

Place and Spirit in Taiwan

Tudi Gong in the stories, strategies and memories of everyday life

Alessandro Dell'Orto



PLACE AND SPIRIT IN TAIWAN



Tudi Gong holding the *ruyi* and the *yuanbao*.

In today's Taiwan, Tudi Gong is often depicted holding, in his right hand, the *ruyi*, a kind of sceptre expressing good luck and, in his left hand, the *yuanbao*, an odd-shaped silver or gold ingot formerly used as money. This Tudi Gong statue is sited outside the Cihou Gong, a temple dedicated to Mazu, on Chongren Road, no. 2, section 1, Beitou district, Taipei city. The four characters *fu you si fang* convey the idea that Tudi Gong 'blesses and protects the four directions' or the whole place, one of the main functions attributed to this deity.

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To my mother Angela,
to the good memory of my father Vincenzo
and to my Taiwanese friends

CONTENTS

<i>List of illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Foreword</i>	xiii
<i>Preface</i>	xvii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xix
Introduction	1
<i>The multilocation and multilocution of Tudi Gong in contemporary Taiwan</i>	1
<i>Positing and positioning the reader/writer</i>	7
<i>An ethnography and anthropology of place</i>	8
PART I	
Telling stories about place	17
1 Datong district	25
<i>'Finding my feet'</i>	25
<i>Mapping territories</i>	26
<i>'Siting' and 'sighting' Tudi Gong temples in Datong district</i>	34
2 Yongxing village	73
<i>'Feeling at home': positioning myself and being positioned</i>	73
<i>My good friend uncle Lai and his family</i>	77
<i>Yongxing: the village and its people</i>	86
<i>Tudi Gong, Lin Peng and the Twelve Ancient Heroes</i>	96
<i>On my way back to the city</i>	106
PART II	
Writing place and the place of writing	109
3 'Siting' and 'sighting' texts	111
<i>From the vantage point of hindsight: reflecting on the first two chapters</i>	111

'Siting' and 'sighting' texts: on writing about Tudi Gong in Datong district and Yongxing village	119
Questions in motion	133
Concluding thoughts	134

PART III

Telling stories about Tudi Gong 139

4 The 'territories' of Tudi Gong 143

On the 'territories' of Tudi Gong: an introduction	143
Tudi Gong: the spirit of the Yin and Yang worlds	144
Delimiting, guarding and purifying the territory: the Fang Jun-Shou Jun ritual in Datong district, Taipei city	163
Discussion	170

5 Fragments from 'popular tradition': telling stories and other representations of Tudi Gong 176

Introduction: fragments from 'popular tradition'	176
Telling stories about Tudi Gong	178
Other representations of Tudi Gong	195
Discussion	214

PART IV

Conclusion 219

6 Retelling stories about place and Tudi Gong: retrospectives and prospectives 221

Tudi Gong and place: the inspiration of place	221
Tudi Gong and place as locale: the agency of place	223
Tudi Gong and place as territory: the authorisation of place	227
Tudi Gong and place as locality: the durability of place	229
Tudi Gong and place as location: the congruence of place	232
Tudi Gong and place as senses of place: the personality and power of place	235
Tudi Gong and place as community and identity: the practice, ambiguities and contradictions of place	237
The anthropologist as Tudi Gong: the authority of place	248

Notes	252
Selected glossary	271
Bibliography	283
Index	294

ILLUSTRATIONS

Plates

1.1	The Fujū Gong	36
1.2	The Hede Ci	38
1.3	Worshippers burning paper money at the Yongle Gong	41
1.4	The Fude Gong	44
1.5	An elder at the Fude Miao	48
1.6	The Hean Gong	50
1.7	The Wanhe Gong	52
1.8	The Fuxing Gong	55
1.9	The Puyuan Gong	57
1.10	The Fumin Gong	61
1.11	Tudi Gong at the Shuangfu Gong	62
1.12	The Chengde Gong	64
1.13	Jingfu Gong	66
1.14	The Fushou Gong	68
1.15	The Fuan Gong	71
1.16	The Qiansui Fude Gong before being destroyed	72
2.1	Uncle Lai of Yongxing village	79
2.2	Ama of Yongxing village	79
2.3	Uncle Lai's house	80
2.4	Backside view of the wooden plaque used for the rotational worship of Tudi Gong and Lin Peng in Yongxing village	91
2.5	Tudi Gong temple in Yongxing village	100
2.6	Frontside view of the wooden plaque used for the rotational worship of Tudi Gong and Lin Peng in Yongxing village	105
4.1	A small Tudi Gong shrine in central Taiwan	146
4.2	Tudi Gong as Houtu	152
4.3	Houtu represented by a small Tudi Gong statue	153
4.4	Tudi Gong during funerals	158

ILLUSTRATIONS

5.1	Tudi Gong holding a walking stick	205
5.2	Tudi Gong and his wife Tudi Po	208
5.3	Tudi Gong and his subordinates: Wenban and Wuban	209
5.4	The Tiger in a Tudi Gong temple in Taibei city	209
5.5	'Making Tudi Gong happy': the Nong Tuzhi Gong procession in Neihu, Taibei city	213

