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DIVINE CONSULTATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN TAIWAN:  
THE PRACTICE OF INVOLVING GODS IN BUSINESS DECISION-MAKING AND  
MANAGEMENT

Master Thesis

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I have written this Master Thesis independently. Any ideas or data taken from other authors or other sources have been fully referenced.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anne Nestor', written in a cursive style.

Anne Nestor

16.01.2024

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## Introduction

Religion significantly impacts the daily life of Taiwanese residents (Qu, 2006; Yang & Hu, 2012; Hu, A., 2014). With countless temples in every corner of the country and numerous religious festivals held throughout the year, the influence of religion on individuals is hard to miss. Even for curious visitors to the island, the role of religion in different aspects of life becomes apparent soon after settling. Lighting up incense and making offerings in temples are just a tiny fragment of the vast puzzle of the religious landscape in Taiwan.

During my field trip to Taiwan, I embarked on a journey of discovering the influence of supernatural beings on people's lives. I visited temples across Taipei, Yunlin, Taichung, and Kaohsiung, and participated in several religious festivals. Through visits to religious events and sites, as well as conversations with locals, I noticed that supernatural beings such as gods and ghosts could play a significant role in people's decision-making and influence their actions and choices.

During my stay in Taiwan, I was struck by the deep-rooted beliefs in supernatural beings that permeated both personal and professional spheres. It was fascinating to see how even the slightest association with ghosts or gods could influence significant decisions, such as the sale of land or the pricing of apartments. I came across some intriguing stories, such as that of a student who dropped out of school due to being possessed by a ghost while on campus. Ghost stories were a common feature of university campuses, and some students took them quite seriously, often following the warnings that came with them.

During my visits to temples, I observed people using moon blocks, popular divination tools, to communicate and ask for advice from their gods. One person I met during my pilgrimage for the folk goddess Mazu had been instructed by the goddess herself to participate based on the results of the moon blocks.

The stories I heard provided an intriguing insight into the role of beliefs in Taiwan's contemporary social and economic environment. I was particularly interested in the stories of businesspeople who sought guidance from the gods, such as the businessman who found tremendous success in his business after worshiping the gods in a temple in Taipei's suburbs. The interest in understanding more about the involvement of gods in business decisions and management is especially relevant in Taiwan, where small businesses are so prevalent, with one out of every eight adults owning a small business (Weller, 2000), making it the country with the highest business density (Yu, 2012).

Taiwan's economic success story in the latter half of the 20th century is widely known. Next to the state interventionism and external financial help (Long, 1991), recent

studies have shown that private enterprise, rather than government policy, was the primary driver of Taiwan's rapid economic development (Dollar & Solokoff, 1994; Wang, 1994). In particular, small-scale entrepreneurs have been the driving force behind the island's economic growth (Weller, 2000). Taiwan is sometimes referred to as the "Boss Island", due to the significant role played by business owners in the country's export-oriented industrialization and development (Shieh, 1992, as cited in Yu, 2012, p. 2). Taiwanese people have a saying, "better to be a chicken's beak than a bull's behind," indicating their preference for being their own boss (Weller, 2000, p. 480).

Taiwan is not only densely populated with businesses but also with temples. According to official statistics, there are 14,993 registered places of worship in the country, with one temple per 2.3 square kilometres. Influenced by Chinese culture and religion, Taiwanese folk religion believers consider gods, ghosts, Buddha, and ancestors powerful and efficacious, capable of influencing human beings' destiny and everyday life. (Wu & Liu, 2014)

Seeking help from worshiping gods and ancestors or attending temple festivals is usual religious practice in Taiwan. Nearly 90% of the island's population are folk religion adherents (Yang & Hu, 2012). However, when it comes to defining and categorising folk religion, researchers have faced complexities. While some individuals practise folk beliefs, identifying the number of adherents can be challenging due to the overlap and change of the practices over time, making it difficult to make clear distinctions. The concept of vernacular religion, as a new methodological approach to the study of lived religion, would, therefore, be highly applicable to the study of religion in Taiwan.

In Taiwan, supernatural beings are widely believed to exist and have a noticeable presence in people's everyday lives. By examining how individuals encounter, understand, and interpret these gods and the practices associated with them, we can gain valuable insights into the overlap and divergence between existing theories and vernacular beliefs. To understand this in more detail, I have chosen to explore the involvement of gods in business decisions and management. This is relevant for two reasons. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, the density of business owners on the island is very high, and small businesses play a crucial role in the island's economy. Secondly, economic importance and cooperation are some of the significant factors that allow Taiwan to establish and maintain friendships in the global arena. Only 13 countries recognize Taiwan as a sovereign country with an official embassy (Diplomatic Alliances, n.d.). In comparison, 59 countries host unofficial offices under various names (Countries that Recognize Taiwan 2024, n.d.), such as the Taipei Mission or the Taipei

Economic and Cultural Representative Office, focusing on strengthening economic and cultural cooperation. Recently, there was news about opening a Taipei office in Estonia at the time of writing this thesis. Therefore, insight into the cultural-religious practices and the narratives of involving gods in Taiwan's business decisions and management is more relevant than ever.

The purpose of this thesis is to gain a deeper understanding of the following topics and questions:

- beliefs about supernatural beings and gods in Taiwan,
- communication with supernatural beings and gods,
- involving gods in business decisions and management,
- what are the motives and interpretations of involving gods in business decisions and management, and
- what are the practices of involving gods in business decisions and management?

Investigation of these themes leads to the deeper understanding of the Taiwanese cultural environment, significant for various spheres of the society, relations and business decision-making. This thesis is structured as follows: introduction, literature review, methods, collected data, results and discussion, and conclusion.

Data for the research was collected through interviews and questionnaires. Ten interviews were conducted in Taiwan between February and March 2023 to gather information on the interviewees' opinions regarding gods, ancestors, and ghosts and their role in everyday life. It was a pleasant surprise to discover that the interviewees were highly motivated to share their thoughts on the selected topic. They found it "very interesting" and even "cool" what I was researching. Their enthusiasm was encouraging, and I realised that reflecting on this topic was meaningful for the local people as well. The focus of the study was later narrowed down to divine assistance in business decisions and management. In addition, questionnaires were collected in October and November 2023 to obtain further insights.

The data was analysed using a combination of theories and methods, including methods of ethnographic research, theories of folkloristics and social anthropology, and social sciences approaches. The study found that the involvement of gods in business decisions-making and management is a popular and widespread practice.

Keywords: Taiwan, vernacular religion, supernatural beings, folk beliefs, divination, business  
CERCS: H400 Folklore

### **1. Taiwan's Religious Background**

Taiwan is an island with a rich history. It is primarily inhabited by descendants of Han Chinese who migrated from Mainland China between the 17th and 19th centuries (Heylen, 2016). These migrants brought the Three Teachings prevalent in China during that era: Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and folk religion.

As per Clart and Jones (2003), Taiwan has been a conducive environment for religious change. Although Taiwanese religious practice has been challenged several times throughout history, the Three Teachings and folk religion have been preserved on the island. These religions have undergone constant change but remain vibrant to this day (Clart & Jones, 2003). However, the situation has not always been like this. During the beginning of the 20th century, the Japanese occupation and the martial law after 1945 didn't support local religious practices, or only did it selectively. For instance, Japanese colonial rule led to the destruction of local temples as they became gathering places for people, leading to riots (Habirirk, 2011).

When Taiwan became part of the Republic of China after World War II, religious activities were again allowed for Taiwanese people. However, most mainland Chinese officials considered Taiwanese religious customs to be "the superstition of the uncivilised". During the martial law imposed by the Guomindang, attempts were made to modernise the island by reviving Confucian values. This restrained the development of Buddhism and Taoism. At the same time, they tried to eradicate what was considered superstition from society. However, despite the repression, Buddhism, Taoism, and folk religion have strengthened since the 1960s. Modernization has not significantly affected traditional religious customs in Taiwan, and many have remained the same until now. (Habirirk, 2011)

When visiting a temple in Taiwan, one might come across a diverse and extensive list of gods, making distinguishing between different religions difficult. In other words, there is a blend of gods and religions in Taiwan. Today, folk religion in Taiwan is diverse and vibrant (Hu & Yang, 2014), with a significant portion of the population adhering to it. According to Yang and Hu (2012), 16 million adults in Taiwan, representing 87.9 percent of Religious Experience Survey of Taiwan (REST) 2009 respondents, worship ancestors and local gods.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Religious Studies in Taiwan

When Western missionaries and scholars first became interested in Chinese religion, they primarily focused on studying Confucianism. They considered Chinese religion to be a combination of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. The common people's ritual practices were disregarded, and their belief in supernatural phenomena was seen as mere superstition. In the early 20th century, some European sinologists began to pay attention to the religious practices of the common people, which were referred to as folk religion. (Yang & Hu, 2012)

Many studies have concluded that drawing a line between elite and folk religions is not possible. Attempts to define a unified "Chinese religion" that would include both folk and elite religions appeared in academia in the 1980s. However, many scholars dismissed this idea as it was difficult to determine the core of "Chinese religion." Consequently, the idea of a unified "Chinese religion" did not last long. (Yang & Hu, 2012) C.K. Yang's book "Religion in Chinese Society" (1961) argues that Chinese society is permeated by religion, to be more specific, by "diffused religion." Chinese scholar Fan Lizhu translated "diffused religion" as *fensanxing zongjiao* or *mimanxing zongjiao*, which is like "formless fog pervading social life" (Zheng et al. 2011, as cited in Yang & Hu, 2012, p. 508)

The "formless fog" has pervaded social life in Taiwan as well, with their religions, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and folk religion, having roots in Mainland China. Before the mid-1980s, Taiwan was mainly considered a destination for studying "Chinese culture" or "Chinese society" due to the political situation and the KMT ruling party's discouragement of calling the research "Taiwan studies" (Jones, 1999).

However, in present day, religious studies in Taiwan are thriving, with Taiwanese intellectuals increasingly embracing local traditions. In 1999, the Taiwan Association of Religious Studies was established, which organises monthly seminars and lectures. Religion has emerged as one of the sources of Taiwanese identity (Weller, 2013; Frettingham & Hwang, 2017). The terms "local religion" and "Taiwanese religion" have emerged alongside the term "Chinese religion."

According to Paul. R. Katz (2003), the majority of research in Taiwan has been conducted on new religions, lay Buddhist movements, and sectarian religions. Katz himself has written on the complex relationship between the state and religious traditions (Katz, 2003), the theme that has also been discussed by Cheng-tian Kuo (2009, 2013), André

Laliberté (2009), and Robert P. Weller (2000). The topics of identity and religion have been studied by Robert P. Weller (2020), Paul R. Katz (2003), and Steven Sangren (2003), reflecting the present-time discourse on Taiwanese identity.

