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## ► Taiwanese People's Cultural-Psychological Images of Gods and Divine Power

台灣民眾對神明與神聖之文化心理意象初探

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## Taiwanese People's Cultural-Psychological Images of Gods and Divine Power

Yi-jia Tsai\*

### Abstract

The religious landscape in Taiwan is home to a vast pantheon of gods. According to the Religious Experience Survey in Taiwan (REST), there are very few interviewees who have never worshipped any god. 76.3% of the total interviewees (1,714) consider worship or prayer important. Many interviewees report that they have experiences of being moved, protected, or blessed by a divine power. Since experiences of gods or divine powers constitute a very significant role in people's religious lives, this research explores the cultural and psychological images of gods and divine power in Taiwan. It explores the narrative accounts provided in answers to open-ended questions of REST. In addition, we analyzed the data from a preliminary study of "drawing images of gods or divine power" covering people from various religious backgrounds. Through analysis of narrations and of pictorial representations of gods and divine power, this research explores Taiwanese people's cultural and psychological characterizations of transcendental power. Analysis of narrative accounts suggests Taiwanese people have a prototypical image of protection and blessings. They characterize gods or divine power as benevolent powers that guide, protect, care for, or heal people in their daily life. These images are held by respondents from various religions, including respondents who consider themselves non-religious.

Preliminary findings from the project that involved the pictorial drawing of images indicate that there is a similar core image of gods or divine power for Taiwanese people. Pictorial analysis revealed creative illustration based on religious traditions. In Taiwan, various religions coexist in the same society. As variegated as it looks, the reciprocal relationship between gods and human beings constitutes the experiential ground for formation of images of gods.

**Keywords:** religious experience, religion in Taiwan, image of god

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“When I was in the ICU (Intensive Care Unit) of a hospital because of a car accident, I felt someone pulling my hand, trying to take me away. My father was very committed to religious cultivation. He recited a sutra for me. It saved me from death. I have believed in the power of Bodhisattva ever since.” (Buddhist, 12211)

“I was once working in the field when a snake was about to strike me. It seems that the snake was pushed aside by an invisible force (before reaching me.) Consulting a temple, my mother was informed that it was either a Bodhisattva or Mazu who lent a hand and saved me.” (non-religious, 10403)

“When my mother was seriously ill, the god Guan and bodhisattvas came to my rescue, and we saw the room filled with bright light and special images.” (folk religionist, 18611)

“I always dreamed of the earth god visiting me, and I felt very well taken care of.” (I-Kuan Daoist, 16116).

“I participated in a temple worshipping tour. During the trip I vomited and was possessed by the Master Mad Monk Ji. It lasted about ten minutes.” (Daoist, 15334)

“In 2005, I had a dream about God. And I was very touched by the peacefulness of the Holy Spirit. I was baptized as a Christian in 2006. I feel comforted and strengthened whenever I pray to God.” (Protestant, 18818)

## Introduction

The above narratives of religious experiences collected from the REST, which was conducted from October 2008 to January 2010, describe vividly how the power of gods was experienced by respondents in their daily life, especially in times of crisis. In response to the open-ended question of REST, many persons reported that they have had experiences of being moved by or of being

protected or blessed by gods or a divine power.<sup>1</sup> According to REST, there were very few interviewees who have never worshipped gods before. The religious landscape in Taiwan is diverse and has a vast pantheon of gods. The gods who are mentioned most in the open-ended questions are bodhisattvas.<sup>2</sup> Other gods frequently mentioned are *Tudi gong* (“the earth god”),<sup>3</sup> *Mazu*, the historical Buddha, and Master Mad Monk *Ji*.<sup>4</sup> These are all popular traditional gods in Taiwan. Besides these gods in the traditional, vast pantheon, Christianity has introduced the Christian God or divine power with Jesus, the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit. Although the origins of the various gods can be traced to certain religious traditions, they are not worshipped exclusively by worshippers of the same religious traditions. For instance, while 18.6% of the total respondents claim to be Buddhists, a bodhisattva has been worshipped by 72.1% of all respondents. In other words, bodhisattvas are worshipped by many religious practitioners who do not consider themselves Buddhists.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, gods are worshipped or prayed to across religions. This phenomenon of cross-religious worshipping is especially evident in Taiwan's traditional religions: Buddhism, Daoism, folk religion and other newly developed religions that are deeply

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<sup>1</sup> The open-ended question was asked before finishing the part of “Mystical Vision and Feelings.” Respondents were asked to describe mysterious or extraordinary experiences that they had felt most deeply. Accordingly, 1029 respondents' narrative accounts were collected.

<sup>2</sup> In Mahayana Buddhism, a bodhisattva is an enlightened being that refrains from entering nirvāna and ending the painful cycle of rebirth. Because of his compassion, he chooses instead to continue reincarnating in order to help others on the path to enlightenment. Bodhisattvas are the most popular gods in Taiwan. According to REST, 72.1% of the total respondents reported that they had worshipped or prayed to bodhisattvas before.

<sup>3</sup> *Tudi gong* literally means “land elder.” He has another formal name: Fude Zhengshen, means “Righteous God of Good Fortune and Virtue.” The shrine or temple of *tudi gong* is ubiquitous in Taiwan in every urban and rural community. Most of them are very small. *Tudi gong*'s mission is to look after local tracts of land and the people residing there. According to REST, 70.5% of total respondents reported that they had worshipped or prayed to *Tudi gong* before.

<sup>4</sup> *Mazu* is originally the Goddess of the Sea, now she is worshipped as a powerful protective God. Her popularity is evident from the more than 400 temples dedicated to her and by the processions in communities all over the island. According to REST, 64.6% of the total respondents reported that they had worshipped or prayed to *Mazu* before.

<sup>5</sup> According to REST, the bodhisattva has been worshipped mostly by followers of traditional religions, including Buddhists (87.4%), followers of I-Kuan Tao (85.4%), Buddhists (84%), and followers of folk religion (77.8%). A high percentage of even those respondents who considered themselves as having no religion reported worshipping the bodhisattva (56.1%).

related to these traditional religions, such as I-Kuan Dao and Buddho-Daoism. The phenomenon of cross-religious worship points to the ambiguous boundaries between traditional religions, boundaries which are related to the syncretic character of traditional religions. The syncretic character of traditional religion is manifested by the followers' cross-religious worship behavior and by the permeability of religious boundaries. These characteristics suggest that the scholarly and official classification of religious traditions do not adequately apply to worshippers' own understanding and experience of gods. If gods are not bound by religious traditions, it means we cannot fully understand the subjective meaning of these gods for their worshippers, particularly if our understanding appeals only to the gods' official characters, which are based on clearer delineations.