Maps

1.1	Map of Taiwan	24
1.2	Taibei city: administrative districts	27
1.3	Location of Dalongtong, Dadaocheng and Datong's neighbouring districts	28
1.4	Location of Tudi Gong temples in Datong district	29
1.5	Location of Tudi Gong temples in Datong district with reference to main roads	30
1.6	Dadaocheng and Dalongtong: 1895 map	32
1.7	Map of Tudi Gong temples' territories, Datong district, Taibei city	33
1.8	Yanping route	34
1.9	Chongqing route	54
1.10	Map of Taibei city: 1920	58
1.11	Chengde route	60
1.12	Chongde temple's territory	65
1.13	Map of Shanzaijiaozhuang locality: 1903–4	67
1.14	Ninth Floodgate route	70
2.1	Map of Yongxing village	94
4.1	Mapping the Fang Jun-Shou Jun ritual in Datong district	164
4.2	The route of the Anfang processions in Datong district	166

Figures

2.1	Official population records: Yongxing-Pingling and Xinglong	89
2.2	Backside view of the wooden plaque	93
4.1	Tudi Gong: the spirit of the Yin and Yang worlds	144
4.2	One of the most common Tudi Gong couplets	145
4.3	The story of 'Meng Chiang-nu' told by Schipper, Ahern and Feuchtwang	155
4.4	Tudi Gong temples in Datong district spatially connected to Youying Gong temples	160
4.5	Saso's chart built on de Groot's explanation of the Yin-Yang and Five Elements views	170

ILLUSTRATIONS

5.1	Newspaper article: ‘God of the Earth kidnapped, thieves demanding ransom’	200
5.2	Drawing of Tudi Gong game	202

Unless otherwise indicated and acknowledged in the text, the reader should assume that I am the author of all plates, maps, figures and tables.

FOREWORD

What you are about to read is an experiment in writing. Recapitulating the walking routes by which he made his first field inquiry, Alessandro Dell'Orto continues it in writing and leaves much of it open-ended. I have seen and walked through many of the same routes, but did not suspect the richness and depth of what he has brought out from them. So I write here with an outstretched hand to introduce author and subject in a kind of congratulation.

Alessandro is Italian, studied anthropology in England, and lives in the city of Taipei, the older quarters of which are the main subject of this book. His tone is one of admiration for the benign god of place called Tudi Gong. His stance is that of a listener, of learning how to interpret the way the god is treated and his rituals conducted from the people who participate in them, adding things they would not have read as an additional, but not necessarily more plausible apparatus of understanding.

Tudi Gong is the most basic Chinese god of locality. He is god of soil, of territory and most meaningfully of place. To build a temple to him is to make a place of the most basic kind, the smallest beyond the households of its residents. His festivals focus and mark its boundaries. People living within them link their everyday trajectories to a sense of the place whose definition is recognised in and by a Tudi Gong temple. People moving out and back into that place cross boundaries of a familiarity and loyalty named by street names or by those of rural paths and streams and turned into a neighbourhood by a Tudi Gong temple. Yet it is probably only the most local of locals who actually frequent the temple as a regular practice. It is into this most local sense of place that Alessandro has felt his way, and into which he induces his readers.

Other, more individuated cults mark larger places that include several Tudi Gong. Very many of these have been studied, but not Tudi Gong. A paradox, this is the first full study of the god of place, yet he is the most ubiquitous of the gods of China. It is probably by his lowliness, his common place that he has evaded the full attention of scholars who prefer something with a higher standing and profile. But to praise this book for being the first on its

subject might give the wrong impression. This is not a mere platform of information to bring a subject into view for further study. It is much more dynamic. It has to be, since Alessandro's journeys and maps across Tudi Gong territories trace what has been one of the fastest growing economies and most quickly changing landscapes, urban and rural, in the world. Taiwan and its capital city, Taibei, have in the past forty years moved from a newly industrialising into a fully, new-technology, developed country. The city must have been rebuilt several times over in those years. Yet Tudi Gong temples and territories, where they already existed, have persisted through the physical alteration of places, with new stories added to older ones, larger, more flashy temples to the simple and low-key structures of the older style. They show a remarkable retention of a territorial sense of place within the deterritorialising tendencies normally associated with advanced capitalism.

All that is fully taken into Alessandro's account. But I want to return to the writing of the book to introduce a further dynamic, its engagement of many different lines of entry into the subject itself of place. Each is valid, no one of them sufficient. On the richly testing ground of Tudi Gong that is personal, ritual, sociable, practical and topographical many strands of cultural geography, anthropology and sociology are examined. The results come back at the end of the book, refreshed and with new questions attached.

Gaps between theory, fieldwork, and writing are questioned and broken down in practice by the way the book is written. It is organised as a textual reading of the results of field enquiries to accomplish two things. One is to allow the reader to see and participate in as large a number of possible theoretical and interpretative departures from the materials presented. The second accomplishment is to convey the indeterminacy and continuing creativity of the people in the field, their practices, images and story telling interpretations of the figure of Tudi Gong in Taiwan. The author presents himself here as a mediator between stories, as he puts it, in fact not just stories and descriptions, but the interpretations included in the stories and comments.