The influence of folk religion in Taiwanese society is extensive and has inspired numerous studies both among local and foreign researchers. Folklorist Alan Dundes once noted that most published work about folklore is purely descriptive in nature (Dundes, 1980). Similar descriptive studies have also been conducted on Taiwan, e. g. "The Ranking of Gods in Chinese Folk Religion" (1977) by Philip C. Baity, "Taiwanese Architecture and the Supernatural" (1974) by Wang Sung-hsing and "Domestic and communal worship in Taiwan" by Stephan Feuchtwang. Researchers conducting fieldwork in Taiwan often settled down in a village to conduct their studies.

Pilgrimage sites and attendees have been another subject of interest for researchers in Taiwan. Mazu, the folk goddess, is one of the most popular goddesses in Taiwan, and Dajia Mazu pilgrimage is one of the three major religious events worldwide (Lin et al., 2020). The Mazu pilgrimage has been the subject of many studies, such as researching the motivation of pilgrims to attend the religious festival and the pilgrimage as a tourism event (Lee et al., 2015; Shuo et al., 2009), perceived authenticity and pilgrimage image (Huang & Lin, 2023), developing a pilgrimage tourist experience scale (Chang et al., 2020), identities of the pilgrimage (Lu, 2005), and the impact of the pilgrimage experience on happiness (Liu et al., 2023). These are quantitative studies conducted among the pilgrimage attendees during pilgrimages. Additionally, qualitative as well as quantitative studies have been conducted on religious coping methods of folk religious believers (Liu, 2014; Wu & Liu, 2014).

Many studies on Taiwanese folk religion rely on the Taiwan Social Change Survey conducted by Academia Sinica. The survey has been regularly conducted since 1980, after the lifting of martial law, with the objective of gathering data on social changes in Taiwan, including religious beliefs. The results of this survey have been utilised in hundreds of research papers and theses. (Fu & Chang, 2023)

## **2.2 Defining Folk Religion in Taiwan**

It is challenging to define Taiwanese folk religion. What most scholars agree on is that it is a combination of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and indigenous beliefs. As H. Chen (1995) pointed out: "There is no definition of Taiwanese folk religion so far, and every

work of folk religion points out the same thing - the great difficulty in defining Taiwanese Folk religion". (Chen, 1995, pp. 24-25)

According to Yang and Hu (2012), measuring the number of people who follow folk religion in Taiwan is complicated. Some individuals practise folk beliefs or worship local gods without identifying as folk religion followers. The criteria used to identify folk religion adherents in their study were to consider people who do not identify with any religion but still believe in gods to be adherents of folk religion. (Yang & Hu, 2012)

In Taiwanese folk religion, seeking help from ritual activities is quite popular among followers. These activities include worshipping ancestors and deified figures such as Mazu (the Holy Mother of the Sea) and Guandi (the God of War), as well as nature gods like earth god and tree god. Attending temple festivals and shamanistic rituals are also common practices (Wu & Liu, 2014). According to Lin (2012), all of these activities are very popular among Taiwanese folk religion devotees (as cited in Wu & Liu, 2014).

Stevan Harrell (1977) asked, "What do the "believers" in a primitive or a folk religion really believe?". He undertook a study where 66 interviews with residents of a Taiwanese village were conducted to answer this question. The findings revealed that people's beliefs could be categorised into four modes: "intellectual believers," who form their beliefs based on intellectual coherence; "true believers," who accept everything without questioning; "practical believers", who evaluate religious tenets based on evidence, and "non-believers", who disregard the relevance of folk religion. His findings had implications for the anthropological debate on "the new intellectualism," suggesting that both the intellectualist position, stating that religious tenets are to be taken literally, and anti-intellectualism positions, stating that religion is just a metaphor for something, oversimplify people's beliefs by not accounting for individual variations.

In order to map folk religion, it is essential to define or classify it (Yang & Hu, 2012). Three categories are used to categorise religion: communal, sectarian, and individual. This classification has been discussed by several authors, including Yoder (1974), Hu (2014), and Hu and Yang (2014). Communal folk religion is based on beliefs and practices in the local community, while sectarian folk religion has a structured organisation that extends beyond the local community. On the other hand, individual folk religion involves supernatural beliefs and practices that are not associated with any particular group. In practice, these categories can overlap and change over time, making it difficult to make clear distinctions between them. (Hu & Yang, 2014).

The challenge of defining and categorising folk religion leads me to discuss new methodological approaches to the study of lived religion. In the following chapter, I will explore the concept of vernacular religion, which is highly applicable to the study of religion in Taiwan.

## **2.2. From Folk Religion to Vernacular Religion**

The concept of folk religion originated in the eighteenth century when Christian clergy criticised what they perceived as "superstitious" folk beliefs during their sermons and in their periodicals (Yoder, 1974). Since then, advanced religions have opposed folk beliefs, often seen as primitive survivals (Bowman & Valk, 2014). Trying to overcome the negative connotation of "folk," Don Yoder (1974) suggests that instead of "folk religion," terms like "tribal" or "national" religion might be more appropriate. He explained that the term "folk religion" itself can be difficult to define for several reasons. Some people associate the word "religion" with organised and official religious institutions of culture. Additionally, the term "folk religion" is often used in contrast to the concept of "universal religion" and is also associated with the word "superstition." (Yoder, 1974)

As a response to the conflict between "official" and "folk" religion, Leonard Primiano (1995) introduced the term "vernacular religion." Primiano (1995) criticised the scholars in the discipline for using the terms "folk," "unofficial," or "popular" religion in a pejorative way to describe the religious beliefs of common people and the subsequent juxtaposition of these terms with "official" religion. Scholars have the power and privilege to name and influence how readers perceive a given subject and should use this power responsibly. (Primiano, 1995)

Primiano's "vernacular religion" was not just a replacement for the term "folk" to eliminate negative connotations. Instead, it served as a "methodological tool for studying the conjunction of religion, folklore, and folklife studies." (Primiano, 1995, p. 42). He stressed the importance of studying religion as it is lived in daily life, "vernacular religion is, by definition, religion as it is lived: as human being encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it." (Primiano, 1995, p. 44)

Although the concept of vernacular religion has not been a widespread methodological approach in the study of religion in Taiwan so far, it is well-suited for the religious landscape of the island. Due to difficulties in defining and distinguishing between religions in Taiwan, and even categorising within folk religion itself, it is more important to

focus on the religion as it is understood, interpreted, and practised (Primiano, 1995) by the local people. This thesis aims to do just that.

### **3. Methodology**

The research used various data collection techniques, such as face-to-face interviews and distribution of online questionnaires. During the data collection process, the contemporary regulations elaborated by international organisations governing ethics in the fields of social sciences and humanities were adhered to, such as the "Ethics in Social Science and Humanities" guideline paper of 2018, the American Folklore Society's "Position Statement on Research with Human Subjects" of 2011, and the American Anthropological Association's "Statement on Race" of 1998. In the thesis, all fieldwork materials quoted are transcripts of the original audio recordings of interviews in English or written responses to the questionnaire conducted in Chinese and later translated. The interviewees and questionnaire respondents were informed about the data collection and research objectives. In rare cases where interviewees were willing to talk but did not agree to the publication of their speech, I avoided quotations and referred only to a general topic or a particular motif. To respect privacy and ensure interviewees' safety and social comfort, all quoted materials are accompanied by fake initials.

The study utilised the concept of vernacular religion, belief narratives, and social anthropology approaches to explore the discursive and ritual practices associated with the theme of divine support in business decision-making. Initially, interviews were conducted with participants to gain insights into their beliefs and practices related to gods, ancestors, and ghosts. Subsequently, the collected data was analysed, and based on the observations and interview materials, a questionnaire was developed to delve deeper into one of the themes that emerged during the interviews - the involvement of gods in business decisions and management. The questionnaires were distributed to gather additional data on this particular theme. The inclusion of questionnaires as a research method aided in understanding the prevalence of this phenomenon, engaging more participants in the study despite language barriers, and receiving more responses within the given time frame.

This chapter will provide a detailed overview of the research design and methodology used to answer the research questions that were introduced earlier in the Introduction section.

#### **3.1 Interviews**

The interviews were conducted with the aim of gaining valuable insights into the role of supernatural beings, such as gods and ghosts, in the lives of people and their impact on the socio-economic context of Taiwan. The interviewees, including businesspeople and

consumers, could share their knowledge and experiences on how gods and ghosts affect buying or selling things. A list of questions was prepared to ensure a comprehensive understanding, and follow-up questions were added to explore the participants' responses further. The confidentiality of the interviewees' responses was maintained, and their consent was obtained to record their responses, which would later be transcribed for research purposes.

The interviews started with questions about the terminology and definitions of gods, ancestors, and ghosts and their role in the interviewees' lives. Businesspeople were asked about the influence of gods and ghosts in their business, while consumers were asked about their experiences with gods and ghosts influencing their buying decisions.

The best way to gather information on this subject was by encouraging the interviewees to share their personal or other people's experiences. The stories and narratives involving gods in business were used as the basis for designing survey questions. This approach helped to provide a better understanding of the impact of supernatural beings on everyday life and the socio-economic context of Taiwan and guided the next research step.

### **3.2 Questionnaire**

Following the analysis of interviews, a questionnaire was developed to investigate the topic of involving gods in business decisions and management in greater detail. The questionnaire aimed to gather more data on the motivations, benefits, and practices associated with involving gods in business decisions and management. All the questions were formulated to cover these themes, and the questionnaire was designed to collect data directly related to the research questions. Discursive and comparative analyses were applied to interpret the collected data content.

Most questions in the questionnaire were designed based on the interview materials. These questions inquired about:

- the specific areas of life where advice from gods is sought,
- the aspects of business decision-making and management where advice from gods is sought,
- the methods or practices used to seek advice or help from gods,
- whether or not consulting with a gods affects the final decision in business and
- whether individuals have ever experienced success after consulting gods.

The section on emotional experience was based on the findings of Laros and Steenkamp (2005), also used by Lee, Fu, and Chang (2015) to research the emotional

experiences of attendees at Taiwan's religious festivals. The section on motivations for involving gods in business decisions and management was developed using information from previous fieldwork, interview materials, comments from Taiwanese scholar of religious studies and a Taiwanese religious practitioner, and the idea that two different aspects of morality could motivate religiosity: personal and social morality (Gorsuch et al., 1997).

