipients of memories, both cultural and personal. My paper will examine how Taiwanese children's literature about gods addresses both modernity and memory, and gives children a role in negotiating between them. In particular, I will look at two early readers about the Earth God (*tudi gong* 土地公). Earth Gods are charged with protecting their respective communities, and due to their closely association with a particular locality, they have a special kind of familiarity and approachability. Yet because they are so local, they are more likely to be displaced by development projects undertaken in the interest of modernization—but also because they are so local, Earth God shrines or temples are important places for the circulation and transmission of community memory. In both of the early readers that I will discuss in this paper, the main character is a young boy who plays a key role in helping the Earth God find a place in a changing community. In *The Last Earth God* (Zuihou yiming tudi gong 最後一名土地公, 2011), technology represents modernization, as the young boy sets up a website for the god and attempts to teach him how to interact in new ways. In *Grandpa Earth God Wants to Go Home* (Tudi gonggong yao huijia 土地公公要回家, 2016), a little boy serves as a conduit for the Earth God, prompting his community to remember its past—one that had been literally erased by a development project. Looking beyond these two examples, I will argue that children serve as mediators—between the past and the future, and between memory and modernity—in children's literature about local gods.