The stress on story telling as a creative, performative and provisional act is appropriate not only to the theme of ethnography but also to the theme of place. Alessandro builds a persuasive case that the spatial construction of place, with a node and a sense of identity and its borders are place-making by many incisions, by use, by experience and by remembering. All traces and tracking of places are, in practice, temporal. They are trips or journeys as well as anecdotes. They can be mapped, structured and objectified. The book is indeed full of maps and pictures. But our attention is drawn to process and narrative, not to fixture, nor to strictly logical argumentation. We are returned to themes, guided through them. But each return is more like an appropriate stress from another angle that amplifies the theme, without coming to a firm conclusion.

FOREWORD

In short, this is an intriguing and open book, about a good and multiple god, and many people, in a fascinating island country and about the sense of place itself.

Stephan Feuchtwang
London, October 2000

PREFACE

At the beginning of my ethnographic fieldwork I was looking for a fixed reference point which could tell stories, indicate strategies and recount memories of local people's – and anthropologists' – practices of everyday life. A fixed reference point that could then become a potentially relevant medium for a deeper and wider understanding of Taiwanese society and of all those cultural traditions and parameters which differentiate and, to a certain extent, bond societies and cultures throughout the world. A fixed reference point which would allow me to explore a number of ethnographic terrains and interpretative directions and, hopefully, contribute towards an ongoing appraisal of the grounds upon which anthropology stands.

It was in the summer of 1991, while I was living in Taipei, that I first decided to undertake a study of Tudi Gong cults and temples in Taiwan. At that time I was mainly engaged in Chinese and Taiwanese language studies. It was not until 1994 that I embarked on a 17-month fieldwork, which was then followed by another 6 months in 1996–7, and by a year of post-doctoral research in 1999–2000. During my frequent visits to Tudi Gong temples, a practice which soon became almost an addiction, I was fascinated by the *multilocation* of Tudi Gong which is – I began to feel – at the same time, his *multilocution*. Each place he guards, in fact, has its stories to tell, and so the cult of this most ancient and popular Chinese deity lives on in the narratives of the people and places of contemporary Taiwan (see Introduction).

Almost 10 years later, I find myself in the same place writing a preface for a book about Tudi Gong, *the spirit of place*, both as a religious–social phenomenon of intrinsic interest, but also as a 'fixed reference point' and an 'appropriate medium' for exploring and analysing the dynamic social changes which have been occurring in contemporary Taiwan, and people's strategic adaptations to these changes. Despite his prevalence and popularity among the people of Taiwan – and throughout Chinese societies, Tudi Gong seems to have been given a disproportionately small place in anthropological and sinological studies. It is surprising that so little attention has been paid to this key figure, despite the fact that a number of scholars have commended its focus.

PREFACE

However, this book is not only about Tudi Gong. My ethnography has allowed me to engage, in an innovative manner, in a theoretical discussion on the practices, processes and strategies of fieldwork and on the shaping of ethnographic writing (see [Chapter 3](#)). Most importantly, it has contributed towards the construction of an *anthropology of place* by analysing a number of key concepts related to the notion of place and space (see Conclusion). In the six chapters of the book, particular attention is given to the changing Taiwanese senses of place, community and identity.

Many people have advised, encouraged and welcomed this study. I would like to thank in a special way Stuart Thompson, Jean Lefevre, Stephan Feuchtwang, Allen Chun and Paul Katz who offered invaluable insights and advice. I would also like to express my gratitude to Jonathan Price and the RoutledgeCurzon team for publishing this book. Working with them on this project has been a learning and exciting experience.

My greatest debt will always be to the people of Taiwan itself, especially those of Datong district, Taibei city and Yongxing village, Nantou county. It is with them that I would like to share the authorship of this book.

Alessandro Dell'Orto
Taibei, October 2000

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INTRODUCTION

The multilocation and multilocation of Tudi Gong in contemporary Taiwan

Images of, and shrines to, Tudi Gong can be seen almost anywhere on the island of Taiwan. In homes, shops, restaurants, urban neighbourhoods or rural villages, he occupies a place, both literal and imagined, among the people as well as within the territory he is protecting. In the most isolated fields the farmers' work is 'watched over' by the attentive and benevolent Tudi Gong. Even the dead of the community continue to sense his presence by having him placed on the side of their tombs. The sayings: 'every two or three steps one can see a Tudi Gong temple' (*san bu liang bu ke jian tudi gong miao*), or 'at the beginning and end of each field there is a Tudi Gong' (*tian tou tian wei tudi gong*) emphasise the 'multilocation' of his presence among the people of Taiwan.

The multilocation of Tudi Gong is, at the same time, his 'multilocation'. Each place he guards has its stories to tell, and so the cult of this most ancient and popular Chinese deity lives on in the narratives of the people and places of contemporary Taiwan.