The questionnaire included demographic variables such as age, gender, education level, type of business, monthly income, and residential area. The questions about respondents' residential areas were taken from the Taiwan Social Change Survey<sup>1</sup>. For the complete version of the questionnaire, please refer to Appendix B.

Upon completion of the questionnaire, it was translated into Chinese and sent for review. The review process involved the contribution of three experts, including a religious Taiwanese, a non-religious Taiwanese, and a scholar of religious studies from Taiwan. The aim was to ensure that the questions and measurements were relevant and unambiguous within the cultural context of Taiwan. The experts provided constructive feedback, which was used to make changes to the questionnaire and ensure its cultural sensitivity and appropriateness.

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<sup>1</sup> More information and questionnaires of Taiwan Social Change Survey are accessible on: <https://www2.ios.sinica.edu.tw/sc/cht/scDownload2.php#eighth>

#### 4. Collected Data

The following data was collected from February to November 2023:

- 10 semi-structured interviews and
- 34 responses to the questionnaire.

##### 4.1 Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in February and March 2023 with participants residing in Taipei and Yunlin, Taiwan. Nine interviews were done in person, while one was via video call from Estonia to Taiwan.

The face-to-face interviews were conducted in various settings, including public areas such as parks and coffee shops, as well as private settings like the interviewee's home and workplace. Eight of the ten interviews were conducted in English, while two were done in Chinese with the aid of a translator. Although choosing informants with whom I could only communicate through a translator was not the first choice, it was necessary due to the limited availability of English-speaking interviewees.

The interviewees' age range was between 21 and 64, with four men and six women. Half of the participants belonged to the "Business" category, indicating that they are freelancers or run their own businesses (marked as "Business" in Table 1), including food businesses in Yunlin and Taipei, as well as construction, music, and trade businesses. I also interviewed individuals from non-business fields such as psychology, university employees, and students. The broad sample allowed me to gain insights into how people of different ages, genders, and living locations perceive supernatural beings.

Table 1

##### *List of interview participants*

Respondent	Residence	Gender	Age	Length	Date	Business
N. H.	Taipei	Male	39	1:08:51	18.02.2023	
C. C.	Taipei	Female	47	1:05:25	13.02.2023	
Y. Y.	Taipei	Male	39	44:48	23.02.2023	
L. H.	Taipei	Female	21	58:53	20.02.2023	
L. C.	Yunlin	Male	30	1:08:49	7.03.2023	Business
S. Z.	Yunlin	Female	37	41:38	10.03.2023	Business

I. Y.	Taipei	Female	33	1:15:40	25.02.2023	
L. B.	Yunlin	Female	64	58:56	9.03.2023	Business
D. F.	Yunlin	Male	59	53:50	29.03.2023	Business
C. S.	Taipei	Female	47	26:49	13.02.2023	Business

Source: Compiled by the author

#### 4.2. Questionnaires

Between October and November of 2023, a total of 34 people responded to a questionnaire that was conducted online using Google Forms. The participants were recruited using a snowball sampling technique. Out of these respondents, 35.3% were aged between 51 and 60, with the majority being female (64.7%) and the rest being male (35.3%). In terms of education, 32.4% had completed high school, 32.4% had completed university, and 29.4% had a higher level of education than university. More than half of the respondents (52.9%) had a monthly income of less than 50,000 NTD, and most of them (44.1%) considered themselves to be from a big city or suburban area near a big city.

The majority of the respondents (81.8%) sought advice from gods. The demographic data of those participants has been summarised in Chart 1, including gender, age group, education level, income, and place of residency. All of them had senior high school education and above.

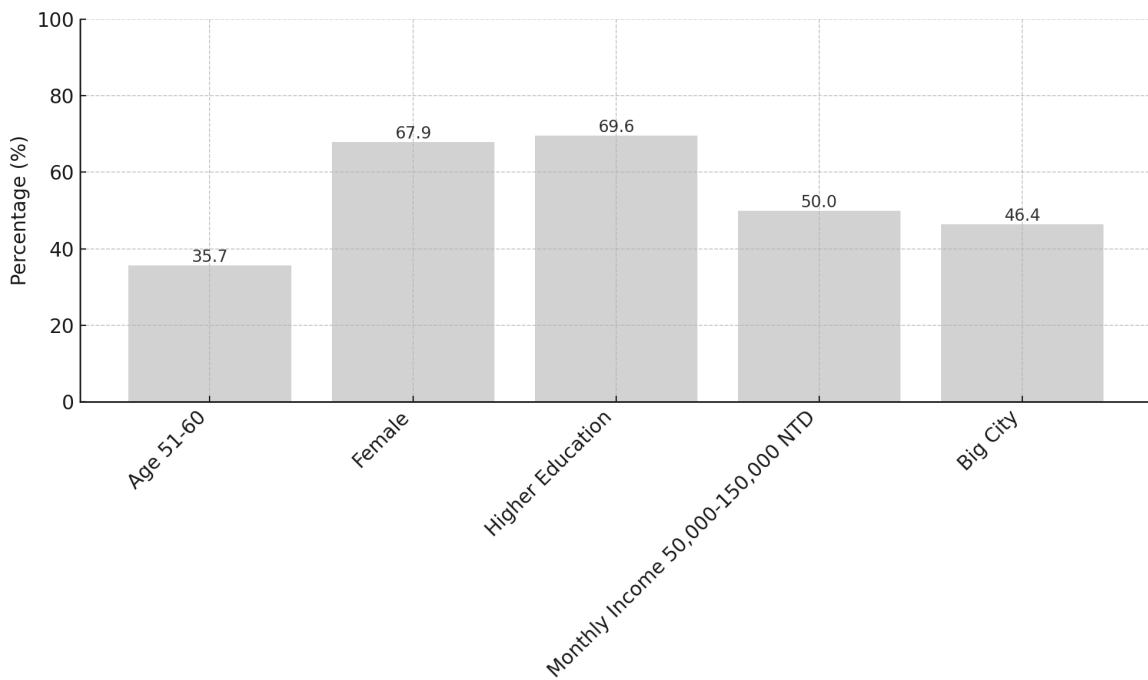
The remaining 18.2% of the respondents who did not consult with gods were a diverse group. They included people from big cities and small villages, both males and females in equal numbers, and those with varying educational backgrounds, including junior high school graduates and those with higher education.

The participants who sought advice for business matters comprised 67.9% of the total respondents. They worked in various industries such as construction, manufacturing, biotechnology, education, medicine, gift industry, clothing, art, export, Buddhist supply store, hospitality, consultancy, and catering. Chart 2 presents the demographic data of only those who sought divine assistance in their business decisions and management.

Although the questionnaire responses provide specific data on people involving gods in various aspects of life, including business decisions and management, the sample size is too small to make generalisations.

Chart 1

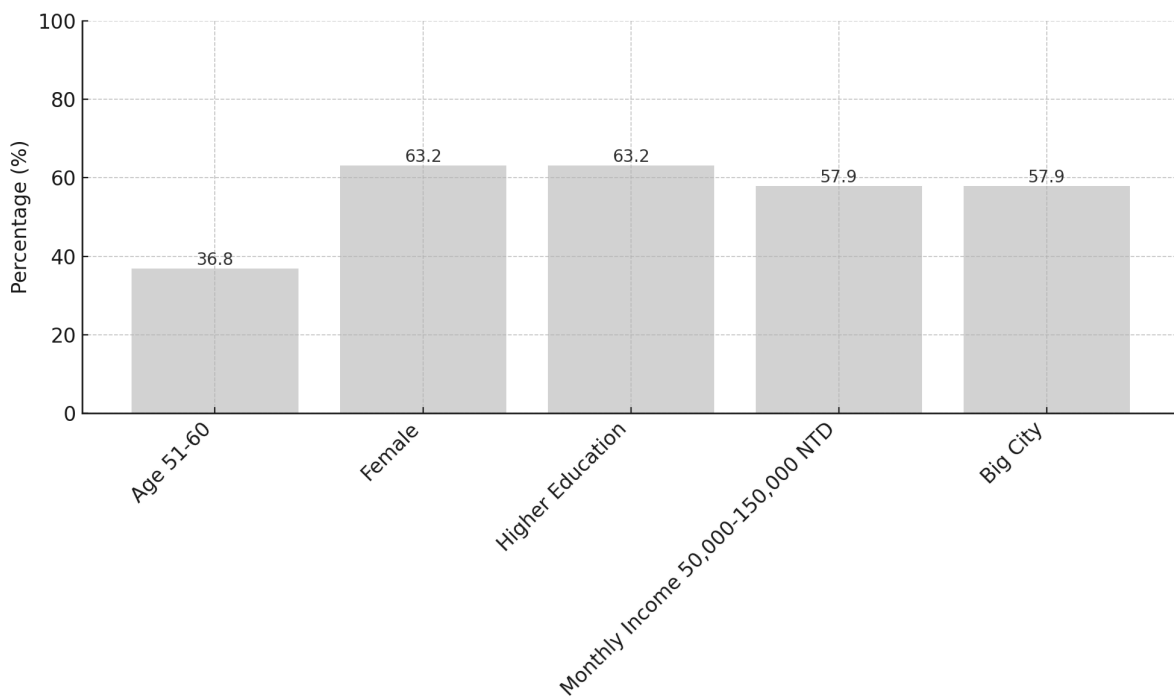
*Participants who seek divine assistance*



Source: Compiled by the author

Chart 2

*Participants who seek divine assistance in business decisions and management*



Source: Compiled by the author

## 5. Results and Discussion

In this chapter, I will present and discuss the research findings based on themes. Firstly, I will provide a broader picture of supernatural beings in Taiwan. Then, a description of gods and their power is given, followed by an exploration of the concept of divine help in business decisions and management in particular.

The findings and discussion are based on interviews and questionnaires conducted with Taiwanese people. The data gathered from interviews provide an excellent introduction to the terminology and definition of supernatural beings. The interviews and questionnaires' results analysed in the discussion section are useful for examining contemporary Taiwan's beliefs and religious practices. This approach aims to present the data in the order in which it was gathered during the research, and then compare it from different perspectives and methods.

This chapter will explore the beliefs about supernatural beings in Taiwan and how to communicate with them. Practices, motives, and benefits of involving gods in business decisions and management will also be discussed.

### 5.1 Supernatural Beings

According to Taiwanese folk religion, three types of supernatural beings coexist with humans: gods, ancestors, and ghosts (Harrell, 1977). Those supernatural beings are believed to originate from the souls of deceased people. Gods (神, *shen*) are the souls of those people who were particularly influential or virtuous individuals (Harrell, 1979), and after passing away, they are remembered and worshiped as *shen* due to their honourable actions in life.