This paper explores the cultural and psychological meaning of gods in the understanding and experience of individuals. It explores the narrative accounts provided in response to open-ended questions in the REST. These accounts are supplemented by an experimental project in which people from various religious backgrounds "drew images of god or divine power". It then analyzed the narrations and the pictorial representations of gods and divine power. It focuses on Taiwanese people's cultural and psychological characterizations of transcendental power. It asks what the relationship between psychological depictions of gods and established conceptions of the gods is; and how different conceptions of gods in varied religious traditions influence the psychological representation of transcendental power. We investigate if there is a "core" cultural-psychological characterization of transcendental power across the various religious traditions in this variegated religious landscape.

## **Research into Images of Gods**

When the respondents were asked if worship or prayer were important for them, 76.3% of them gave positive answers (including "very important" and "quite important"). Hence, worshipping gods plays a very significant role in people's religious life in Taiwan. The significance of gods for the religious life of the worshippers is deeply related to how they conceive these gods and how they experience them in their daily life. Scholars have identified differences

between the concepts of god and the images of god. While the former refers to an abstract, intellectual, mental representation of the word “god”, based on religious ideas or beliefs, the latter denotes the complex, subjective emotional experience of god and is more experiential and unconscious in nature.<sup>6</sup> Although both aspects contribute to the significance of the idea of god, the emotional and experiential dimension is considered more relevant in the religious life of individuals. Their image of god is regarded as a psychological construct that exists across religious, cultural, academic and theoretical boundaries.<sup>7</sup> It is shaped by a person's family history and cultural milieu; it is also related to a person's religious or spiritual belief and religious practices. The General Social Survey (GSS) included twelve image-of-god items to enable clarification of the relationship between images of god and various demographic categories.<sup>8</sup> Previous research has paid attention to the dimensions of image of god, the gender differences in dimensions, and their correlation with other variables, such as self-esteem and self-image, parental dynamics in a family, developmental factors and psychological wellbeing.<sup>9</sup>

Scholars have pointed out the failure to consider the impact of diversity on research into images of god. Few attempts have been made at differentiating the images of god of individuals from different socio-cultural backgrounds.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, since most of this research has covered Christian societies and cultures, few have explored how God is represented in non-Christian cultures. In a society with diverse religious traditions, such as Taiwan, “god” is not a singular term pointing to one transcendental image. Taiwanese people address gods as *shenming*. *Shen* means “god, spirit, soul, mind or energy.” *Ming* means “clear, intelligent or enlightened.” Accordingly, *shenming* denotes deities who have a clear vision. Most gods worshipped in Taiwan were earlier worshipped in

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<sup>6</sup> G.L. Moriarty & Hoffman L., “Introduction and Overview,” *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*. 9.3/4 (2007): 1–2; A.-M. Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 47–48.

<sup>7</sup> G.L. Moriarty & Hoffman L., “Introduction and Overview,” *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*. 9.3/4 (2007): 5.

<sup>8</sup> W.C. Roof & J.L. Roof, “Review of the Pools: Images of God among Americans,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 23 (1984): 201–05.

<sup>9</sup> C. Grimes, “God Image Research: A Literature Review,” *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*. Vol. 9.3/4 (2007): 11–32.

<sup>10</sup> C. Grimes, “God Image Research: A Literature Review,” 28.

China from where most of the islanders came, but there are also indigenous gods deified from local heroes and the unruly dead. Gods are worshipped for their ability to provide health and prosperity.<sup>11</sup> According to Lin Mei-Rong, one of the most renowned scholars of folk religion in Taiwan, worshippers of *shenming* entrust themselves to the care of *shenming*, for these gods are patrons of the community. They give directions to people when they are lost. There exists a strong bond of reciprocal relationship between gods and their worshippers. While people worship gods and express their respect to gods, gods bless people with prosperity and protect them from peril. Although different gods have different origins, history and character of the power and influence of gods depends on a continuing reciprocal relationship between gods and worshippers.

How are gods perceived and experienced by Taiwanese in their daily life? What is the cultural and psychological meaning of the images of gods for Taiwanese people? These questions are discussed below on the basis of narrative and pictorial data.

## Images of Gods in Narrative Analysis

In the open-ended question of REST, respondents were asked to describe their most deeply felt mystical or extraordinary experiences. They gave various answers, including narratives of uncanny experiences without clear religious connotations and mysterious or extraordinary experiences with direct religious ascriptions. The following discussion is based on descriptions of experiences of gods or divine power by 118 respondents.<sup>12</sup> The images of gods are drawn from these accounts. According to these accounts of encounters with gods or divine power, the images of gods can be classified into several groups, including protector, savior, guide, director, healer and comforter. These positive images represent the significance of their respective status in worshippers' minds. In the following, these various images are delineated by exemplary accounts as described by the respondents.

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<sup>11</sup> Paul R. Katz, "Taiwanese Religion," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* ed., Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 8965.

<sup>12</sup> Since the open-ended question asked a more general question about "mysterious or extraordinary experiences," only 118 respondents gave accounts about experiences of gods or divine power. The narrative analysis is based on these accounts.

### *1. God as protector or savior*

The commonest interpretation of experiences of encounters with gods is to consider god as a protector or savior. Respondents describe their experience of being protected or saved by a god from danger or illness. These experiences happen either when the respondents were sick or were involved in an accident or in a dangerous situation. The intervention of a god or divine power protected them from possible injury or peril. In some of these experiences the respondents did not ask for help but felt the active intervention of a god. In other cases they called out for help, and the gods answered their calls. Some of these narrations are as follows.

“I fell asleep when I was working (in an assembly line). A bodhisattva appeared and woke me up, preventing me from coming to grave harm.”