Tudi Gong has been variously translated into English as spirit of the earth, territory god, earth god, lord of the land, tutelary deity of the site-locality, god of the soil, locality god and god of the place, *inter alia*. This multiplicity of terms gives some flavour of the range of 'functions' and 'connotations' which Tudi Gong is given in people's interpretations of the cult and in textual sources.¹

During the first stage of my fieldwork, the multilocation, multilocation and the various roles that people ascribe to Tudi Gong appeared to me as somewhat cryptic, but I have learned to regard this very multifacetedness as heuristically advantageous and of potential relevance for my anthropological analysis. To a certain degree, it reflects the ambiguity of defining, in a theoretical manner, key terms such as *place*, *locale*, *territory*, *locality*, *location*, *senses of place*, *community* and *identity*, and the problems of sorting the complexity of the interrelationships among these key words. It also replicates

the differential, multiple and somewhat contrasting senses of place, community and identity that people experience and imagine in the practice of everyday life.

The multiplicity of Tudi Gong's iconographies, as they have been represented by the Chinese through time and space, seem to convey the sense that Hugh Baker associates with this most famous and 'kind-hearted' of all the spirits inhabiting the Chinese pantheon. Tudi Gong 'stands for a sense of stability, of security, of identity with fixed and unmovable reference points, of community and of belonging' (Baker 1981: 1). Important events occurring in the lives of individuals and communities are reported to him in a manner analogous to notification at the local police station or registry office. His help is sought by farmers as well as business people, by shopkeepers as well as housekeepers.

Given his good nature and his low-level position in the Chinese pantheon, Tudi Gong is often said to be cheated or bribed by his human clientele. His proximity to people makes him unable to exert any kind of malignant power on his worshippers. Successful gamblers are often said 'to have made deals with [Tudi Gong, while] . . . menstruating women and people who have had a family member die within the past year . . . are not excluded from participating in the ceremonies' to celebrate Tudi Gong (Huang Shu-Min 1981: 98).

On this and other counts he is shown not to be a stickler for regulations and formal proscriptions, as other deities may be. He is compassionate and has human-like qualities. As a Taiwanese friend told me, 'he is a spirit who understands the human heart, its weaknesses as well as aspirations, and the ways it changes and adjusts to new places and situations'. The theme of Tudi Gong's 'understanding', 'flexibility' and 'benevolence' was often addressed by Taiwanese friends during my fieldwork. They thus regarded him as 'the people's deity' (*ren jian de shen*).

In time of need, however, people would be more concerned with Tudi Gong's *ling*, his 'miraculous power.' In fact, if his *ling* is no longer efficacious, he may be temporarily sanctioned or even replaced by the community.²

Some of my raconteurs pointed out that there have been cases in which Tudi Gongs have been left in the sun for not having managed to provide the rain needed for agriculture; or they have not been worshipped for a while because of delays in granting people's requests for help; or they have been mutilated and then thrown away for having failed to indicate to gamblers the exact numbers to be played in lotteries. It was explained that such a 'contractual', or one may say 'mutually beneficial', relationship between people and deities – which, I believe, is not only a characteristic unique to Chinese popular religion – seems to be quite widespread in contemporary Taiwan.

Tudi Gong and senses of place

This leads me to speculate on whether senses of specific places wax and wane concomitantly with the 'magical power' of Tudi Gong and other Chinese deities³ or, in more general terms, in accordance with a dialectic between places and Tudi Gongs. This, I feel, can be traced on three interconnected levels.

First, the fact that some Tudi Gongs are thought as having more *ling* than others has often made the places where they are located more attractive to both worshippers and visitors. In more general terms, I wonder whether the fact that some places seem to gather momentum towards an intensified 'sense of place' in people's feeling and interpretations, might not be ascribable to the *ling* of some gods, ghosts and ancestors, whose temples are sited in a specific locality.

Tudi Gong, for example, seems to have had the capacity, in several cases, of endowing specific places through the 'authority' of his presence. This authority is mainly due to the efficaciousness and durability of his miraculous performance or linked to the fact that a specific Tudi Gong may have been a local personage or a local ancestor. Petrie pointed out that there are 'as many personifications . . . as there are shrines to him . . . Usually these gods are the spirit of a local personage, historically known in the locality and famous for his personal accomplishments' (Petrie 1972: 39) and 'good deeds' (*gongde*) which were performed to help the people. The Chinese saying that 'the birth – or presence – of heroes brings glory to a place' (*di ling ren jie*) may be somehow applicable to the various Tudi Gongs. Goodrich (1991: 388) quotes a letter from the *Chinese Recorder* which says:

a distinguished literary man, who died 50 miles away from here a thousand years or more ago, has, within the past ten years, become the supreme object of adoration by the people of this and surrounding villages. Ten years ago little or nothing was heard of him. Five years ago they built him a gorgeous temple . . . whatever prosperity they have they attribute to him.⁴

Lefevre (1990: 3) stresses that, in contemporary Taiwan, Tudi Gong can be an ancestor of a local family. This is the case for a Hakka community in Pingdong district, one of whom told the story that, after his death, his grand-uncle (younger brother of his grandfather) was chosen by the community as its local Tudi Gong.

