The Marginalization of Folk Beliefs under Taiwan's 2019 Curriculum Reform: Educational Dilemmas and Paths to Cultural Sustainability

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***Abstract*—This study examines the generation gap and educational marginalization of traditional folk beliefs in Taiwan's secondary schools under the 2019 Curriculum Guidelines. We analyzed high school social studies textbooks and conducted interviews with young people, temple managers, and high school teachers. The results show that the current curriculum presents folk beliefs in a dry, intellectualized way, largely detached from real life. Furthermore, multicultural education mainly focuses on specific ethnic groups, leaving folk beliefs marginalized in schools. At the same time, declining birthrates and intense exam pressure have weakened how families pass down these traditions. To support cultural sustainability, this paper suggests practical solutions across family education, classroom teaching, and digital media.**

***Keywords*—12-year basic education, folk belief, cultural sustainability, cultural capital, cultural rights**

I. Introduction

Folk belief is the spiritual backbone of everyday Taiwanese society. Centered on Taoism, it combines local customs with traditions from Buddhism to create an inclusive faith system. Its influence appears not only in temple worship, but also in weddings, funerals, store-opening ceremonies, and seasonal festivals. Many religious rituals and practices are organized in terms of family units, so that religion retains its traditional strength. In addition, local organizations and political-economic forces maintain a close interlocking relationship with religion, which contributes to the vitality of Folk belief [1]. However, modern trends like globalization, the internet, and higher education present serious challenges to traditional faith. In recent years, with social changes, many researchers have tended to emphasize the deterritorialization of Folk belief [2].

With declining birthrates and heavy exam competition, students now spend most of their time on academic success. This leaves young people with far fewer chances to join family rituals. The home is where children first learn core values and habits through family cultural capital. When school exams take top priority, young people lose their hands-on connection to local religious life, viewing rituals as external chores rather than meaningful traditions.

A critical examination of the 2019 Curriculum Guidelines, implemented by ROC (Taiwan) Ministry of Education in 2019 [3], reveals structural deficiencies regarding the discourse on religious faith and culture. High school Civics and History textbooks cover religion only briefly, using cold and factual descriptions.

In addition, schools often dismiss folk beliefs as mere "customs" or "superstitions" instead of treating them as protected cultural rights. Current multicultural education focuses mostly on Indigenous and new immigrant cultures, pushing mainstream folk traditions to the sidelines.

As a result, an intergenerational gap has widened. According to the Taiwan Social Change Survey by the Institute of Sociology, Academia Sinica, the proportions of the faithful population, religious practices, and rituals have been declining year by year [4], further substantiating this phenomenon.

Previous studies in Taiwan have explored introducing religious education into compulsory schooling through religious pluralism, multicultural education, and curriculum design [5]. However, most research focuses on theoretical frameworks and policy implementation. Few studies have examined how Taiwanese folk beliefs are addressed in the 12-Year Basic Education Curriculum, or how they relate to declining birth rates, family education, and cultural sustainability.

This study explores two key questions: (1) How are folk beliefs positioned in secondary social studies education from the perspective of cultural rights? (2) How do lower birthrates and changing families affect young people's involvement in folk faith?

II. Literature Review

A. Cultural Rights, Cultural Capital, and Folk belief Culture

As the crystallization of collective lived experience, culture shapes shared values and norms, conditioning the

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value orientations of new social members through interaction, environment, and institutional education. Culture refers to the abstract symbol system, including language, beliefs, values, and behavioral norms, that shapes people's ways of life [6]. In the evolution of human civilization, religion is one of the oldest and most universal cultural phenomena in human history.

Religion and human culture are co-constitutive; as one of the carriers of human culture, religion carries the spiritual essence of cultural dissemination and exchange [7]. From the perspective of human rights law, the "International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights" also regulates the protection of cultural rights and defines their connotation: respecting everyone's culture, authenticity, and essence; equal access and respect for non-discrimination principles; opportunities to participate in the creation and enjoyment of mainstream and minority cultures; indispensable freedom for creative activities, such as freedom of expression and intellectual property rights; and safeguarding and developing participatory culture, including national and international cultural exchanges regarding mainstream or minority cultures [8].