“At another time, I had a car accident. I felt a force of *qi* pushing me away. I avoided serious injury because of this.” (non-religious, 17424)

“In 1971 my family had a car accident on the way to Mount Li. During that accident I felt a power pulling my body and saving me from falling into the valley. I felt it was Buddha who helped me.” (Buddhist, 10463)

“Every day I would pray to God before leaving home, hoping that I would be safe on the road. Many times I almost had an accident but always managed to escape death and stay safe. Therefore, I derive deeper and deeper faith in God.” (Protestant, 18212)

“Thirty years ago while driving around Mount Qixing, my brakes failed to function and my car drove into a mountain wall. Back then I could feel the protection from some formless force.” (Catholic, 16109)

### *2. God as guide and director*

Another image of god frequently mentioned by the respondents is gods as a guide and director. Since the general appellation of gods in Taiwan signifies clear apprehension, gods are the ones who are able to see things thoroughly and with a power of precognition. As in the above narration where God is considered



as protector and savior, most of these experiences happened at or around moments of potential danger or peril. Sometimes they occurred when the worshipper encountered a major event or difficulty in life.

“One day, when I was speeding, I saw Guanyin bodhisattva (in a white dress and hat) standing in front of me. Guanyin bodhisattva blocked me from seeing the road ahead. I thought Guanyin was reminding me to slow down.” (Daoist, 19315)

“Before the flood that happened on August 8th, the bodhisattva had revealed it to me and reminded me to be careful.” (Daoist, 17134)

“I survived fires twice. It was because at the critical moment I received instructions and warnings from an unknown source, and was able to escape at the most dangerous moment. Thus, I deeply appreciate the wonder of mystical powers.” (Daoist, 16412)

“When I looked for a job and asked for guidance from a god. The god directed me and I found a job successfully.” (Buddhist, 10655)

“After I paid my respects to the deity and returned home, I felt the instructions revealed by the deity that evening and I felt very blessed.” (Daoist, 10621)

“I cultivate myself and accumulate merit in ordinary times. When I encounter difficulty I meditate and receive inspiration from gods to solve the problem. Everything goes off smoothly.” (Buddho-Daoist, 19617)

### *3. God as healer*

Many respondents have had the experience of being healed by gods. Most of them experienced physical healing from gods. Sometimes gods cured them directly. Sometimes they felt the curing power of a god via a spirit-medium.

“When I was sick Guanyin bodhisattva came to help me and my health improved.” (folk religionist, 20445)

“The earth god came to offer instructions, blessing me and helping me to recover. All turned out well.” (folk religionist, 20415)

“When I was ill, all the gods and Buddha came to treat my diseases, and I recovered my health.” (I-Kuan Daoist, 16313)

“I fell ill and, for a long time, did not recover until my mother went to beg the Bodhisattva for blessings. My health gradually improved afterwards.” (folk religionist, 17433)

“My father-in-law, who suffered from a stroke, recovered after a consultation with a medium and treatment.” (Buddhist, 20244)

“When I attended the Church service of praise worship, I felt a gush of hot air flowing from my heart. My long-accumulated stress was released and I felt I was healed.” (Protestant, 15130)

#### *4. God as comforter*

Besides providing physical or psychological healing, another image is that of comforter. In the following accounts the respondents describe what God means for them in general and at special times, particularly in times of difficulty.

“I deeply felt the care and love from the Mother Goddess *Jiutian*, whom I could rely on and believe in. My heart and mind feels great peace and comfort.” (folk religionist, 16423)

“In 2005 I had a dream about God. I was very touched by the peacefulness of the Holy Spirit. I was baptized as a Christian in 2006. I feel comforted and strengthened whenever I pray to God.” (Protestant, 18818)

“When I underwent an operation, I dreamt of Guanyin bodhisattva. Guanyin told me that my operation would be successful. So I did not

worry about it.” (non-religious, 13502)

“My younger brother fell ill, and my mother became worried. The gods at home possessed me to inform my mother not to worry.” (Daoist, 19453)

“After the typhoon, family luck turned bad and our health deteriorated, so the gods came to comfort and bless us.” (folk religionist, 16317)

### *5. Being moved by god and manifestation of god*

Many respondents have had the experience of being moved by gods. Some of them sensed the presence of gods in dreams. Most of them felt the presence of god during religious activities, such as worship of God, chanting sutras, and during religious ceremonies, pilgrimages, troupe processions, temple festivals, church services, or while meditating or praying. Although these experiences do not delineate a specific image of gods, they nevertheless denote an intimate relationship between a god and the worshipper.

“I am a volunteer at the temple. All I ever wish will be accomplished thanks to assistance from the bodhisattvas.” (Daoist, 18312)

“When I conducted the Buddhist morning ceremony and recited the Sutra, I could feel the presence of a bodhisattva.” (Buddhist, 11366)

“I climbed the mountain with friends and was taking a rest in a desolate building. Inside the building I saw three sticks of incense in the incense burner in front of the statue of Lü Dongbin. The sticks of incense were shaking, but the wind was not blowing. Later I consulted the temple that I was acquainted with and decided to receive the deity and to worship him at home. I worshipped the deity regularly. My life and my work have been smooth since then.” (Buddhist, 21417)

“On the 24<sup>th</sup> of the twelfth month of each lunar year, before receiving gods, I practice a vegetarian diet and keep the precepts. When meditating

in the Hall of Light, I receive the presence and light emitted by the gods, and I aspire to work harder in the coming year.” (other, 15303)

“Once in a while, the Master Mad Monk, Ji, naughtily sat on top of my shoulder, or he would lean on me completely, so that I began to feel really sore all over my shoulders. I asked him to leave, so that I would no longer feel the pain.” (Buddho-Daoist, 18257)

The manifestation of gods are sometimes fierce. A few of the respondents have had the experience of being possessed by gods.