Although the view that a Tudi Gong is the personification of a famous local personage or a local ancestor is quite widespread in Taiwan, during fieldwork I was not able to discover which local figures, if any, were personified by the several Tudi Gongs I researched upon. My feeling is that most people did not seem to know or be concerned with the origins of Tudi Gong.

Often I have heard people saying, ‘the Tudi Gong of that specific place has more *ling*’ and have encountered many people who normally, or for special events, such as in the sickness of a relative or friend, would worship Tudi Gong at more than one location, at the local temple in their neighbourhood as well as at specific Tudi Gong temples with a reputation as ‘having more miraculous power’ (*bijiao you ling*).

In some cases, the area surrounding these Tudi Gong temples has been transformed into a recreational park. Checheng village (Pingdong, southern Taiwan) is believed to have built the biggest Tudi Gong temple in the world, a four-storey temple which accommodates several deities of the Chinese pantheon as well as museums, recreational areas and, around it, a large park. In recent years, Checheng’s Tudi Gong temple has attracted thousands of visitors from all over Taiwan.

Second, it has to be stressed that some places exert a power of attraction on many Taiwanese on account of their beauty, geomancy, memorability and durability. These places seem to have enhanced the magical power of temples and deities located in the area or to have inspired some local people to build a new temple. I found a very small temple dedicated to Tudi Gong near Taidong (southeast of Taiwan), among the trees and very close to the sea. An elderly man was in charge of it. He explained that he inherited the surrounding land from his ancestors who were once the landlords of that locality. The development of tourism brings thousands of people every year to enjoy the eastern coast of Taiwan. This is why he decided to build a temple dedicated to Tudi Gong to guarantee safety, peace and enjoyment for himself and his visitors – who usually stopped for a short worship – both on the land and in the sea.⁵ A further example is the recent refurbishing of the Tudi Gong temple situated in Jiufen, a small village one-hour’s drive from Taipei which, over the last few years, has become a major tourist attraction especially for the young people of Taipei.

Third, there are also cases in which the ‘power of place’ and ‘power of Tudi Gong’ (or other deities) have been merged since the first ‘community’ settled in a specific locality. My ethnographic data from Datong district, which will be presented in the first chapter, seem to show that some places and some Tudi Gong temples, which have become memorable through time, are regarded as distinctive by local inhabitants through association with events of the past that somehow continue to live on in people’s personal and collective narratives.

The ‘popularity’ of Tudi Gong

It is a moot point whether Tudi Gong popularity and appeal has waxed or waned in recent years in Taiwan. Despite the fact that over the last few years Tudi Gong’s ‘miraculous power’ (*ling*) has been questioned by the Everybody Happy (*dajiale*) movement,⁶ his statues, images and representations have not

diminished in quantity. On the contrary, 'it seems that every year in Taiwan, there is a mass production of statues representing Tudi Gong', Mr Gao told me. My attempt to know how many statues are made each year or, at least, to estimate tentatively the number of temples which are dedicated to Tudi Gong on Taiwan, sounded like a joke to my Taiwanese friends:

you will never be able to know it. There must be several thousand temples on the island. These multiply with the development of places, especially in the city. Temples dedicated to Tudi Gong or any other deity, normally increase as the Taiwanese do not like to destroy temples. It is bad luck.

Tudi Gong is more popular even than Mazu or Guan Gong with whose images he is often associated. The multilocation of Tudi Gong presence in Taiwan seems to show the profound attachment that the Taiwanese have for this deity. 'It is like our habit of keeping photos of our good friends', a young student told me. 'He is portrayed as a jolly and friendly elderly man. We are not afraid of him', another one added, implicitly referring to the fact that some deities and some temples do induce a sense of fear and that it is better not to come too close to them.

Gao-Hong, one of my best friends on Taiwan, explained to me that the relationship between Tudi Gong and the Chinese resembles that between 'old friends' (*lao pengyou*) or 'classmates' (*tongxue*). Although it is not always possible to meet or stay together, friendship does not diminish. It does not need too many 'meetings' to strengthen it. The absence of regular worship on the part of some, does not mean that Tudi Gong is not important for the Chinese. 'Tudi Gong is very close to us, and so very flexible', he pointed out. One may say that proximity makes the whole relationship between Tudi Gong and people very 'flexible' (*you tanxing*). Even those who do not worship Tudi Gong on a regular basis have some kind of relationship and idea about him. Gao-Hong also stressed the fact that the Chinese are said to have, and claim to have, an intense attachment to the 'land' (*tudi*) and 'ancestors' (*zuxian*) which, ideally, allows them to experience a sense of continuity with people and places. This attachment is differentially experienced depending, for example, on the grade of social mobility, the sense of collective and individual identity and belonging to one's place of origin, status and gender. Mr Pan, a good friend that I met in Canada on my way to Taiwan,⁷ told me that

when the Chinese settle down in a new place, the first temple they build is a Tudi Gong temple. If we move to a new house, in Taiwan or abroad, the first deity we worship is Tudi Gong. He has to know of our new location so that he can protect our families and our neighbourhoods. When I arrived in Canada a few years ago I informed Tudi Gong of my family change of address.