From the perspective of sociological stratification theory, Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" refers to the cultural background, skills, knowledge, and specific dispositions transmitted from parents to children across generations. This domain encompasses linguistic cultivation, modes of thought, behavioral norms, and value representations; hence, it is also defined by academia as a form of "informational capital" [9].

In early rural societies, due to traditional faith behaviors (such as sacrifices, ancestor worship, and groundbreaking ceremonies), habits, and government promotion, most people adhered to Folk beliefs. Early religious experiences and parents' religious beliefs deeply affect children's religious orientations; children's religious beliefs are strongly influenced by their parents [10].

However, as digital natives, contemporary teenagers exhibit distinct behavioral paradigms. Teenagers are accustomed to accepting new things, and their criteria for judgment and behavioral guidelines tend to be modernized and liberalized, differing from the values of the previous generation. Concurrently, influenced by the speed and content formats of modern mass media, it easily causes cultural diffusion and popularization [11]. Despite this, traditional Folk belief activities—such as religious processions, troupe performances (Zhentou), and divine generals (Jiajiang)—demonstrate the potential to attract youth participation when packaged and broadcast visually via social media platforms. The sociological root of this phenomenon still resides in the transmission efficacy of cultural capital, particularly through the values and behavioral paradigms internalized during primary socialization.

Currently, many high school students' adherence to faith culture and ritual customs still depends heavily on the rigid requirements of family education. Their pathways of exposure to and attitudes toward faith culture remain constrained by the degree of inheritance of family cultural capital and subcultural interactions within peer groups.

B. SDGs and Cultural Sustainability

The United Nations formally proposed the "2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" in 2015, establishing 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Among them, SDG Target 11 aims to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. Within its 169 targets, Target 11.4 specifically demands to "strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage" [12]. As the backbone of intangible cultural heritage, Folk belief possesses an irreplaceable subjective value within the framework of cultural sustainability. Folklore scholarship posits that for intangible cultural heritage, especially folk culture, it is highly natural for its cultural connotations to undergo variations generated by historical backgrounds or localized characteristics over time and space [13].

The core dynamic of cultural sustainability stems from an intergenerational dynamic dialogue. Traditional culture must integrate contemporary progressive concepts and digital vectors to reconcile a new point of equilibrium acceptable to modern society. For instance, the integration of ritual practices with internet technologies—yielding localized practices like "remote worship" and "online divination"—serves as an exemplary paradigm of sustaining cultural lifelines under new modalities to achieve cultural sustainability.

C. Religious Faith Culture under the 2019 Curriculum Guidelines: A Critical Policy Review

Regarding the philosophical debate on educational justice, generally speaking, discussions on educational justice roughly converge on two dimensions: first, what is the purpose of education? Second, what is the concept of justice? Agreeing on the purpose of education does not necessarily imply agreement on the understanding of justice; conversely, agreeing on the concept of justice may lead to entirely different educational claims due to differences in understanding the purpose of education [14]. Schooling and family education assume distinct functions in the modern social division of labor. The family specializes in personality formation and the orientation of an individual's outlook on life, whereas institutional school education, while imparting professional academic expertise, operates under the core directive of the state-mandated curriculum guidelines.

However, textbook compilation guided by the current 2019 Curriculum Guidelines exhibits highly skewed ethnic preferences and structural volumetric imbalances. Within the multicultural education modules, teaching materials lean heavily toward indigenous cultures, thereby marginalizing traditional Han ordinary Folk beliefs and traditional religious cultures within the institutional apparatus.

A rigorous empirical examination of current mainstream textbooks reveals that in the History discipline, Folk beliefs are introduced briefly and in a decontextualized manner (e.g., Nani Version, History 2, pp. 52–59, which dispatches the origins of Taoism,

Buddhism, and folk religions in a single, perfunctory section) [15]. In the Civics and Society discipline, Folk belief is treated merely as an informal instrument of social control within chapters on "Social Norms" (e.g., Lungteng, Sanmin, and Nani versions of Civics and Society 2) [15–17]. The relevant text averages less than two pages and consistently lacks an examination of the spiritual essence of these faiths.