“*Shen*, a long time ago, was a person, a real person in China, but because of their action or their loyalty, when they die, people would remember them and come to them as a *shen*, to a god” (Y. Y.)

The second category of the souls is the ancestors (祖先, *tsu-hsien*). They are the souls of one's own patrilineal forebears (Harrell, 1979), who receive offerings from their descendants (Wu, 2019). Many Taiwanese I have talked to within and outside of this research have revealed that their families maintain the tradition of worshiping ancestors. Various rituals are performed by the descendants, such as visiting the grave during the tomb-sweeping festival, taking care of the ancestral tablets at home, and performing particular rituals at the ancestral hall or temple on special occasions (Lazzarotti, 2014).

A 21-year-old informant, L.H., confessed that when she was a child, she could not understand the necessity of following her parents and grandparents to perform this ritual. Now that she was older, she had changed her mind and found it very meaningful:

“When I grew up, I found out that you can still have some connection to the people from the past. Especially when my grandpa passed away.” (L.H.)

The third category of the souls are the ghosts (鬼, *gui*). These are the souls of the individuals who died violently or who have no-one to worship them (Harrell, 1979). One's soul can be regarded as a ghost when their descendants fail to make offerings to them. That can happen, for example, when ancestors and their descendants are separated by many generations and their descendants have forgotten about their ancestors. Another scenario is when descendants are unable to make offerings because their family member passed away unnaturally and away from home. In that case, their souls will remain wandering around and can not be worshiped at home (Wu, 2019).

The three categories of supernatural beings in Taiwanese folk religion are not fixed, and there is no single theory regarding the origin and categorization of the souls. The discussions about these categories and the soul's forms started early in Chinese classics. For example, Confucian scholars of the Tang 唐 (618-907) period used classical sources to formulate the concept of spirits and souls. In his commentary on the imperial edition of the Five Classics (The Correct Meaning of the Five Classics 五經正義, 653), Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574-648) gives a detailed concept of spirits, souls, and ghosts. (Wilson, 2014) Discussions on these concepts continue by contemporary researchers and practitioners.

As mentioned before, ancestors who are not worshiped, may become ghosts. However, ancestors can not, according to Baity (1977), become gods, and argues that many Taiwanese gods originated from "hungry ghosts," who due to their lack of descendants were worshiped by the public. On the other hand, Harrell (1979) discusses a theory put forward by Chu Hsi, which suggests that the cosmic force of *yang* produces the *yang* soul, associated with *shen* (gods), while *yin* produces its corresponding *yin* soul, associated with *gui* (ghosts).

All of the interviewees had their own understanding of gods (*shen*), ancestors (*tsu-hsien*), and ghosts (*gui*)<sup>2</sup>. While the main characteristics of those three categories remained similar throughout the interviews, the categorization part differed to some extent.

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<sup>2</sup> During the interviews and in the discussion part of this thesis, I use the local terms for supernatural beings: *shen*, *tsu-hsien*, and *gui*. These terms speak to the local person and express their perspectives. I translate *shen* as gods, *tsu-hsien* as ancestors, and *gui* as ghosts. It is important to note that the English translations are conventional and may not fully capture the precise analogue between original term and the translation.

Gods, ancestors and ghosts were defined as “different forms” or “different kinds” of “spirit” or “different energy”. However, two participants only gave two categories: gods and ghosts/ancestors (I.Y.), and ghosts and gods/ancestors (N.H.).

According to I.Y., when a person dies, he or she becomes a ghost. A ghost is either a friendly ghost, for example, someone’s own grandmother or grandfather, or a scary ghost, the one that no one worships. On the other hand, N.H puts ancestors and gods into the same category as those who “have finished their business.” In contrast, ghosts are the ones who “have some business that is not finished.”

Most participants used positive words when talking about gods (*shen*), and described gods in relation to themselves. They said that a god is someone who can protect, to whom to go to clean their mind, feel calmer, and ask for safety.

Compared to god, the ghost is described as something negative or neutral, without giving any judgement at all. Interviewees did not describe ghosts as something in relation to themselves, but rather as a thing in itself. According to the interviewees, a ghost is a spirit still lingering around, still having unfinished business in this world, or not having anyone who feeds it. Ghosts are people who die with hate and resentment. Only L.H., the youngest of my interviewees, admitted that she was scared of ghosts.

To sum up, the interview data revealed no single definition or categorization of gods, ancestors, and ghosts. Secondly, the interviews showed that participants felt a stronger personal connection to gods and ancestors compared to ghosts. Therefore, Habkirk’s (2011) claim that people felt more connected to ghosts and ancestors while gods were “elusive and their presence is distant” could be discussed further.

### **5.1.1 Who are Gods?**

In some “advanced religions”, gods are considered to be highly superior to humans and therefore, approached with great humility and respect (Beattie, 2013, p. 230). It is considered significant to maintain a certain distance from gods in those “great tradition” religions (Li, 2004, as cited in Wu, 2019, p. 305). In Taiwan, however, gods and temple altars are very approachable to human beings, and when gods appear through spirit mediums, they are so accessible that people may have normal conversations with them (Weller, 2000).

When I spoke to the Taiwanese and asked to define gods, I could not detect any profound sense of sacredness or humility. They were very relaxed in the conversation and used words like “kind of a spirit”, “good man”, and “positive energy” to describe gods:

"Gods are people when they are still alive. And do something positive, or contribute to the society, and the whole society appreciates him or her. Gods and ghosts are the same thing. Like one coin has two sides." (D. F.)

In defining Taiwanese folk religion, it is argued that the religion puts emphasis on some virtues and values such as loyalty, wisdom, honesty, and more (Wong, 2011). Z.L. Huang (2008) proposed that folk beliefs primarily aimed to guide people toward good behaviour (Wong, 2011). The moral aspect of the folk religion was also conveyed through the stories told by the informants when they were asked to define supernatural beings. The majority of the participants shared a common belief that a person's actions during their lifetime were decisive in determining whether they became a god or a ghost. Those actions were usually categorised as positive or negative. People who were kind and helpful to others would become gods. Gods serve as a source of inspiration for others to become better versions of themselves.

"I think *shen* is just like a person that we can learn something from. For example, maybe *shen* are very kind, they like to help people." (L. C.)

"The *gui* is usually bad and *shen* is usually a good man" (Y.Y.)

### ***5.1.2 The Pantheon of Taiwanese Gods***

In the early 1900s, an American missionary in China, D.C. Graham, met a Buddhist priest who offered his perspective on the local religious landscape: "One god is not enough for the Chinese, for there are too many people in China" (Graham, 1961, p.172). This statement could also be applied to polytheistic Taiwan, where different god cults are competing with each other over the ritual territory and loyalty of worshippers (Baity, 1977).

The Taiwanese pantheon comprises a vast number of gods, goddesses and other figures of worship. According to Zieser (2003), the pantheon of gods in Taiwanese folk religion is similar to the Taoist pantheon but with additional gods and goddesses. People often consider popular or traditional gods, not related to the Taoist pantheon, as Taoist gods. When asked about a specific god's religion, Taiwanese people who are unaware of the answer confidently state that the god must be a Taoist god (Hall, 2009). Although Hall (2009) argues that it is not too difficult to differentiate Buddhism from other religions in Taiwan, Wong (2011) says that people who worship Buddhist gods "folk religiously", by offering meat or

burning incense, are considered folk religion adherents. The Taiwanese pantheon is very inclusive with no clear boundaries between . The majority of the Taiwanese population worship both Taoist and Buddhist gods in folk temples (Wu, 2006), and some of the same gods can be found in both Buddhist and Taoist temples in Taiwan. (Hall, 2009)

Each god in Taiwan usually has its own roles and responsibilities. For instance, Tudi Gong is the Earth Lord who is believed to safeguard local communities, Wangye keeps diseases away, and Mazu is the goddess of coastal communities (Yang & Hu, 2012). One of the interviewees vividly described the abundance of gods in Taiwan as a "big department," where there are "many deities to support any kind of business" (I. Y.).

The vast number of gods in the folk religion are structured in a hierarchy (Tamney, 1998). The "hierarchical bureaucracy of heaven" in Taiwanese folk religion is considered to be a "parallel system" that is not "necessarily superior to the human world" (Wolf, 1974, as cited by Habkirk, 2011, p. 30). High-ranking gods can be approached through the lower-ranking gods. For example, a very popular god in Taiwan is Tudi Gong, the Earth Lord, who serves as an intermediary between worshippers and higher gods (Hall, 2009). As one of the informants stated:

"Even gods will have different levels. They can upgrade, depending on their power. So it is like the human governments in the human world." (C.C.)

Various factors, such as popularity, power, and efficacy, contribute to the change in god's rank. The more popular and powerful a god is, the higher their rank tends to be, as they attract more worshippers and control larger ritual areas. The size of a god's ritual area is a symbol of their relative rank, with larger areas indicating a higher rank. (Baity, 1977). However, the hierarchy of gods in Taiwanese religion is not only determined by their popularity, but also by various factors such as historical significance, mythology, and cultural importance. (Hall, 2009)

One of the most significant factors in determining gods' rank is their efficacy. The effectiveness of gods is determined by their ability to provide efficacious answers to worshippers. (Baity, 1977) Without efficacious answers, the gods can not increase the number of their worshipers and therefore grow their popularity and power. One of the interviewees shared her opinion that can explain the reason why one might stop worshiping gods. Although her parents took her to temples to worship numerous gods when she was a child, then as she grew older, she did not feel the need to do it any more:

"I feel like I do not really need them (gods), because I do not know what they can give me." (L. H.)

## 5.2 The Communication with Supernatural Beings

Humans are able to communicate with supernatural beings, and therefore ask gods for help and protection, support their ancestors in the afterlife, and appease potentially harmful ghosts. The communication with supernatural beings is done through burning incense and presenting offerings of food and paper money (Harrell, 1977). However, when it comes to passing through some information, the living and the dead can not communicate directly with each other because they are separated by the spheres of *yin* (陰) and *yang* (陽)<sup>3</sup>. When humans pass away, they leave from *yang* world and enter the *yin* world. The separation of the worlds creates demand for information, and is characterised by the asymmetry between gods, ghosts and humans in relation to information. Human beings can only access the information that is superficial and concerning the present day. The information that is transmitted by ghosts is not available to humans. Gods, on the other hand, can access the information because they are able to cross the boundary between *yin* and *yang*. Therefore, gods are at the top of the power hierarchy as they have access to information unavailable to others, and they are playing the most powerful role in the relationship between ghosts and gods. (Wu, 2019).