“I participated in the ghost-ship-burning ceremony at the Temple of the Three Lords. Suddenly, both corners of my lips curved down. My face looked as vicious as Wang Ye. After I left the scene I recovered immediately.” (Daoist, 18159)

“The god Guan possessed a medium and asked me to participate in the worshipping session.” (folk religionist, 18614)

“When traveling with friends and passing by a temple, all of a sudden the god, by possessing me, told one of my friends to kneel down in front of the god to repent. He also revealed, through me, something only known to this friend.” (Buddho-Daoist, 13612)

These images of gods are drawn from narrative accounts of the respondents based on their experience of gods. Instead of being abstract and intellectual, they are experiential and subjective in nature. These personal and emotional accounts of experiences with gods demonstrate that gods are experienced as living in people's life. The images of gods are thus characterized by the following points. First, time is an integral constituent of the experiential dimension of the gods. Gods are encountered at particular times, especially times of emergency, accident, illness, crisis, difficulty or critical life events. These special moments of life point to a possible turning point in one's life. The presence or manifestation of gods at these critical moments separates these moments from ordinary times. The living gods are gods of time. They turn a possible perilous

moment into one of redemption and grace. Gods are encountered in ordinary moments as well, such as in daily life or in religious activities, when their presence or manifestation points to a special time that is a break from ordinary times. The living gods break into time by their divine actions and this leads to the second character of the living gods: the living gods are gods of action.

The respondents recognize the presence of the gods because of a divine intervention or responses, such as protection, blessing, revelation, inspiration, delivering from danger, answering requests, healing, guiding, comforting and demonstration of miracles. Their actions are mainly demonstrated through their transformative power, turning peril into safety or healing the respondents. Sometimes the presence of gods is manifested by the bodily experience of the respondents. The presence or action of a god is sensed through sight, sound, touch, and smell. Sometimes the respondents feel that a god makes a request to them by fierce action such as possessing them or controlling them. In other words, the respondents understand living gods as gods of action. The gods do not exist only in legends or tales. Their existence is evident from the transformative power that they manifest through their actions.

Third, the living gods are also characterized by an intimate reciprocity between gods and worshippers. Worshippers seek the guidance and direction of gods when they are in trouble. They also turn to gods for healing when they are ill. Nevertheless, gods do not come from nowhere. In Taiwan, gods are worshipped in public temples or at private altars. Whether a god is from mainland China or from Taiwan, it first needs to make a connection with a certain place by taking certain actions, such as performance of a miracle or healing of illness before it is considered worthy of worship. Such “emplacement” lays the basis for future relationships between the gods and the worshippers. When local people recognize the power of miracle making or healing, the god starts to receive worship from people and becomes a patron for them. Accordingly, the initial relationship between a God and worshippers is characterized through this reciprocal exchange of worship and protection. While gods ask for recognition and respect, their worshippers seek blessings and prosperity from them. The interdependence between gods and worshippers is not unlike the intimate bond between parents and their children. Some parents send their children to gods as their adopted children. When gods become godparents, they are supposed to take care of their children. The first four images of god or

divine power discussed above (god as protector, guide and director, healer, comforter) are similar to such parental character. While the parental-like qualities constitute the main character of gods, there are a few exceptions. Katz points out the popularity of cults associated with the unruly dead or eccentric deities, such as Master Mad Monk Ji.<sup>13</sup> Another popular cult in Taiwan worships a child god, Nezha, a rebellious and naughty god. Such images are shown by the fifth category just mentioned (“being moved by gods and manifestation of gods”). Although the images of these gods are far from parent-like, people still request protection and blessing from them.

Fourth, the images of gods delineated above are shared by worshippers from various religious traditions. In other words, certain images do not apply only to a certain god, or strictly correlate to worshippers from certain religious traditions. For example, although images of protector and savior are frequently ascribed to a bodhisattva, such an image is also shared by other gods, such as the Buddha, Mazu and the Christian God. When the respondents describe their encounters with gods, they sometimes use the general term *shenming* to denote gods without pointing to their specific titles. To a certain degree, such a way of addressing a god suggests the ambiguous boundary between gods of different religious traditions. Although different gods are related to different origins, legends and tales, history, place, character and ritual, from an experiential perspective they may share a similar cultural-psychological image. Such prototypical images come from worshippers' experience of the god at a specific time. At specific critical moments they feel the presence and action of gods. Gods manifest to them as protectors and saviors, guides and directors, healers and comforters. The god and the worshipper recognize each other through their reciprocal relationship and action. Experiences of blessings and protection from gods constitute the experiential ground of the prototypical image of gods for Taiwanese people. These experiences are fundamental experiences of reality, as Heyde said:

A phenomenology and a philosophy of religious experience make it clear that when human beings utter the name of God, it originates in a diversity of fundamental experiences of reality. Experience of sense and

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<sup>13</sup> Paul R. Katz, “Taiwanese Religion,” 8965.

nonsense, emotion and fear, overwhelming and emptiness, guilt and goodness, suffering, beauty, gratitude, bottomless sorrow and incomprehensible anger.<sup>14</sup>

Analysis of narrations of the images of gods suggests an experiential prototypical image of gods that is grounded in the experience of being protected, guided, healed or comforted. Phenomenologically speaking, the ways gods are experienced and characterized tell the way people “give meaning to experiences and events or to [their] existence in general.”<sup>15</sup> Gods constitute a significant source of meaning for Taiwanese people, especially when they encounter difficulties and need care or help. Whether gods are experienced as a power that is personal or impersonal, they provide the hope of peace and healing for people.

## Analysis of Images of Gods in Pictures

In REST, images of gods were further explored through a preliminary study of pictorial images. Although the questionnaire of REST was not designed to explore the Taiwanese people’s images of gods, analysis of narrative accounts of mystical or religious experiences suggests a prototypical image of gods characterized by giving blessings and offering protection. In order to further explore the Taiwanese people’s images of gods, an exploratory study of pictorial images of gods was conducted. Because of limitations of time and expense, this exploratory study did not collect data from the original sample of REST. Since it is preliminary in nature, it attempted to collect data from people of different religious traditions (including non-religious) and describe the general way people from various religious traditions perceive gods or divine power. Since the data of REST measures linguistic data, this further research attempts to address the issue from another direction. The respondents who participated in this

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<sup>14</sup> L. Heyde, *Het gewicht van de eindigheid (The Weight of Finiteness)* (Amsterdam: Meppel, 1995), 39, quoted from Lans Van der, “Empirical Research into the Human Images of God: A Review and Some Considerations,” in *The Human Image of God* ed., Ziebertz, Hans-Georg. (Leiden, The Netherlands; Boston: Brill, 2001), 347.