This deliberate marginalization within the curriculum results in an institutional asymmetry between state-sanctioned diversity and the actual cultural demographics of Taiwanese society. By reducing comprehensive theological and historical frameworks of local folk faiths to a minor subsection under social control mechanisms, textbooks generate a fragmented misrecognition. The multi-layered meanings of community solidarity, spatial configuration, and historical resilience within folk practices are completely flattened.

Although state multiculturalism appears inclusive, it can unintentionally exclude mainstream local practices by treating them as outdated customs rather than active systems of knowledge. By leaving these traditions out of the curriculum, schools marginalize students and discourage them from critically examining their own cultural environment. As a result, vibrant living traditions are reduced to static, historical records.

This curriculum design creates a double gap in education: children neither receive clear, rational explanations of folk rituals at home, nor do they gain more than fragmented knowledge in school. Young people who wish to learn more must often wait until taking general education courses in college. However, by adulthood, many have already passed the critical stage for developing a strong identity and empathy toward their local culture, worsening the intergenerational gap in Taiwanese folk beliefs.

III. Research Design

A. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm, constructing a dual-track investigative path that combines secondary data analysis with in-depth interviews to scrutinize the structural disconnect between institutional educational policy and localized practice in Taiwan. First, regarding textual analysis, this study systematically reviewed the 12-Year Basic Education Curriculum Guidelines for the Social Studies Phase and deconstructed the text of history and civics textbooks published by mainstream houses (Lungteng, Sanmin, and Nani) [15–17]. This analysis critically examines the volumetric allocation and representational modes of Folk belief culture under the discursive framework of "multicultural education".

Second, to transcend the static limitations of textual analysis, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with both the youth generation (the educated end) and local temple administrators (the practical end). Concurrently, the researcher executed open-ended classroom discussions and field surveys at senior high school teaching sites to capture students' genuine cognitions and attitudes, enabling a triangular cross-examination of the core factors underlying cultural rupture.

B. Participant Selection

To ensure both breadth and depth, six representative informants were selected for semi-structured interviews:

- Student A: A graduate student actively participating in religious activities for 10 years.
- Student B: A graduate student, 24 years old, participating in religious activities for 9 years.
- Mr. C: A temple general affairs manager with 52 years of religious practice experience.
- Mr. D: A temple priest (Miaozhu) with 46 years of religious practice experience.
- Mr. E: A temple chief executive (Zongganzhi) with 64 years of religious practice experience.
- Mr. F: A temple trustee with 35 years of religious practice experience.

Interviews with Students A and B provided insights into contemporary higher-education youth's attitudes toward Folk belief and their perspectives on cultural sustainability. Interviews with Mr. C through Mr. F offered a structural diagnosis of the demographic shifts in grassroots congregations, the practical challenges of youth attrition, and the efficacy of utilizing digital social media platforms for cultural transformation. Furthermore, leveraging the researcher's position as a high school Civics and Society instructor, field observations and classroom discussions were deployed to grasp senior high school students' current engagement with Folk beliefs.

C. Data Sources and Textual Positioning

The secondary data for this study were retrieved from current senior high school social studies textbooks and the 12-Year Basic Education Curriculum Guidelines. In the curricular stages of the 2019 Guidelines, items such as Civ Bc-V-1 (How do social norms maintain social order and form social control?) and His Ub-V-1 (The significance of religious beliefs and festivals) explicitly outline the inclusion of social norms and religious beliefs [3].

Nevertheless, the textbook expositions of these entries remain highly formulaic. For example, when discussing the constraints that social norms impose on individuals, certain textbooks state that the impact of social norms on individuals and groups can be examined through traditional Han funeral customs, illustrating how gender role norms are deeply influenced by social culture—specifically, how rituals reflect gender inequality and devalue women's social status [15], or how religious belief serves as an informal internal social norm [16]. Crucially, within these narrative contexts, the textbooks never explain in detail why these religious Folk belief cultures and habits were able to construct these social norms in the first place.