One of my informants, L.C., is a member of a musical ensemble. When we talked about gods and ghosts, he mentioned that he used god's help to communicate with ghosts when necessary:

"I don't think I have the ability to communicate with them (ghosts). I would say something in my heart to the god and talk to the god to help me to communicate with them. I think this is what I do now. Because I can not talk to them directly." (L.C.)

He shared an incident that happened to him and his band members during one of their performances. They were invited to perform in front of a temple at night. According to my interviewee, if you play a specific type of an instrument, it can harm ghosts who gather

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<sup>3</sup> *Yin* (陰) and *yang* (陽) are the most well-known concepts from Chinese cosmology. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2024), *yin* is "the feminine passive principle in nature that in Chinese cosmology is exhibited in darkness, cold, or wetness and that combines with *yang* to produce all that comes to be", and *yang* is exactly the opposite. The concept of *yin yang* is a "world view, methodology, and life wisdom" (Fang, 2014, p. 3). One of the most significant texts in early China (Discourse on Salt and Iron, 81 BCE) says: "The middle kingdom (*zhongguo*/China) is in the middle (*zhong*) of heaven and earth and is at the border (*ji* 際) of *yin* and *yang*." (Wang, 2013, p.1)

around temples at night. They played the instruments and as a result, many band members fell sick the next day.

L.C.: We went there just for the festival. The show we arranged included the instrument. Public performance. And we were invited there. Yeah so, it's true. We don't know why we were just good at the performance day, but the next day most of our members got sick. There's no reason.

Me: Maybe they got cold?

L.C.: It's summer. So the way that we do it now is that we will pray for the god. Not pray, but maybe talk to god that we will have a show or performance somewhere and when. So, we will talk to the god to help us to communicate with local energy. We have to communicate. If they know us, we will perform there, they will maybe at that time just get away, so there's no harm. What we do now is if we go somewhere to perform, we will ask the god in the private temple and the god will tell us if we need to burn the paper<sup>4</sup> or not. So the paper is maybe for the energy, for the ghost or yeah. Something.

Me: You pray before the performance when you arrive at the performance place?

L.C.: Few days before. It can decrease the harm we make to the ghost. So that's the reason why I say I take them as friends, because I don't want to harm them and we are equal.

Although L.C. considered ghosts equal to him, he was unable to communicate with them directly. Instead, he used god's help to pass through his message. Since gods are considered to be at the top of the hierarchy when it comes to acquiring information, humans seek them out for assistance (Wu, 2019).

### ***5.2.1 Seeking for Support and Positive Resolutions***

Spirits are often thought to rely on humans, just as humans rely on them (Beattie, 2013). In Taiwan, the relationship between humans and gods is not one-sided either, but is characterised by a sense of mutual exchange and reciprocity. As humans do, the gods wish to have meat and paper money (Chan, 2012). Furthermore, gods assist humans in daily life by providing solutions to their problems and hardships (Lin, 2008). The personalised

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<sup>4</sup> The interviewee is indicating to burning paper spirit money, special printed paper sheets that serve as money for the spirits. It is believed that burning paper spirit money transforms it into usable currency in the spirit world (Graham, 1961).

relationship between humans and gods is fundamental in practising folk religion (Chan, 2012).

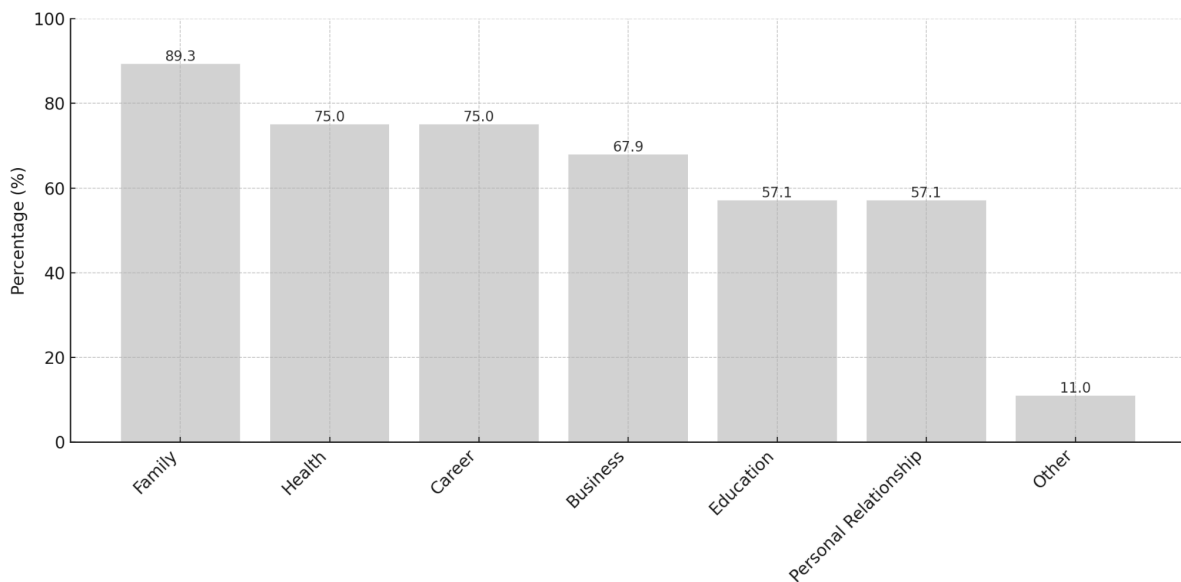
The most common method of a reciprocal relationship with gods is through the worshiping practice *baibai* (拜拜) in Chinese. People burn incense and offer food or paper money to worship the gods and seek divine assistance. According to the interviewees, gods offer protection, help to clear one's mind, help to feel calmer, and help to find safety.

“When we worship them (gods), they make our hearts and feelings calm down.” (L. C.)

Divine assistance is sought in various aspects of life. According to the questionnaire results, the most popular aspect of life where the respondents seek divine assistance is their family matters, as 89.3% of them reported. Chart 3 gives an overview of the aspects of life the participants seek divine assistance with. In addition, some other areas were mentioned, such as spiritual support, solutions to bad luck, and purchasing a house.

Chart 3

*Aspects of life the participants seek divine assistance with*



Source: Compiled by the author

The relationship of mutual exchange between Taiwanese people and their gods also has economic implications. According to Clart and Jones (2003), there has been an increase

in religious construction and related industries in Taiwan. This phenomenon is believed to reflect the current economic prosperity and a particular attitude of the people. The Taiwanese believe that their success is partly attributed to the protection of the gods, and as a result, they believe that gods deserve better treatment. Therefore, temples have experienced a significant increase in revenue. (Wang, 2014)

The monetary relationship with the gods can manifest itself in other ways too. Apart from offering donations to temples, some individuals also resort to borrowing money from the temple. In other cases, people make deals with gods, where they promise to repay if their wish or desire is fulfilled. During an interview, a 64-year-old businesswoman explained the reciprocal relationship between humans and gods. She told me about the worshippers who, after gods have helped their businesses, return money to the temple. If someone's wishes come true, they will often return to the temple to repay their debt:

“So in Taiwan, so many temples become rich, it's the reason. I don't know in Western countries if people go to church to do this or not. It's culture. Why do people do that? Make themselves feel free. Because I ask and I refund. I return to the temple and make myself peaceful. Use the money to make myself free.” (L. B)

To sum up, the relationship between humans and gods in Taiwan is characterised by a sense of mutual exchange and reciprocity. The personalised relationship with gods, who have access to the information that humans do not, leads individuals to seek divine guidance and assistance in various aspects of life, including business decisions and management. Is this practice solely spiritual, or does it also lead to practical benefits such as better business outcomes? How do people understand, interpret, and put this practice into action?

### **5.3 Divine Consultation in Business Decisions and Management**

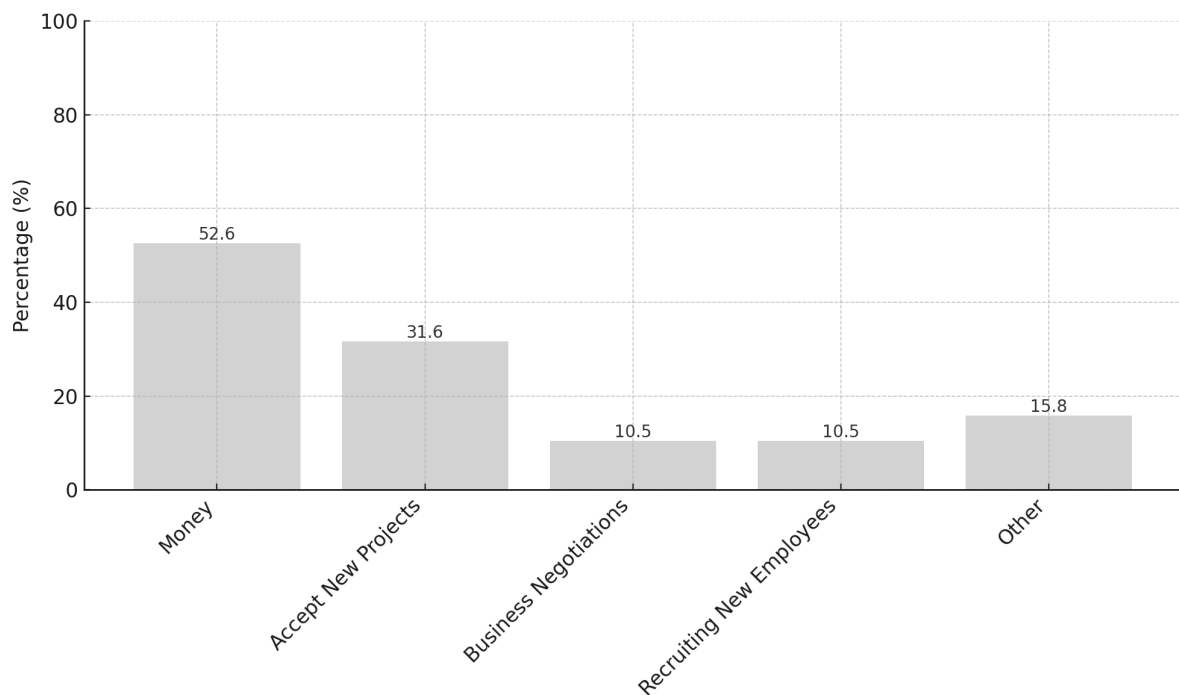
During my interviews with businesspeople, I discovered that most of them, except L.B., involved gods in their businesses. Among questionnaire respondents, over 67.9% answered affirmatively to the question about involving gods in business decisions and management. Both the interviewees and the questionnaire respondents provided valuable information on the experiences of interacting with gods and the benefits derived from it.