<sup>15</sup> Lans Van der, “Empirical Research into the Human Images of God: A Review and Some Considerations,” in *The Human Image of God* ed., Ziebertz, Hans-Georg (Leiden, The Netherlands; Boston: Brill, 2001), 347.

project were asked to draw a picture of god or divine power based on their deepest experiences. They were given the following instruction: "Some people have experienced a kind of being or power that is transcendent, beyond them. A Buddhist may have experienced the power of a Buddha or a bodhisattva. A Christian may have experienced the power of God, Christ or the Virgin Mary. Some people may have experienced the power of Mazu, the earth god, or their ancestors. Although these gods or powers have specific appellations, characters or images, different people experience them in their own way. Please draw a picture of the god or the power that you have experienced most deeply and describe your picture."

At the end of the instruction some basic information about the respondent was collected, including their name, gender, age, education, religious background, telephone number and email address for further contact. Provision of this information was not compulsory. If the respondents did not want to reveal anything, they could leave the space blank. In this preliminary study 109 pictures were collected from respondents of various religious traditions. Although two respondents proposed that their personal gods or divine powers did not have a specific image, their "image-less" images are still considered a kind of image in this project. Some of these pictures were collected by the researcher, some by respondents who participated in this study and who were invited to collect data from the believers of their own religious traditions. Most of the respondents (105) were over 20 years old, ranging up to 70 years old. The other respondents were 3 children and one adolescent. The religious background and gender of the group are as follows:

This preliminary research is not designed for statistical analysis and, therefore, its sampling was not conducted in accordance with a strict procedure. Nevertheless, pictorial representations of gods or divine power from various religious traditions were collected and a preliminary analysis was still feasible.

Scholars who study images of gods by way of pictorial representation commonly consider them as a nonverbal way of measuring the concept or perception of gods.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly contents of the pictures are classified into different types and correlated with other factors that the researcher considers

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<sup>16</sup> R.L. Bassett et al, "Picturing God: A Nonverbal Measure of God Concept for Conservative Protestants," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 9 (1990): 73–81.



Table 1: Number of respondents according to religious tradition and gender

Religious tradition	Number	Female	Male	Gender unknown
Folk Religion	13	10	3	0
Buddhism	17	12	5	0
Daoism	5	1	4	0
Buddho-Daoism	9	6	3	0
I-Kuan Dao	10	7	3	0
Catholicism	18	9	8	1
Protestantism	9	8	1	0
Non-religious	21	15	5	1
Unknown	7	3	3	1
Total	109	68	35	3

Table 2: Number of respondents according to religious tradition and age

Religious tradition	Number	20 and under	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	60 and above	Un-known
Folk Religion	13	1	11	0	0	0	0	1
Buddhism	17	1	5	1	4	6	0	0
Daoism	5	0	2	1	2	0	0	0
Buddho-Daoism	9	0	0	2	0	4	0	3
I-Kuan Dao	10	0	3	3	0	0	1	3
Catholicism	18	4	4	1	3	3	2	1
Protestantism	9	2	4	0	1	0	0	2
Non-religious	21	4	10	2	0	0	0	5
Unknown	7	0	3	1	0	0	0	3
Total	109	12	42	11	10	13	3	18

important, such as gender, age or denomination.<sup>17</sup> Some interpret these pictures as reflecting the basic stages of development in the perception of a god.<sup>18</sup> Generally speaking, this research regards pictures as representations of thinking. Other researchers who follow a phenomenological approach consider drawing as a process of creation. A specific picture is a phenomenon of one single person's formation process, in his or her life story, with his or her specific surroundings and his or her world.<sup>19</sup> Instead of focusing on the contents of respondents' pictures, the phenomenological approach pays more attention to the specific way respondents draw. It rejects the assumption of direct representation that presumes that respondents begin by completely building up their inner images of god and then copy that image onto paper.<sup>20</sup> Drawing does not copy the pre-existent image. Drawing itself is the process of image creation. Accordingly, the task of drawing a picture of god can be regarded as a process of creative seeing and formation of a god image.

The following discussion attempts to adopt a content analysis without ignoring the dynamic process of drawing. Contents of the drawn images are divided into three categories: concrete image, religious symbol and natural symbol. In Table 3 classifications of contents are shown by various religious traditions.

Generally speaking, categories of concrete images and religious symbols correspond to the type of religious tradition. Respondents from certain religious traditions tend to adopt the representative concrete images or symbols of their religion to depict their personal image of god or divine power. For example, some Christians drew images of a cross or rosary to represent their personal god. Followers of folk religion or Daoism draw their perception of divine power using the image of the *taichi*. Nevertheless, one of the most significant findings

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<sup>17</sup> K.L. Ladd, D.N. McIntosh & B. Spilka, "Children's God Concepts: Influences of Denomination, Age, and Gender," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 8.1 (1998): 49–56.

<sup>18</sup> Ernest Harms, "The Development of Religious Experience in Children," *American Journal of Sociology*, 50.2 (1944): 112–22; J.A. Shelley, *The Spiritual Needs of Children: A Guide for Nurses, Parents and Teachers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982.)

<sup>19</sup> R. Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children*. (Boston: Harper Collins, 1990); Hans Günther-Heimbrock, "Images and Pictures of God: The Development of Creative Seeing," *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 4.1 (1999): 51–60.

<sup>20</sup> Hans Günther-Heimbrock, "Images and Pictures of God: The Development of Creative Seeing," 54.

