

TRAVEL

16

SATURDAY, APRIL 17, 2010



Matsu on the move

The Dajia Matsu Pilgrimage, Taiwan's largest, is an ideal opportunity to experience the country's indigenous religious culture — either for one day as a tourist or for the entire nine days as a pilgrim

BY NOAH BUCHAN
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Surrounded by hundreds of worshippers and a scrum of photographers, Jenn Lann Temple President and controversial Legislator Yen Ching-piao (顏清標), “a small godfather in political circles” and “the throat and tongue of the people,” according to the temple’s literature, prepared to cast divining blocks to determine the starting day of this year’s Dajia Matsu Pilgrimage (大甲媽祖繞境進香) — the largest pilgrimage devoted to Matsu, patron goddess of the sea and, with more than 500 temples dedicated to her, one of Taiwan’s most revered deities.

Worshippers craned their necks to catch a glimpse of Yen through thick clouds of incense smoke as Yen, flanked by Legislative Speaker Wang Jin-pyng (王金平) and Jenn Lann Temple Vice President Chen Ming-kun (鄭銘坤), let go of the oversized glossy red moon blocks that had rested on a thick stack of paper money.

Matsu let the date be known: the third day of the third month on the lunar calendar (April 16 for the solar calendar) — last night at 11pm, when the temple’s statue of Matsu was to be removed from her resting place and brought out on its pilgrimage.

In addition to the bustling crowds weaving through Jenn Lann Temple on Feb. 28 as Yen performed the ritual, appearances by heavyweight politicians such as the Chinese Nationalist Party’s

(KMT) Presidential Office Secretary-General Liao Liou-yi (廖了以) and Taichung Mayor Jason Hu (胡志強) as well as the Democratic Progressive Party’s (DPP) former deputy Presidential Office secretary-general Lin Chia-lung (林佳龍), attest to both Jenn Lann Temple’s pull and the popularity of the pilgrimage.

The event is so popular, in fact, that organizers decided this year to extend it by a day and a night to allow worshippers more time to receive blessings from Matsu. “Adding another night and day in Singshuei will reduce crowds on the final day in Dajia and allow more time for [pilgrims] to rest,” Wu said.

It might also decrease the number of fights among local gangsters and the more zealous believers that have become part of the pilgrimage’s lore.

A few years back, Chen, the temple’s vice president, had to break up a fight involving dozens of spirit mediums vying to touch Matsu’s passing palanquin, which is said to bring blessings and good luck.

Matsu’s origins and subsequent hagiography are the stuff of legend. Though written and oral accounts vary, she was supposedly born amid auspicious signs into either a family of fishermen or low-ranking but devout officials in the 10th century in China’s Fujian Province. She was given the name Moniang (默娘), or “silent girl,” because

she didn’t cry for the first month after her birth. She mastered the Confucian classics and demonstrated a flair for banishing demons and averting disasters — particularly those involving the dangerous waters of the Taiwan Strait. According to one legend, she sacrificed her life to save her father and brothers who were out on the open ocean when a typhoon struck, hence her current status as goddess of the sea and protector of fishermen and sailors.

The Dajia Matsu Pilgrimage started more than a hundred years ago with only a small band of worshippers. It has grown exponentially over the past two decades. Wu I-min (吳伊敏), a temple spokesperson, anecdotally estimates that a million people showed up last year, of whom 60 percent were tourists.

Some stayed for a day while others chose to follow Matsu’s sedan chair on foot for the entire route, from its home to the Tienfeng Temple (奉天宮) in Sinkang (新港), Chiayi County, and back again, Wu said.

The total journey is around 350km. Throughout yesterday afternoon tourists poured into Dajia’s downtown while groups of pilgrims took turns marching up to the temple’s main square to pay their respects and perform for Matsu. One martial arts troupe waved swords and traditional weapons for Yen and Chen, who stood on the temple’s front steps and applauded. After

the performance members of the troupe handed Yen and Chen weapons and the pair struck poses for the media’s cameras.

Inside the temple, photographers positioned themselves on raised platforms waiting for the arrival of President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) and Premier Wu Den-yih (吳敦義), while pilgrims poured into the packed sanctuary.

When the time of the president’s arrival drew near, Criminal Investigation Bureau (CIB) officers pushed worshippers away from the main incense burner to clear space for Ma’s entourage. As Ma approached the temple some pilgrims were still trying to break through the security cordon.

In a gesture of respect to Matsu, CIB officers took banners from worshippers and waved them around the incense burners for good luck before returning them. One officer collected incense sticks from pilgrims and stuck in the main incense burner. An overly zealous middle-aged woman dressed in red tried to do it herself but was dragged away screaming.