Money plays a vital role in Taiwan's society and culture, as exemplified by one of the interviewees who said, "Asians love being rich, have money." The survey results support this

statement. Over 50% of the participants acknowledged that they sought the intervention of divine beings in money-related business issues. In particular, 52.6% of the respondents reported that they sought guidance from gods in this regard. Next to seeking divine help in money-related issues, the second most common response was accepting new projects, with 31.6% of the participants doing so. Chart 3 lists specific aspects of business decision-making and management where respondents sought help and advice from gods. In the category of "Other," respondents added "increased orders", "successful new product development", "new customers," and "pray for everything to go well in the store."

Chart 3

*In what aspects of business decision and management do you seek help/advice from gods?*

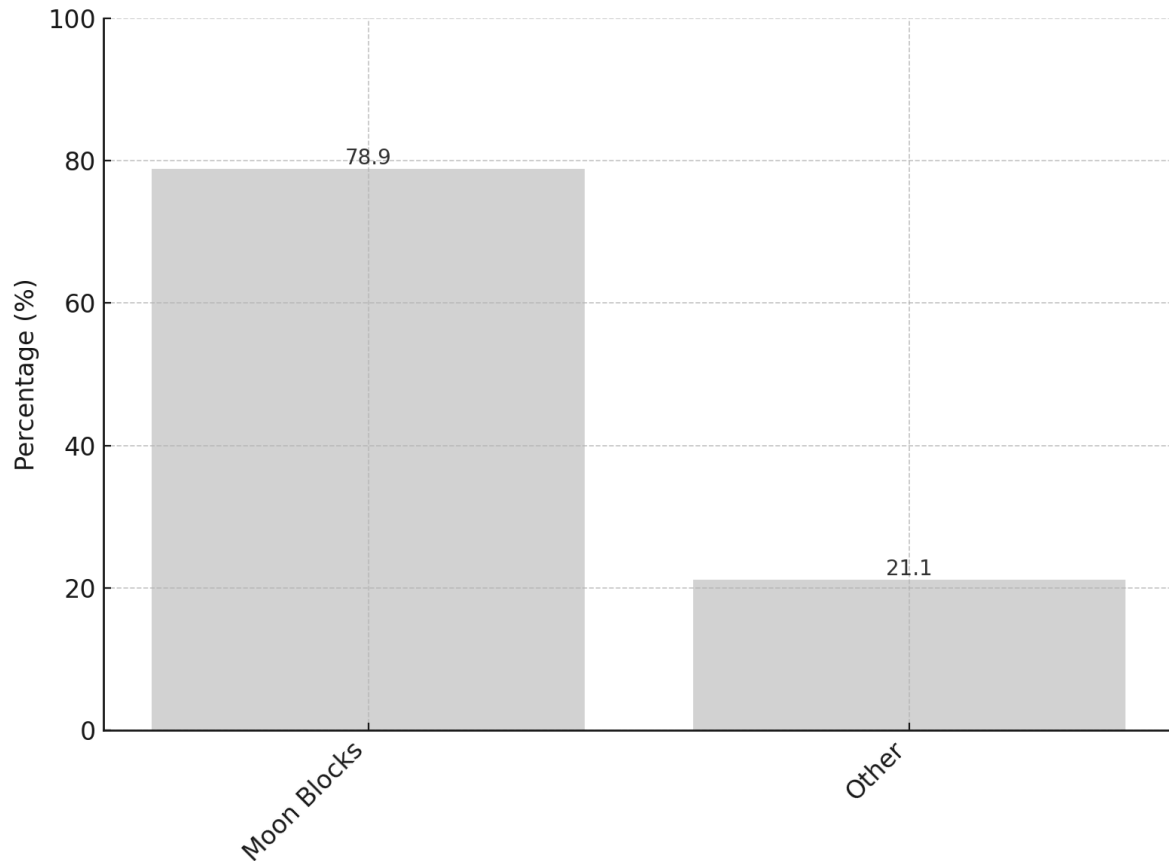


Source: Compiled by the author

Table 3 shows the various methods and practices utilised to seek divine assistance. Interestingly, throwing moon blocks was found to be the most popular method among the participants, surpassing regular worship practice *baibai*. Other methods of seeking divine assistance were “mother money”, spirit mediums, *baibai* and “hold on to your way, and things will go your way” (心誠則靈).

Table 3

*In the context of business decisions and management, what methods/practices are used to seek help/advice from gods?*



Source: Compiled by the author

In the next two subchapters, I will explore the two most popular aspects of business decision-making and management where divine consultation is prevalent - money and accepting new projects. Additionally, the methods of seeking divine guidance in these areas will be discussed. By exploring what people say about the aspects and methods of divine consultation, we can gain a better understanding of how people interpret and justify these practices and rituals.

### **5.3.2. Money Matters**

S. Z. owns a coffee shop in a small township in Taiwan. Once, she went to a temple to worship gods. Here is what happened:

“The most interesting part is that I will go to the main statue. Under the table, they had a statue of the tiger, so I was praying, and I saw someone taking their coins to exchange them with the tigers’. So they say if you give them your own 5 dollars, you exchange exactly the number back; it's like the mother of the money. I do not know how to say, but if you take it home, they will have babies. Like growing more money for you. So after that, we take 5 dollars home. So in the next couple of days, we have very good business. It is very interesting. It is very coincidental, my husband says it is a coincidence. I can take it as a good sign because the next day, we had customers coming here to buy coffee for 10,000 (NTD), and then we had a couple of small orders the other day. It is quite interesting. I believe that. So they are saying that if you believe it, it will come true because you will have the energy to push it. So this is very interesting. People say do not get superstitious, but I believe it is a kind of energy when you make wishes. You are not making wishes to god; I believe that in that moment when I stand in front of the statue, my wishes will have energy, so it will push you to come true. People say that when you want something so badly, you will make a wish thinking you already have it, so after that, you will embrace it to happen. Very interesting.” (S. Z.)

The term "mother money," or *muqian* (母錢), refers to money lent from a temple with the belief that it will generate many “offsprings”, more money coming to the household / business (Brose, 2018). S. Z. shared how she witnessed someone taking "mother money" from the temple and decided to do the same. To her surprise, her business became more profitable in the following days. She did not directly link her business success to the gods, believing that her wish and hard work played the primary role. According to Valk, one of the devices of storytellers' truth rhetoric is discounting alternative interpretations (Oring 129-130). The storyteller gave alternative interpretations like coincidence or superstition but did not directly disregard them; however, she remained steadfast in her belief. The word "interesting" was used multiple times to describe what had happened, giving the whole story a sense of mystery and chance for the listener to interpret the story. Later, she revealed that she has regularly returned to the same temple for worship. For her, the reciprocal relationship with the gods had been established by coincidence, but kept her coming back to the practice regularly.

Another interviewee, a 64-year old businesswoman, who is distancing herself from any practices of involving gods in her business or personal life, also shares a story about *muqian* and the benefit it brings:

“So the money 500 is more like "mother money" because the mother will give birth to the baby, so they pray for the little money and hope their business goes to the fortune. The temple always says: "I borrow, I give you 500 (NTD), and if your business becomes rich, you will come back to return, because it is borrowed, not given to you.”  
(L. B).

L. B mentioned that she had heard several stories from successful business people who borrowed "mother money" from a temple. However, she also suggested that individuals may not borrow the "mother money" solely for business purposes but to ease their minds and feel happier. "It is for their happiness life," she said.

The two narratives that describe divine intervention differ in nature. In the first story by S. Z., the narrator shares her personal experience of benefiting from the "mother money." She was excited to share what happened and interpreted the events positively. On the other hand, the narrator of the second story, L. B, is a second-hand storyteller who shares her knowledge on the matter neutrally.

In the first case, the narrator keeps the tradition of regularly returning to the original temple to worship the gods despite not necessarily believing that the gods brought her financial success. In the second case, the narrator finds no value in the worship for herself, but she acknowledges that it may hold value for others. Despite the differences between the two narratives, they reach a similar conclusion. Both stories link borrowing the "mother money" with the positive impact on one's mental state.

### ***5.3.3. Accepting New Projects***

A 59-year-old businessman who manages a construction company shared his method of deciding whether to accept new construction projects or not. He involves the gods in his decision-making process and uses moon blocks to communicate with them. He said that for some significant projects, he would ask the gods, and sometimes, he received a continuous "yes" response, not just three times, but more. Here is how he explains it:

“So it is kind of a psychological thing. You ask the god and you do the moon blocks and you get three "yes" and you will feel better. Once you have a good mood or positive mind, then you feel everything is smooth.” (D. F.)

Moon blocks, also known as divination blocks, are commonly used in Taiwan as a tool to seek the opinion of a god. These blocks can be thrown in a temple after introducing oneself to the god and asking a question. Once thrown and fallen to the ground, there are usually three possibilities. The first possibility is confirmative, where one block has fallen inside up and the other inside down. The second possibility, where both blocks are inside up, means a retry. The third possibility, where both blocks are inside down, means negative (Ho, 2005). To receive an affirmative answer from the god, one must throw confirmative three times in a row.

D. F., similar to L. B. and S. Z. whose stories we analysed in the previous chapter, also associated the ritual with positive feelings and mental impact.