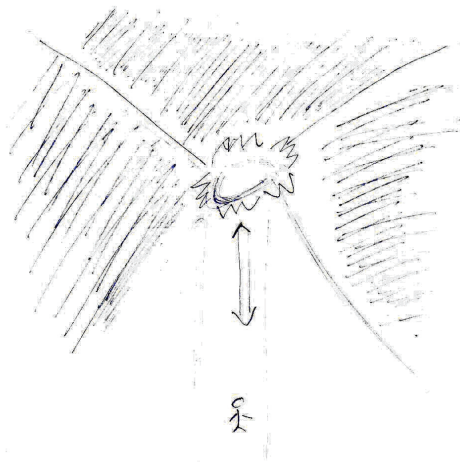
Table 3. Religious traditions and classification of contents

	Concrete image	Religious symbol	Natural symbol
Folk Religion	Pot of burning incense, Talisman, objects of offering, burning paper, Mazu	<i>Taichi</i>	Light, lighthouse, heart, hand, watching eye
Buddhism	Bodhisattva, Buddha in meditation		Light, light of star, sun, shaking of earth, ocean waves
Daoism	Light of Buddha	<i>Taichi</i> , Eight trigrams,	Light, smoke
Buddho-Daoism	Guanyin bodhisattva, Buddha, deity		Light, candle,
I-Kuan Dao		Three lights of the <i>Wuji laomu</i> (“Eternal Mother”)	Light, fire, sun
Christianity		Cross, rosary, dove	Light, heart, sun, moon, supporting hand, tree, road, well water
Non-religious		Cross	Light, flame, wind, rainbow, sun, flower, road, heart, meteor shower, power of warm and peace, energy

of this exploratory research is found in the category of natural symbols. Compared with concrete image or religious symbol associated with a specific religion, natural symbols are more frequently adopted by respondents. This inclination was not limited to respondents who considered themselves non-religious. In other words, respondents tended to adopt natural symbols to depict their personal god or divine power. The frequent adoption of natural symbols and its plural forms point out the varieties of images of gods and divine power. Furthermore, from the experiential or personal perspective, it seems that

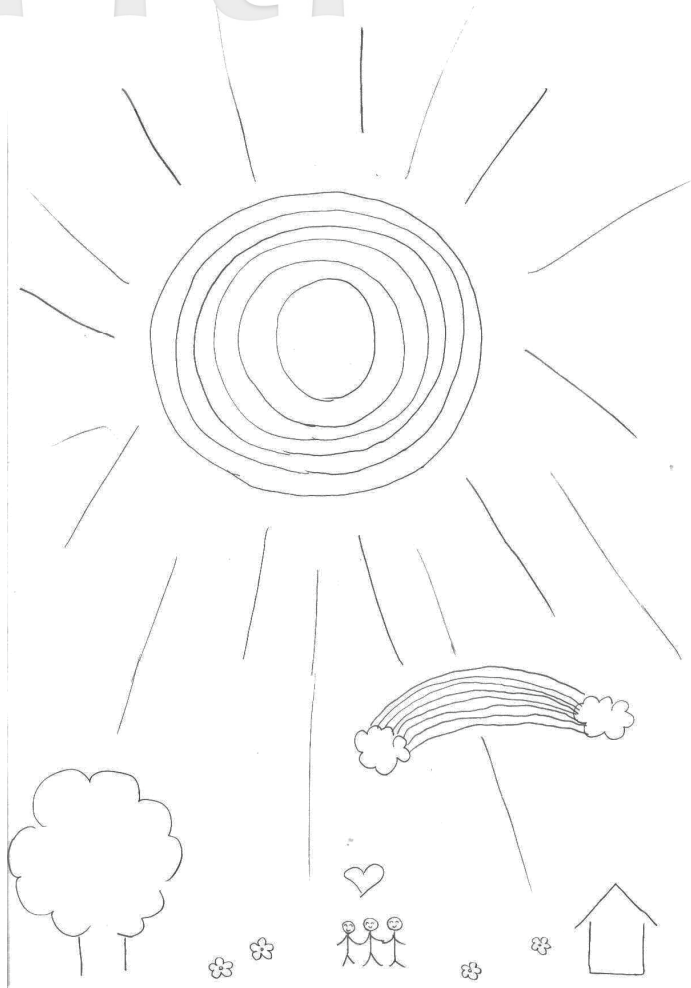
images of god or divine power are not constrained to traditional images or religious symbols. While the traditional images or religious symbols tell how gods or divine power are perceived by specific religions, the natural symbols illustrate the subjective meaning of gods or divine power for individuals.

Among the natural symbols adopted by respondents, the image of light is the most common. Respondents from each religious tradition, including those identified as non-religious, all used this image. It was also frequently adopted among respondents from the same traditions. Based on the preliminary analysis of pictorial representation of gods or divine power, it seems “light” is a prototypical image that cuts across the boundaries of religious traditions and across the borders of the religious and the non-religious. One Buddhist respondent described light as “a powerful, bright, thorough, tender and auspicious energy. It surrounds lowly me. My worry is solved in the light, or perhaps in a dream.” Another respondent, a follower of I-Kuan Tao, described the light as the guide that leads people toward the world of light. (Picture 1)