The Chinese pay special attention when moving to a new place. A favourable time has to be chosen and several steps have to be followed when taking up residence in a new territory. I have heard a good number of people telling me that at this time worshipping Tudi Gong both in the new house and at the local temple is a matter of extreme importance.⁸

Schipper has pointed out that, in the history of Taiwan, 'Tu-di Gong played an important role as the first cult established by new settlers to protect them against demons and aborigines alike' (Schipper 1977: 770, note 16). Over the last 300 years, the history of Chinese settlements on Taiwan has never been peaceful. It has been marked by fierce fights between aborigines and Chinese settlers – and among these settlers, too – in order to take possession of the best land and water resources on the island. The land, as Baker writes, 'must have its supernatural as well as its mortal master' (Baker 1981: 4) and the establishment of Tudi Gong cults shows:

a concern with the earth, with location and permanence. In the Chinese world of natural and man-made disasters, of precarious peace and fickle rulers, land was the traditional anchor. Come drought and hunger, come rapacious bandit or greedy mandarin, come fire or disease, with land there was always hope of rejuvenation and recuperation.

(Baker 1981: 4)

Tudi Gong's domain, however, extends well beyond the relationship between man and the land. His agricultural function – thus Tudi Gong has often been translated as earth god – is but one aspect which should be integrated with notions of territory (Baker 1979: 1), locality and community (Wolf 1974: 134; Feuchtwang 1992: 96) and place (Sangren 1987; Wolf 1974: 134).

The Chinese, in fact, attribute two main functions to Tudi Gong. Wolf describes them as the policing of 'ghosts' (*gui*), 'the supernatural equivalent of bandits, beggars, and other dangerous strangers' (Wolf 1974: 134) which are associated with the earth, and spying as well as taking records of all the most important events occurring in the community he is protecting. Tudi Gong's 'surveillance' function, thus, makes him 'the king of *gui*, the locality's official' (Feuchtwang 1992: 95). He will then have to report to the City God (*chenghuang*).

My point here is that no matter how different people explain and 'talk about' the Chinese religious pantheon, Tudi Gong seems to be the spirit closest to the Chinese. His lower status in the supernatural hierarchy makes him the most loved spirit that one can rely on or, as explained by an old woman, 'whether out of doors or indoors, one depends on Tudi Gong' (Feuchtwang 1992: 97).

Positing and positioning the reader/writer

In terms of writing and reading, the openness of a relationship is a consequence of producing a text. If reading is a creative process, then a text is open to creativity whenever it is read, to a potentially infinite number of readings. If to be open, to give of oneself, is the Levinasian basis of ethics, then to recognise the openness of one's own writing and to release it to the reader is of fundamental importance. If the production of language and the construction of texts is central to the process of self-definition, then to abandon what has been written to the desires of a readership is to place one's identity in the trust of the reader.

(Revill 1993: 125)

As a strategic and open-ended view, the previous part has, I hope, allowed the reader to begin familiarising himself or herself with some of the themes which will be presented in this book. This first part also represents the thoughts and ideas, modified slightly through hindsight, to which I was exposed when I first decided to undertake a study of Tudi Gong cults and temples in Taiwan.

The multilocation and multilocution of Tudi Gong and the ethnographic insights they generated during my stay on the island (1990–3) prior to my fieldwork considerably inspired my theoretical approach to *place and senses of place*. This approach, which was produced as part of my MPhil research report in London (Dell'Orto 1994), attempted to unravel the concept of place in several key terms which I identified as *locale*, *territory*, *locality*, *location*, *senses of place*, *community* and *identity*. Though in different ways and to different degrees, these key terms have often been referred to and have engendered various speculative discussions in the chapters of this book. After journeying through the three main parts, my concluding chapter will reposition the ethnographic and theoretical data and insights previously presented and attempt to contribute towards an *anthropology of place* from the perspective of Tudi Gong.

I feel that the above brief orientation should be enough for the reader to turn this page and 'walk along' the various physical and theoretical routes that my ethnographic process has generated. In the very act of reading, in fact, the reader should gradually become familiar with, and aware of, the same 'forces', 'orientations' and 'sightings' which I, myself, experienced in exploring the double perspective characterising my research: that of place and that of Tudi Gong. In the very act of reading, the reader should become acquainted with stories of people and places and the extent to which these have intermingled with my own. In the very act of reading, the reader should 'establish a connection' (*jianli guanxi*) with the various 'authors' (including myself) of the stories which will follow, as I attempted to do with my 'raconteurs' in Taiwan.

There is no need, I reckon, for me to construct artificial parameters at the beginning of this book to conform – or force – your reading to my own expectations. The story that you are about to read will tell you its own tale in its very unfolding and will point out to you the ‘strategies’ behind its creation and development.

The reader has probably started to perceive that in this book I wish to put a stress on the ethnographic process rather than the final product and to contribute towards reducing the distance between *culture* as it is known during fieldwork and *culture* as it is portrayed in a written account, between ethnography as a process and as a product, as a method and as genre (Agar 1995). In [Chapter 3](#), in fact, I will suggest that:

as in the field so in the text . . . the construction of anthropological knowledge is an ongoing process in which different poles of experience and interpretation, those of the anthropologist and those of the people on the ground, are created and recreated in the same ethnographic process.