Ma entered the temple five hours before Matsu was to be brought out on her pilgrimage. The chaotic crowd rushed the wall of CIB officers amid shouts of “President Ma!” to try to get a glimpse of him or shake his hand. Ma caught the eye of one diminutive elderly worshipper holding a handful of incense sticks and clasped her hands.

The president then proceeded to the main

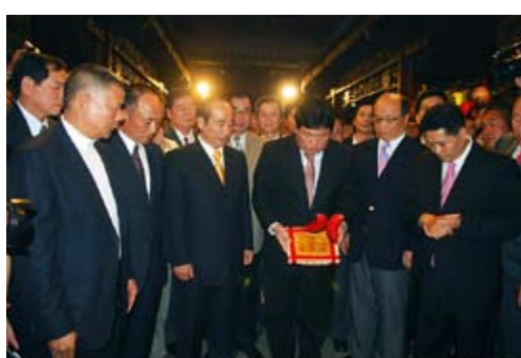
altar with Wu and a handful of officials to pray at the statue of Matsu. In front of the main altar, Yen presented Ma with a white statue of Matsu and a large red envelope. After receiving the presents Ma gave a speech, half in Hoklo (commonly known as Taiwanese) and half in Mandarin, praising Jenn Lann Temple for raising the profile of Matsu.

Ma then asked the crowd if they knew how many Matsu worshippers there were in the world. “One million!” a man shouted. “You underestimate the power of Matsu!” exclaimed Ma, adding that there were more than 100 million Matsu worshippers in the world.

According to temple spokesperson Wu, the best days for tourists to witness the pilgrimage are the first day, when Matsu is brought out of the temple, the fourth day, when she arrives in Singang, where many performances are held, and the final day, when village gangs have been known to fight their way to the front of the crowd to protect Matsu as she is returned to her resting place in Jenn Lann Temple.

Just walking for a night with Matsu through the back roads of central-west Taiwan can be a fascinating experience.

“Even in the middle of the night way out in the countryside you will see people set up a table and offer fruit and food to pray to Matsu,” Wu said.



Top: Jenn Lann Temple President Yen Ching-piao presents President Ma Ying-jeou with a red envelope as Premier Wu Den-yi stands in the background yesterday before the start of the Dajia Matsu Pilgrimage. PHOTO: NOAH BUCHAN, TAIPEI TIMES
Above: Yen Ching-piao casts moon blocks on Feb. 28 to determine the starting day of this year’s pilgrimage. Standing to his right is Legislative Speaker Wang Jin-pyng, to his left Taichung Mayor Jason Hu. PHOTO: CHANG HSUAN-CHE, TAIPEI TIMES
Left: Worshippers carry Jenn Lann’s statue of Matsu back to its resting place at the conclusion of last year’s Dajia Matsu Pilgrimage. PHOTO: LIAO YAU-TUNG, TAIPEI TIMES

If you go

- Temples along the Dajia Matsu pilgrimage route offer rudimentary accommodation. Water and vegetarian food are provided for free by temples and believers along the route. To learn more, go to Jenn Lann Temple’s Web site (Chinese and English) at www.dajiamazu.org.tw
- Jenn Lann Temple is a five-minute walk from Dajia Train Station (大甲站). Return tickets on Taiwan Rail from Taipei Train Station are NT\$480. The Taiwan High Speed Rail does not have a station near Dajia

Schedule

Departure from Jenn Lann Temple, Dajia, Taichung County, last night at 11pm

- Day 1 (today):** Overnight at Nanyao Temple, Changhua City (彰化市南瑤宮)
- Day 2 (tomorrow):** Overnight at Fuhshing Temple, Siluo Township (西螺鎮福興宮)
- Day 3 (Monday):** Overnight at Fengtien Temple, Singang Township (新港鄉奉天宮)
- Day 4 (Tuesday):** Main blessing ceremony at 8am, overnight at Fengtien Temple, Singang Township (新港鄉奉天宮)
- Day 5 (Wednesday):** Overnight at Fuhshing Temple, Siluo Township (西螺鎮福興宮)
- Day 6 (Thursday):** Overnight at Chenghan Temple, Beidou Township (北斗鎮興安宮)
- Day 7 (Friday):** Overnight at Tienhou Temple, Changhua City (彰化市天后宮)
- Day 8 (Saturday):** Overnight at Chaohsing Temple, Singshuei Township (清水鎮朝興宮)
- Day 9 (April 25):** Return to Jenn Lann Temple, Dajia Township (大甲鎮瀾宮)