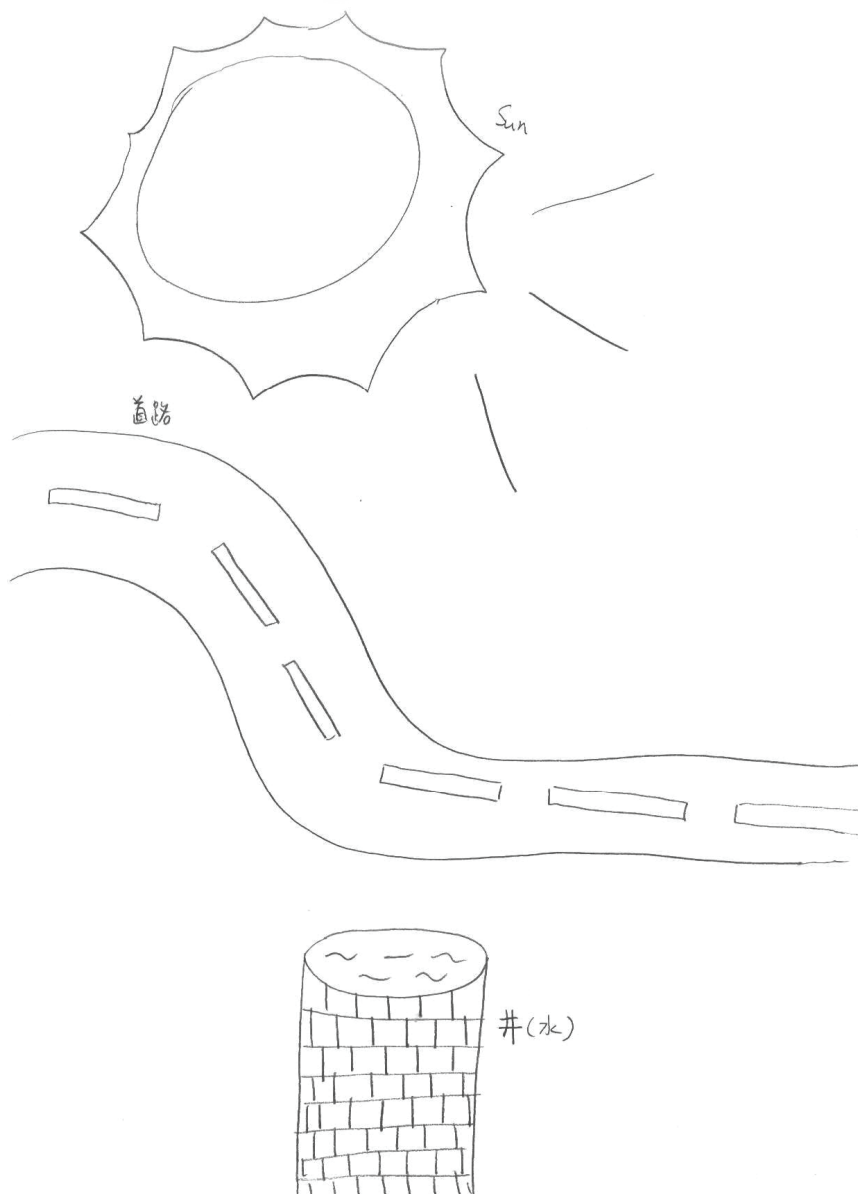
Picture 1

A respondent of folk religion considers the light “as bright as the sun. There are layers of rings of light. It spreads its power all over the world and fills it with peace and joy.” (Picture 2)



Picture 2

A catholic respondent draws her picture as follows. (Picture 3)



Picture 3

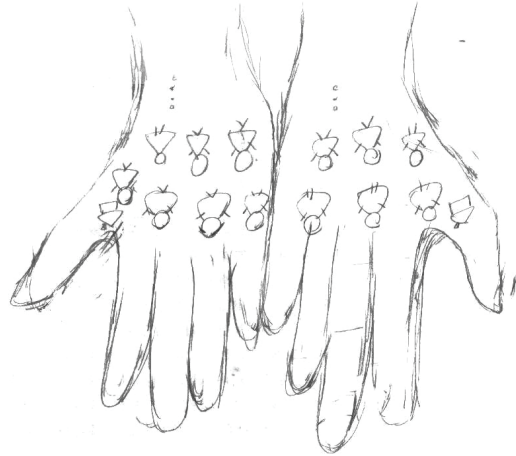
A respondent who regarded herself as non-religious described her picture as follows: “*Shenming* always guides me like a light. It carries me on the road of life. It accompanies me at any crossroads of decision. It has endowed me with healing power.” (Picture 4)



Picture 4

To a certain extent, these depictions and illustrations are in tune with the proto-image of blessings and protection drawn from the narrative analysis. The other natural symbols adopted by respondents from various religions also point to a similar subjective meaning. Respondents adopted the image of a “hand” to depict the image of god in the following examples.

“It is the power of faith. It protects me from danger. I feel it holding me in its hand. When I feel lost and anxious, I entrust myself to its care.” (folk religionist) (Picture 5)



Picture 5

“It is the power I feel when I pray. I feel I am tightly held. Its support keeps me from falling down.” (Catholic) (Picture 6)



Picture 6



“God is a big hand of warm and almightiness. God holds me and protects me. I am like an infant cared by a loving mother.” (Catholic) (Picture 7)



Picture 7

Other respondents who adopted the image of a “heart” to depict their gods narrated their feelings as follows: “When my heart is broken, helpless, hurt or does not know what to do, I keep praying. A great power of warmth and tenderness surrounds my broken heart and mends it. This power can turn the broken heart into one that is whole and strong.” (Protestant) (Picture 8)



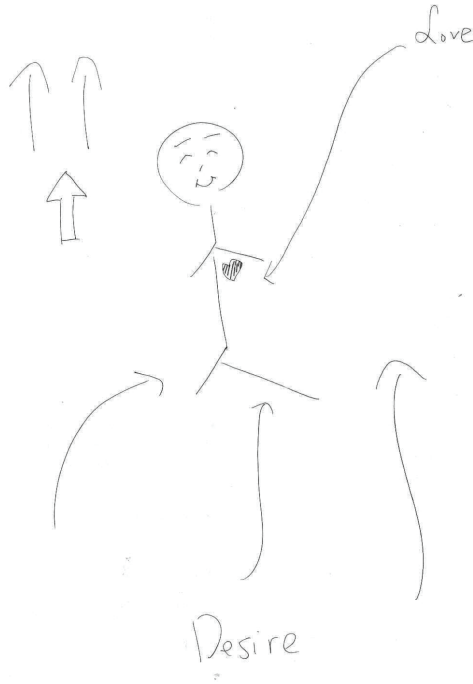
Picture 8

“The tree represents God. God holds every heart. The tree represents mercy and greatness. The different lines indicate that God contains the ‘hearts’ of each person.” (Catholic) (Picture 9)



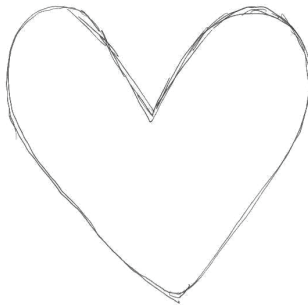
Picture 9

“While the human being is controlled by desire, the power boosts her (to transcend her desire). She receives warmth through love and feels joyful in her heart.” (folk religionist) (Picture 10)



Picture 10

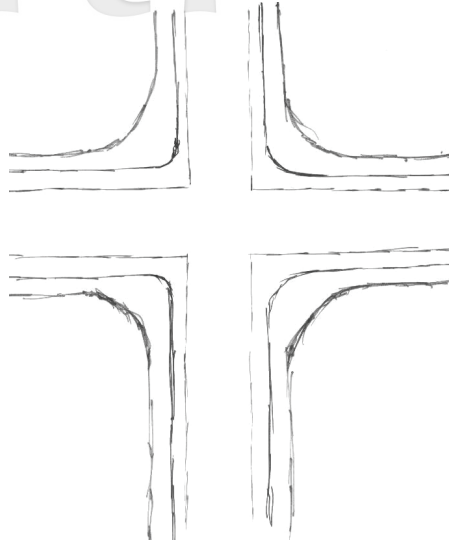
“It represents setting ones’ mind at rest, just like hiding in the harbor of refuge”  
(non-religious) (Picture 11)



Picture 11

If we compare the preliminary findings of content analysis of picturing gods or divine power with the images revealed through narrative accounts, a similar cultural-psychological perception of gods or divine power can be discerned. Gods or divine power are regarded as benevolent powers that guide, protect, care or heal people in their daily life. These images of gods or divine power are not limited to a specific religion. Followers from different religions, whether monotheistic, polytheistic, agonistic, or even people who consider themselves non-religious, are able to experience such power in their lives.