You, reader, will ‘find your way around’ through the various ethnographic and theoretical routes as I myself did during my ethnographic process. Your own reading of the text I am presenting to you will travel through different, overlapping and sometimes opposing landscapes of meaning that you will, consciously or unconsciously, posit on the pages of this ethnographic account. However, before releasing my own writing and placing my own identity, and that of my ‘raconteurs’, in the trust of the reader (see Revill’s quotation on p. 7), I intend merely to put forward a few brief considerations which may be useful for an introductory analysis of the concept of place (see Conclusion) and for a preliminary reflexive awareness of my own writing (see [Chapter 3](#)).

An ethnography and anthropology of place

Anthropologists are not like ‘detached’ scientists studying the behaviour of rats from outside a glass cage; we are positioned subjects within those fields and should therefore be ‘objects’ of anthropological enquiry as well. Writing more candid, subjective and reflexive accounts of ‘what really happened during fieldwork’ does at least help to render this more apparent – to ourselves and our reader.

(Shore 1999: 45)

In 1976, Relph wrote that ‘place and sense of place do not lend themselves to scientific analysis for they are inextricably bound up with all the hopes, frustrations, and confusions of life, and possibly because of this social scientists have avoided these topics’ (Relph 1976: preface). In more recent years, his phenomenological approach to the study of place and placeless-

ness, has been followed by several studies which have speculated about the significance of place in understanding modern life.⁹ In other words, place now matters to the humanities as well as social sciences to the extent that it has become a privileged locus for understanding the fragmentations and confusions of life.¹⁰

Despite – or, perhaps, because of – its significant conceptual and practical potential, place remains ‘one of those *contestable* concepts whose application is a matter of dispute. In geography, it is often used synonymously with location, point, area, or space’ (Agnew 1987: 26).¹¹

The use of the term in everyday life shows that place is ‘one of the most multi-layered and multi-purpose words in our language’ (Harvey 1993: 4). Generic qualities of place (such as milieu, locality, location, local, neighbourhood, region, territory) and particular kinds of place (such as city, village, town, megalopolis, state) intermingle with more specific connotations of place (such as home, hearth, ‘turf’, community, homeland, landscape).¹²

People’s attachments to monuments, churches, temples, squares, whose very names evoke memories of specific places and events for individuals as well as communities, are created and re-created in and through the practices of everyday life. The ‘landscapes of leisure and entertainment’,¹³ whether Tokyo’s Disneyland or Paris’s Euro Disney, and the ‘landscapes of war and death’, such as Rwanda, Sierra Leone or former Yugoslavia, ‘are seen as not so much segregated sites but modes of representation that permeate virtually all landscapes and hence inseparable from daily life’.¹⁴ Furthermore, metaphors add to the multilayeredness of place distinctive connotations which, although rendering our understanding of it more difficult, also allow us to ‘walk through’ the variety of ‘experiential and conceptual landscapes’ to grasp some ‘partial’ and ‘opaque’ meaning that we ourselves and other people may give to place.¹⁵

I wonder how all these various facets of place, which seem to take the form of a ‘spatial puzzle’ or ‘collage’, interact and/or overlap in people’s stories, strategies and memories of everyday life? And, vice versa, to what extent our everyday life ‘constructs’ such complicated ‘spatial puzzles’? How can we analyse, theoretically, the concept of place?

Agnew has pointed out three major and interwoven elements in the conceptualisation of place:

locale, the settings in which social relations are constituted (these can be informal or institutional); *location*, the geographical area encompassing the settings for social interaction as defined by social and economic processes operating at a wider scale; and a *sense of place*, the local ‘structure of feeling’.

(Agnew 1987: 28)

However, my ethnographic data seem to indicate that Agnew’s suggestion that analysis should be formed in terms of the tripartite differentiation of

locale, location and sense of place, as interwoven elements in the concept of place, is not sufficient for the exploration of the multifaceted notion of place. 'Territory', 'locality' and the 'relationship between community and identity' add to the concept of place further dimensions which should not be ignored.

My approach originated from the fact that during my becoming familiar with Tudi Gong temples in Datong district (Taipei city) I gradually came to realise that the concept of community, through which Tudi Gong temples and cults have often been considered, would not have been enough to explore and analyse the multilocation, multilocation and the various roles that people in Taiwan ascribe to Tudi Gong. It seems that I am not left alone with this preoccupation. With regard to aboriginal culture and society, Michio Suenari stressed that

the speed of the present changes in aboriginal culture and society seems to be too fast for anthropologists to catch up with using the classical tools and concepts. The reason is the change in the nature of the community itself. The sphere of daily life has widened, along with the number of people obtaining necessities for daily life outside the community, and the mobility of villagers looking for higher education or jobs outside. The post modernists seems to be more eager to throw stones at the drowning dog than devising some means of salvage.¹⁶

It is, I suggest, the multiple intersections 'in space and time' (= in place) of theoretically distinct concepts, such as locale, territory, locality, location, senses of place and the relationship between community and identity that can make the notion of place less 'contestable'. In addition, the notion of place I am proposing is, I feel, a potentially significant perspective from which social anthropology – and other disciplines – can attempt to explore the dialectical relationship between the relative valencies of cultural and historical continuity versus topographical specificities and conjunctures.