#### 5.3.4 Gods Involved in the Business Decisions and Management

We briefly discussed and analysed the ritual practices of seeking divine assistance and their implementation in business decisions and management. The list of gods involved in these practices was diverse, reflecting the variety and mixture of gods worshiped in Taiwan. The questionnaire informants reported the following gods they turn to for divine assistance in business decisions and management:

Table 2

*Gods involved in business decision and management*

<b>Name in English</b>	<b>In Chinese</b>	<b>Pantheon</b>	<b>Times mentioned</b>
Mazu	媽祖	Folk/Taoist	7
Tudi Gong	土地公	Folk	4
Guan Yu / Sainly Emperor Guan	關公 / 關聖帝君	Folk/Taoist	3
Xuantian	玄天上帝	Taoist	2
Immortal Ancestor Li Tieguai	李鐵拐仙祖	Taoist	1
Ancestor Gods	祖上神明	Folk	1

Bodhisattva	菩薩	Buddhist	1
Avalokitesvara Buddha	觀世音佛祖	Buddhist	1
Namo Master's Great Self-restrained King Buddha	南無本師大自在 王佛	Buddhist	1
Guanyin	觀音	Buddhist	1
Baosheng Dadi (God of Medicine)	保生大帝	Folk	1
Fu Zheng Shen (God of Fortune)	福德正神	Folk	1
God of Wealth	財神	Folk	1
Yao Ci Golden Mother	瑤慈金母	Folk	1
All	全部		1

Source: Compiled by the author

The most frequently mentioned god among respondents was Mazu, who is an excellent example of a god that is integrated by various teachings and religions. Mazu was believed to have been born around 960 AD in Fujian. During her lifetime, she used her knowledge and magical powers to prevent disasters and save people at sea (Lu, 2005). According to legend, Mazu rescued her father and brothers from a storm (Zhang, 2020), which represented her filial piety, a fundamental Confucian idea for ordinary people (Hwang, 1999). Mazu's representation of this virtue helped her to be promoted by the Confucian state (Zhang, 2020). However, Confucianism was not the only teaching that was accommodated in the cult of Mazu. Both Taoist and Buddhist temples worshiped her after her death. Although scholars do not have a consensus on Mazu's religious categorization (Kuo, 2009), she is mainly connected with the folk religion and Taoism, mixing with Buddhism and Confucianism.

Tudi Gong, who is known as the God of the Earth, was found to be the second most popular god among the respondents. He is widely worshiped by Taiwanese people and is considered to be a very popular god (Hall, 2009). Guan Yu, also known as Guandi or Saintly Emperor Guan, is a highly esteemed god in Taoism and was also mentioned several times. He is regarded as a benefactor of commerce, among other things (Nguyen, 2023).

More than a quarter of the respondents mentioned more than one god. Along with the folk and Taoist gods, Buddhist gods were also mentioned, as were ancestors. There was no

difference in the practice methods between followers of folk/Taoist gods and those of Buddhist gods - there were members from both groups who used moon blocks to communicate with their gods. Although the sample size was small, the pantheon was widely represented.

### 5.3.5 Motivations and Interpretations for Divine Consultation

We previously discussed that people often seek divine assistance regarding money issues or accepting new projects, and moon blocks are widely used for this purpose. Questionnaire respondents also specified the gods they turn to when they need help. When asked to describe on which occasions divine assistance is sought, respondents said when they felt helpless, uncertain, or ambiguous, when they faced troubles, when they needed to improve their performance, when they couldn't make a decision, or when they had money troubles. Only a few respondents had a fixed schedule to turn to gods, such as on the first and fifteenth day of the lunar month or the second and sixteenth day. "I find one day every month to pay homage to the Tudi Gong and ask questions," one of the respondents

Although people turn to the gods when they need something, what do they hope to achieve by doing so? Table 3 ranks the responses to this question in descending order, with the highest score representing the most popular answer and the lowest score the least popular. The small gaps between the statements indicate the overall coherence of the responses.

Table 3

*Involving gods in business decision and management:*

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Mean</b>
secures a happy and peaceful life	4,26
protects my business	4,21
brings luck	3,95
is part of the family tradition	3,89
gives directions	3,84
gives good advice	3,68
helps to make a decision	3,68
brings success in business	3,58
helps in building social connections	3,58
is part of the community behaviour	3,42
protects from ghosts	3,37

Source: Compiled by the author

The most popular answer was to have a happy and peaceful life. These results confirm the narratives discussed in the previous chapters and indicate that involving gods is linked with an overall positive feeling.

However, is the practice of involving gods in business decisions and management just a way to appease one's mind or feel good? According to Weller (2000), the small businesses in Taiwan's economy are primarily driven by relying heavily on social trust and networks to thrive and succeed. Entrepreneurs, potential entrepreneurs, and even individuals working in household-based piecework production must build and maintain networks of connections to achieve success. In this regard, god cults play a significant role in solidifying business networks (Weller, 2000).

The results indicate that people involve themselves with gods in a temple by throwing moon blocks. This practice is a communal folk religion that contributes to community solidarity and cohesion. Communal folk religion is embedded in clan or village communities. For example, in traditional China, money loans and rotating credit associations preferred loaning money to townspeople or people with the same family name, as they believed that only those who worshiped the same gods or had the same ancestors were trustworthy (Yang & Hu, 2012).

Three survey questions were focused on social networks and community behaviour, with family being one of the forms of the communities. The responses to the two questions in this section were neutral: nearly half (44%) of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statements that involving gods in business decisions and management was helping in building social connections or being a part of the community's behaviour. The statement that received the highest score from respondents was incorporating gods in business decision-making and management as a family tradition.

### **5.3.6. Success after Seeking Divine Consultation**

Questionnaire results showed that 82.9% of respondents seek advice from gods, with 67.5% doing so for business decisions and management. A rational person might question whether or not this practice is effective. As Coleman (1990) pointed out, what may seem irrational to an observer may actually be rational from the actor's point of view.

Seeking divine assistance can have a real impact on decision-making. According to the questionnaire results, 73.7% of respondents reported that consulting with a god

sometimes affects their final decision in business, while those who always or never get impacted are 10% for each group.

Earlier, S. Z. shared a story about involving gods in her business, which resulted in successful sales the next day. It raised the question of whether or not getting successful outcomes after consulting gods is just a rare occurrence. According to the survey, 68,4% of the participants admitted that they had experienced success in their business after involving gods.

Some of the stories about how gods have helped in business:

- Inspirations appear often at work, which helps me achieve more with less effort.
- Getting advice, believing that having faith will help you achieve your goal.
- Full confidence.
- I met a life changer who referred me for jobs.
- Everything is well-planned.
- Peaceful mind gets all the work done smoothly.
- There is no one specific story. I always feel peaceful and happy when praying. I'm grateful that I'm able to live in the present.
- Trust the power of believing.
- Unable to express.
- I often feel like somehow everything is arranged, for example customers always order the same kind of product, which makes it easier for us to make. Also, sometimes issues between relationships resolve themselves naturally.

Before I got the questionnaire responses, I thought that the success stories that my respondents would share would match the responses to question number 17, which asked about the areas in which help/advice from gods in business decision-making and management was sought. However, I found that none of the participants had any stories about accepting new successful projects, getting more money, or choosing the best employees thanks to the consultation with the gods, although these were the problems and questions they turned to gods. Instead, what was common among the stories shared by both interviewees as well as survey respondents was that involving gods in business decisions and management helped to strengthen their mental power and confidence.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to explore the beliefs of people in Taiwan regarding supernatural beings, with a specific focus on the involvement of gods in business decisions and management. The data was collected through ethnographic and qualitative research methods involving semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. The study aimed to identify the role of gods in business decisions and management, as well as the benefits, motivations, and practices associated with involving gods in these areas.

According to this study, no one set definition or approach to supernatural beings in Taiwan exists. People tend to have varied experiences with them, with some feeling more connected to and sharing their stories and knowledge about gods, others about ancestors, and some about ghosts. While the literature describes the definitions of these categories and explains how communication between humans and supernatural beings works, the vernacular beliefs expressed by the research informants regarding these categories and communications show a multiplicity of expressions regarding those phenomena. This provides a multitude of possibilities for future research.

A discrepancy on how to define and categorise supernatural beings, as well as on how to communicate with them, exists. However, it is clear that a sense of mutual exchange and reciprocity characterises relationships between supernatural beings and humans. Despite a considerable amount of literature on the relationship between religion and the economy or business, including the close ties between economic conditions and religion (Chen, 1995), increasing donations to temples (Wang, 2014), and the historical connection between the economy/business and religion (Weller, 2000; Chen, 1995), there is a lack of ethnographic qualitative research on people's beliefs regarding divine assistance and intervention in the business sphere. This thesis presents a fresh approach to studying religious beliefs in business settings using the vernacular belief approach.

The existing literature sheds light on human-god communication and the reasons, motivations, interpretations and results why people seek divine assistance. For instance, through religious practices and communications with gods, people may seek to attain information that is not accessible to them (Wu, 2019) or to reduce painful feelings and promote positive emotions (Wu & Liu, 2014). This study confirms the above but also reveals that reasons and interpretations for divine assistance vary, indicating a recurring element of multiplicity of expressions. While believers expect efficacious answers from gods to their demands (Baity, 1977), what exactly is considered and interpreted as efficacious is more complex. Due to the limited sample size of this research, no generalisation of the results

could be made. Future research could include more people from different demographic groups to have a more comprehensive understanding of the interpretations of divine consultation and assistance. Researchers could also consider structuring the questionnaire differently to see if the wording and order of questions could possibly influence the results.

K. Y. Wang (2014) stated that Taiwanese people attribute their economic success to the gods and, therefore, believe they should treat them better. According to P. C. Baity (1977), the efficacy of gods is measured by their popularity. In other words, if people believe a particular god is ineffective, its popularity will decline. This study found that interpreting a successful interaction with the gods does not always have to be directly linked to practical outcomes. So, what is the measure of the effectiveness of the gods? Is it a successful business deal or a satisfactory cash inflow? The research shows that people's interpretation of successful interaction with the gods is mainly related to their peace of mind and increased confidence, even when practical outcomes are met. Although there was no significant difference in results between demographic groups in this study, it is important to note that the sample size was small and many questionnaire respondents fell into the same category.

To sum up, the study revealed that the involvement of gods in business decision-making is a popular and widespread practice. The most common method of involving gods in business decisions in Taiwan is throwing moon blocks in a temple and asking for financial assistance. More than half of the respondents stated that their business decisions were sometimes influenced by consulting with gods, and they experienced success in businesses after involving gods. The primary motivation for involving gods in business was to have a happy and peaceful life and to protect the business. Both the survey and interview results indicate that the practice of involving gods in business decisions and management is linked to positive feelings.

This thesis not only explored new theoretical approaches to studying religious beliefs and practices in the academic sphere but also aimed to give an adequate picture of the local cultural and religious settings to foreign businesspeople and visitors alike to better understand the cultural environment and perspectives of the people residing on this beautiful “Boss Island”, packed with temples and businesses.