In the narrative analysis, the proto-image of protection and blessings is drawn from respondents' experiences of encountering gods or divine power. Accordingly, this proto-image is subjective and experiential in nature. The preliminary study of "drawing god or divine power" attempts to understand how people depict their experiential gods or divine power through pictorial representation. The images and narrative accounts collected in the course of this preliminary study are, therefore, more directive and more reflexive. The influence of religious teaching and acculturation from each religious tradition in the formation of images of gods is more obvious. Consequently we can see how respondents adopt images or symbols from their own religions to depict their images of gods or divine power. However, the drawing process cannot be limited to copying a pre-existent image. According to the phenomenological perspective mentioned above, drawing is also a process of image creation. If our analysis of pictures does not restrict itself to classification of contents, the creative aspect of the drawing process can be observed more clearly. Even though respondents adopted images or symbols from their own religions, they are still experiential in character. For example, one Catholic respondent depicted his image of God with the symbol of the cross. (Picture 12) This cross is drawn according to his vision of the cross during prayer. He says, "I closed my eyes tightly and I saw this image of cross. It was transformed from hardness to tenderness. And its color changed from darkness to light. It is the consummation of the cross for me."



Picture 12

Another respondent who once considered himself a Buddhist but is now a Daoist, and in future expects to become a Buddha, drew Guangong with his broadsword in hand. He recognizes Guangong as his Master and his boss. (Picture 13)



Picture 13

A follower of I-Kuan Tao drew her image of god or divine power based on her experience of praying in front of the lamp of the Eternal Mother. This experience inspired her to draw the picture below. (Picture 14) She sees the Eternal Mother as a light. She can experience the light whenever she talks to the Eternal Mother in front of the lamp. There is no concrete image for the light. Still she can feel its heat and its brightness. In the middle of the light she draws a teardrop, which symbolizes the tear the Eternal Mother sheds for all sentient beings. It also symbolizes her own tears when she feels vulnerable. There exists a subtle connection between the Eternal Mother's tear and her own tears.



Picture 14

Although these examples adopt concrete images or religious symbols from the respondents' religions, it is by no means naïve duplication or transmission of religious teaching. Each religion has its own way of characterizing its god or divine power, but it cannot determine how its followers should experience this divine power. Creative images of god or divine power collected from this preliminary study suggest that, from the experiential perspective, the individual is an active participant in his/her own religious tradition. On the one hand, the concept of God or divine power which is transmitted from one's religion leads one to perceive a transcendental reality that is beyond one's conception of reality. This transcendental reality becomes the significant constituent of one's world of meaning. On the other hand, unless the concept of god or divine power is experienced in one's life, it remains only a dead concept. When the image is adopted in one's "illusionistic world" or "transitional space"<sup>21</sup> and is able to

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<sup>21</sup> Pruyser proposes the concept of "illusionistic world" as the intermediate between "autistic world" and "realistic world." It belongs to the sphere of play that mediates the cold fact of outer reality and narcissistic state of mind. Winnicott's concept of "transitional space" also situates between inner and outer world. It is a virtual world for play and creativity. P. Pruyser, *The Play of the Imagination: Toward a Psychoanalysis of Culture* (New York: International Universities Press, 1983); D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

constitute one's desire and moderate one's fears and limitations,<sup>22</sup> it becomes a living god or divine power for the individual.

## Conclusion

This paper examines the cultural-psychological images of gods or divine power through a narrative analysis of experiences with gods or divine power and an exploratory research into “drawing images of gods or divine power.” Analysis of narrative accounts has suggested that Taiwanese people have a prototypical image of protection and blessings. They characterize gods or divine power as benevolent powers that guide, protect, care or heal people in their daily life. These images are held by respondents from various religions, including respondents who consider themselves non-religious. Preliminary findings of the project of drawing indicate a similar core image of gods or divine power for Taiwanese people. Pictorial analysis reveals creative illustration based on religious traditions. In Taiwan various religions coexist in the same society. As variegated as it seems, the reciprocal relationship between gods and human beings constitutes the experiential ground for formation of images of gods.

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<sup>22</sup> A.-M. Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).



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## 台灣民眾對神明與神聖之 文化心理意象初探

蔡怡佳

### 摘要

台灣是一個多元宗教並存的社會，信徒祭拜眾多的神明，神明的祭拜也構成信徒宗教生活的重要活動。根據台灣地區宗教經驗調查(2008-2010)的結果，大多數台灣民眾都有祭拜神明的經驗，76.33%的受訪者認為神明參拜或是祈禱對他們來說是重要的活動。許多受訪者也表示曾經有被神明觸動、保護或是庇佑的經驗。本研究以台灣地區宗教經驗調查之開放題的敘說資料為基礎，輔以勾勒神明的圖畫分析，研究發現：台灣地區民眾，包括不同宗教傳統的信徒或是自認為沒有宗教信仰的民眾，有一個跨越宗教傳統區分的共同核心形象，將神明理解為提供保護與庇佑的神聖力量。勾勒神明的圖畫分析支持這個發現，但在這些圖畫形象的勾勒中還展現了個人的獨特理解。本研究主張，雖然台灣地區的宗教多元，但在民眾的經驗層次，存在著一個以神人互惠為基礎的神明形象。

**關鍵字：**宗教經驗、台灣宗教、神的形象