Place and senses of place

While anthropological descriptions of place have remained relatively monological, places themselves are fertilized into being through a confluence of voices. Places are complex constructions of social histories, personal and interpersonal experiences, and selective memory.

(Kahn 1996: 168)

What I also suggest in this book is that place is best ethnographically described and theoretically analysed as a 'confluence of voices' which, through

people's and anthropologists' stories, strategies and memories of everyday life, are variously and continuously spoken. As Kahn interestingly notes with reference to her own fieldwork, 'I focus on place through the shifting vistas and dimensions of the anthropological encounter, through the ways in which "my" view and "their" view meet at the points of inclusion, exclusion, and overlap to create a sense of "our" place' (Kahn 1996: 168).

In this regard, what I propose to consider is that an analysis of people's senses of place (I imply that there is more than one sense) coupled with a study of Tudi Gong cults and temples in specific communities can be an appropriate medium for exploring Taiwan's radical and rapid transformation over the last few decades, and people's strategic adaptation to these changes. Various degrees of, and multiple, attachments to place (such as family, community, rural village, urban neighbourhood, temple, nation, homeland, school, workplace, etc. . . .) may indicate the extent to which these intersect, overlap and create tensions and alliances in people's practices of everyday life. It may indicate whether the 'imagined' boundaries of a community contrast (or otherwise) with the administrative (or other) boundaries of the state or the wider nation. It may also show the way social transformations are occurring, social interactions and senses of identity are changing and the style in which communities are 'imagined'.¹⁷ As I write in [Chapter 3](#):

by concentrating on the notion of senses of place I am not excluding the other concepts from my theoretical and ethnographic landscape. Senses of place, I feel, seem to capture, more fully, the multiplicity of meanings which people ascribe to place 'through experience, memory and intention' (Johnston *et al.* 1994: 549) . . .

With reference to fieldwork and ethnographic writing, the main question, in my view, is the extent to which people's and anthropologists' senses of place are allowed to come forward and merge in the ethnographic process and final product.

I feel, in fact, that the process and production of anthropological knowledge should be based on dialogical practices which engender a 'merging of horizons' (Salmond 1982: 74) between people's and anthropologists' senses of place 'so that the viewpoints of self and other progressively overlap and understanding is achieved' (Salmond 1982: 74). These, in turn, should be allowed to 'dictate' the style and tenor of anthropologists' ethnographic accounts (see [Chapter 3](#)). In fact, 'in relation to ethnographic fieldwork, it is now widely accepted that the anthropologist can no longer be seen as an observer recording social facts and processes but must be seen as an active, situated, participant in the construction of accounts and representations' (Turner 2000: 51).

Telling stories about place and Tudi Gong

The meaning of a place, for the people who live there is best captured by the stories that they tell about it, about the elements that comprise it, and about the events that took place within its bounds.

(Ryden 1993: 45)

People's senses of place and the multilocation and multilocution of Tudi Gong in the context of Taiwan have 'dictated' considerably the stories I am about to present in this book. In the text as in the field, I have attempted to be open to the different 'forces' and 'voices' (including my own) which seem to characterise both place and Tudi Gong. Stories, I reckon, best capture people's and anthropologists' various degrees of, and multiple, attachments to place. Through stories, personal and communal 'histories' are continuously made and remade, 'cultural traditions and parameters' are asserted and reasserted thus retaining a sense of significance and some kind of vitality both for people and places.¹⁸

As the chapters of this book will hopefully show, my stress on story telling as a creative, performative, and provisional act is appropriate not only to the theme of ethnography but also to the theme of place. However, if on one side my deliberate emphasis on process and narrative seems to play at the expense of strictly logical argumentation and comprehensiveness of topics, on the other, such a choice allows the reader to move with the author in a variety of interpretative directions through the material the chapters disclose. As Tonkin points out, 'by choice of genre telling is constrained, shaped in a particular way' (Tonkin 1998: 66) and 'the commitment to anthropological holism in the context of locality and in association with the need for a sequential ordering strains the narrative mode at the same time that the anthropologist must leave out what others regard as the "important things"' (Silverman and Gulliver 1992: 34).

What I wish to ask of the reader is to become an 'author' himself or herself by telling his or her own story in the same process of reading other people's stories. De Certeau, who has been one of my favourite storytellers in my ethnographic process, pointed out that:

the story does not express a practice. It does not limit itself to telling about a movement. It 'makes' it. One understands it, then, if one enters into this movement oneself . . . The storyteller falls in step with the lively pace of his fables. He follows them in their turns and detours, thus exercising an art of thinking. Like the knight in chess, he crosses the immense chessboard of literature with the 'curved' movement of these stories, like Ariadne's threads, formal games of practices. In that very action he 'interprets' these fables as a pianist 'interprets' a musical composition. He executes them, privileging