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**APPENDIX A**

Interview guide

<b>Business-people</b>	<b>Buyers</b>
<p>1. Could you tell me who are <i>shen</i>, <i>tsu-hsien</i>, and <i>gui</i>?</p> <p>2. What role do they play in your everyday life?</p> <p>3. Do you think <i>shen</i>, <i>tsu-hsien</i> and <i>gui</i> can influence how business is going? How?</p> <p>4. Do you ever think about <i>shen</i> or <i>gui</i> when making a decision in your business?</p> <p>5. How to attract the help of <i>shen</i>?</p> <p>6. How to attract protection from <i>gui</i>?</p> <p>7. Do you know any stories about <i>gui</i>?</p> <p>Follow-up questions when they tell a story:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Why do you think it happened?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">How did you feel?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">How did it influence you?</p>	<p>1. Could you tell me who are <i>shen</i>, <i>tsu-hsien</i>, and <i>gui</i>?</p> <p>2. What role do they play in your everyday life?</p> <p>3. Does it happen that <i>shen</i> or <i>gui</i> can influence your decision to buy or not to buy something? How?</p> <p>4. How to attract the help of <i>shen</i>?</p> <p>5. How to attract protection from <i>gui</i>?</p> <p>6. Do you know any stories about <i>gui</i>?</p> <p>Follow-up questions when they tell a story:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Why do you think it happened?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">How did you feel?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">How did it influence you?</p>

## APPENDIX B

## Questionnaire

1. Age 年齡
  - 20–30 years old (20-30歲)
  - 31–40 years old (31-40歲)
  - 41–50 years old (41-50歲)
  - 51–60 years old (51-60歲)
  - 61–70 years old (61-70歲)
  - more than 70 years (70歲以上)
2. Gender 性別
  - male 男性
  - female 女性
3. Highest acquired education 最高學歷
  - junior high school 國中
  - senior high school 高中
  - university 大學
  - institute above 大學以上
  - other 其他
4. Type of business 事業別
5. Monthly income (NT\$) 月收入
  - less than 50,000 低於5萬
  - 51,000 – 100,000
  - 100,001– 200,000
  - 200,001– 300,000
  - more than 300,001大於30萬
6. Which county or city do you live in at the present? 您目前居住在哪个縣市?
7. Which town or city do you currently live in? 您目前居住在哪个鄉鎮市?
8. Would you describe the place where you live as... 請問您覺得現在所居住的地方是都市或鄉村?
  - a big city 大都市
  - the suburbs or outskirts of a big city 大都市旁的郊區
  - a small city or town 小都市或小鎮
  - a country village 農村地區
9. Do you ever seek advice from *shen*: 您是否有求神問佛過呢?
  - Yes 有
  - No 無
10. Have you ever seeked advice from *shen* about personal relationships? 您是否曾經在個人感情上求神問佛過呢?
  - Yes 有
  - No 無

11. Have you ever seeked advice from *shen* about family? 您是否曾經在家人方面上求神問佛過呢?  
Yes 有  
No 無
12. Have you ever seeked advice from *shen* about health ? 您是否曾經在健康方面上求神問佛過呢?  
Yes 有  
No 無
13. Have you ever seeked advice from *shen* about your career? 您是否曾經在職涯方面上求神問佛過呢?  
Yes 有  
No 無
14. Have you ever seeked advice from *shen* about education? 您是否曾經在學業方面上求神問佛過呢?  
Yes 有  
No 無
15. Have you ever seeked advice from *shen* about business? 您是否曾經在商業方面上求神問佛過呢?  
Yes 有  
No 無
16. Areas that are not listed above but have been asked from *shen*: 上述未列但曾經求神問佛過的事情:
17. In what aspects of business decision and management do you seek help/advice from *shen*? 您在商業的決定或者管理上的哪個方面尋求神明的協助呢?  
finance, 金錢  
recruiting new employees, 招募員工  
accepting new projects, 接受案子  
business negotiation, 商業談判  
other 其他
18. When you need advice or help with business decisions or management, how often do you seek divine assistance? 當您在商業上的決定或管理需要建議或幫助時, 您大概求神問佛的頻率為何?  
every day 每天  
2-3 times a week, 每週2-3次  
once a week, 每週1次  
2-3 times a month, 每月2-3次  
once a month, 每月1次  
2-3 times a year, 每年2-3次  
once a year, 一年1次  
on special occasions (which)? 特定場合(什麼時候)  
other 其他

19. Could you briefly describe, on which occasions do you seek help/advice from *shen*?  
 請您簡單描述一下，您通常都在什麼時候求神問佛呢？

20. In your opinion, how likely does a consultation with a *shen* affect your final decisions in business? 依您的意見，求神問佛後的答案如何影響您在商業上的決定呢？  
 never, 從來沒影響  
 sometimes, 有時候會影響  
 always, 總是影響  
 other 其他

21. Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?  
 您是否同意下列表格中的陳述？

Involving *shen* in the business decisions and management:

讓神佛參與商業決策以及管理:

	Strongly agree 非常同意	Agree 同意	Neither agree nor disagree 無意見	Disagree 不同意	Strongly disagree 非常不同意
brings good luck, 帶來幸運					
gives good advice 取得意見					
give directions 指點方向					
protects from ghosts 驅邪					
brings success in business 取得商業的成功 (?)					
helps to make a decision 幫助我決定					
protects my business 保佑事業					

secures a happy and peaceful life 保佑生活平安幸福					
helps in building social connections 有助於人脈的建立					
is part of the community behavior 是社區活動中的一部分					
is part of the family tradition 是家族間的傳統					

22. Which *shen* do you involve in your business decisions and management? 您祈求哪位神明協助商業決策及管理呢?

23. In the context of business decisions and management, what methods/practices do you use to seek advice/help from *shen*? 您在商業上的決定或管理求神問佛時，您是透過什麼方法來尋求意見或幫助的呢？

- lending mother money, 求錢母
- consulting a spirit medium, 問乩童/廟公
- throwing moon blocks, 擲筊
- other 其他

24. In the context of business decisions and management, do you involve with *shen*: 您在商業上的決定或管理求神問佛時，您總是在哪做呢？

- in temple 廟宇
- online 線上
- at home 在家
- other 其他

25. When it comes to consulting a *shen* in the context of business decision and management, how does it make you feel? 當您求神問佛關於商業的決策及管理時，你當下有何感受？

	Strongly agree 非常同意	Agree 同意	Neither agree nor disagree 無意見	Disagree 不同意	Strongly disagree 非常不同意
--	------------------------	-------------	-----------------------------------	-----------------	----------------------------

Fulfilled 被實現					
Happy 快樂					
Relieved 安心					
Enthusiastic 熱情的					
Contented 滿足					
Peaceful 平靜					
Optimistic 正向的					
Encouraged 受鼓舞					
Hopeful 充滿希望的					
Pleased 高興地					
Joyful 享受的					

26. *If you didn't find any option from the above list that you strongly agree with, please give your own option:* 如果上述表格中沒列處您在當下的感受, 請您描述:

27. Have you ever experienced success in business after involving *shen*? 您是否有過求神拜佛後事業順遂的經驗?

yes 是

no 否

other 其他

28. If yes, could you share a story where *shen* helped you in your business? 如果有的話, 請您分享一下相關的經驗故事呢?

### Resümee

Magistritöö “Jumalustega konsulteerimine ja ettevõtlus Taiwanil: jumaluste kaasamine äriotsuste tegemisse ja juhtimisse” eesmärk oli uurida rahvausundi ja üleloomulike olendite mõju Taiwanil inimeste elule, eriti jumaluste äriotsustesse ja juhtimisesse kaasamise kontekstis. Üleloomulike olendite (ingl. k. *supernatural beings*) hulka kuuluvad jumalused, esivanemad ja kummitused, kes on Taiwanil rahvausundi järgi kolm hinge kategooriat. Taiwanil on 87.9% elanikkonnast rahvausundi järgijad (Yang & Hu, 2012). Uskumuste uurimine ärikontekstis on asjakohane, kuna Taiwan on suurima ettevõtlustihedusega riik (Yu, 2012), kus igal kaheksandal täiskasvanul oma väikeettevõtte (Weller, 2000).

Uurimustöö käsitles ja vastas järgmistele küsimustele: uskumused üleloomulikesse olenditesse ja jumalustesse Taiwanil, suhtlemine üleloomulike olendite ja jumalustega, jumaluste kaasamine äriotsustesse ja juhtimisesse, ning millised on selle praktikaga seotud tavad, põhjused ning tõlgendused. Andmete kogumiseks kasutati etnograafilisi ja kvalitatiivseid uurimismeetodeid. Uurimus põhineb välitööde materjalidel, mis koguti 2023. aasta veebruarist novembrini. Välitööd tehti kahes etapis, kõigepealt koguti kahes erinevas Taiwanil linnas 10 poolstruktureeritud intervjuud, seejärel lisaks *online*-küsimustiku kaudu 34 osaleja vastused. Andmete analüüsimisel kasutati etnograafilise uurimistöö meetodeid, folkloristika ja sotsiaalanthropoloogia teooriaid ning sotsiaalteaduslikke käsitlusi.

Käesolevast uurimustööst ilmneb, et ühte konkreetset definitsiooni ega lähenemist üleloomulikesse olenditesse Taiwanil ei ole. Olemasolevast kirjandusest küll nähtuvad nende kategooriate selgitused ja see, kuidas toimib inimeste ja üleloomulike olendite omavaheline suhtlus, kuid intervjuueeritavate poolt antud informatsioon nende kategooriate ja suhtluse kohta väljendavad rahvapäraseid uskumusi (ingl. k. *vernacular beliefs*), mis näitavad nende nähtuste mitmekesiseid väljendusviise.

Üleloomulike olendite ja inimeste vahelisi suhteid iseloomustab vastastikkus. Kui jumaluse poole pöörduja ootab jumaluselt oma küsimustele ja soovidele tõhusaid vastuseid (Baity, 1977), siis see, mida peetakse tõhusaks, on mõnevõrra keerulisem defineerida. Uurimus näitas, et inimeste tõlgendus tõhusast jumalustega suhtemisest on peamiselt seotud nende meelerahu ja suurenenud enesekindlusega, isegi kui jumalustega konsulteerimisele järgnevad ka praktilised tulemused.

Kokkuvõttes selgus uuringust, et jumaluste kaasamine äriotsuste tegemisse on populaarne ja laialt levinud praktika. Kõige levinum viis jumaluste äriotsustesse kaasamiseks oli ennustusplokkide (ingl. k. *moon blocks*) viskamine templis. Peamiselt küsitakse nõu ja abi rahalistes küsimustes. Rohkem kui pooled vastanutest väitsid, et jumalustega konsulteerimine

mõjutas nende äriotsuseid “mõnikord” ning nad kogesid pärast jumaluste kaasamist äris edu. Jumaluste äriotsustesse ja juhtimisse kaasamise peamine ajend oli tagada õnnelik ja rahulik elu ning kaitsta oma ettevõtet. Nii küsitluse kui ka intervjuude tulemused näitasid, et jumaluste kaasamine äriotsustesse ja juhtimisse on eelkõige seotud positiivsete emotsioonide tekkimisega.

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