In point of fact, sacrifice is an important ritual in Chinese culture and an important component of folk belief. The women of every family were representatives of community religious activity participation, both before

and after urbanization. For example, the oldest woman in the family, rather than the man, usually attended the seasonal religious ceremonies. In the local knowledge system, participating in religious ceremonies as the family representative is the housewife's affair, no matter the religion (Christianity, Buddhism or Taoism) [18]. Textbook discourses completely omit this mode of gender practice within local knowledge, revealing a profound fissure between institutional text and ordinary reality.

D. Research Validity and Reliability

To ensure qualitative rigor and academic validity, this study implemented multiple strategies to enhance reliability and validity. To achieve reliability, transparent and systematic protocols were established, maintaining clear data collection frameworks and a structured thematic analysis process. To secure validity, the study utilized "data triangulation" across heterogeneous sources (textbooks, youth interviews, temple administrator interviews, and high school field surveys). This cross-examination and mutual verification across different empirical sites maximized the objectivity, consistency, and scholarly rigor of the research findings.

To mitigate potential bias stemming from the researcher's dual role as a high school instructor, all class discussions and interviews were conducted in a neutral, non-evaluative environment, ensuring that student expressions did not impact their academic grading.

IV. Findings and Discussion

A. Ritual Practice as an Intergenerational Vehicle of Family Education and Cultural Capital

The empirical data show that home-based rituals, such as ancestor worship and daily deity veneration, serve important ethical and psychological functions. They help honor ancestors and provide emotional support. Interviews with young participants (Students A and B) reveal that participating in family rituals or local pilgrimages from a young age helps make these practices part of their routine. Even after moving away for college or work, these young adults actively return home to participate in family sacrifices.

However, the interview data also expose the severe impacts of demographic shifts on this cultural transmission vector. Temple administrators (Mr. C through Mr. F) uniformly observed that daily temple rituals and pilgrimages increasingly feature a pattern of "grandparents and grandchildren accompanying each other." The young-adult generation is largely absent due to the structural constraints of the labor market, appearing only briefly during major lunar New Year festivals.

Furthermore, under highly competitive educational structures, students' visits to temples to pray for success before major national examinations (such as worshiping Wenchang Dijun) have become a highly instrumental ritual practice in daily life. These findings validate that the preservation of values and ritual practices in Folk belief remains contingent upon the early upbringing provided by family education, though its operational process is facing significant weakening due to modern tempos of life.

B. Textbook De-emotionalization and the Marginalization of Multicultural Discourse

Textual analysis paired with pedagogical observations indicates that current senior high school civics and history textbooks suffer from acute "decontextualization" and "emotional detachment" in their coverage of Folk belief culture. Unlike the spatial transformations discussed [18], Taiwan's dilemma exhibits a top-down educational marginalization where institutionalized curriculum reform inadvertently flattens the nuanced, gendered representations of local knowledge.

For students who lack direct religious experience, the detached and instrumental language of textbooks fails to convey the emotional meaning and community support found in daily folk beliefs. This educational gap weakens the emotional connection between students and their local traditions. During our fieldwork with high school students, we observed that while many come from families that maintain home altars or practice business rituals (such as offerings on the 2nd and 16th days of the lunar month), their relationship with these practices remains strictly observational. Because textbooks frame these activities in purely instrumental terms, students struggle to understand the local wisdom behind them.

By consistently omitting the social and psychological benefits of folk traditions, the curriculum creates a false divide between academic knowledge and local customs. Consequently, the lack of narrative depth in textbooks prevents students from recognizing their local heritage as an essential cultural right, gradually replacing local identities with a generic, globalized secular perspective.

Field observations further show that although most students' families engage in some form of ritual practice—such as corporate offerings or seasonal festivals—most students remain passive onlookers rather than active participants. Driven by credentialism and intense academic competition, parents often prioritize cram schools and study time, leaving children little opportunity to learn cultural meanings through daily practice.

Finally, when school education limits religious content to abstract historical overviews and confines multicultural education mainly to Indigenous peoples, new immigrants, or language policies, folk beliefs receive minimal coverage in the curriculum. This lack of representation prevents students from developing cultural empathy and weakens the collective awareness that local folk traditions are an essential cultural right.

C. Divergence in Youth Attitudes: Media Stigmatization and Divided Cultural Identity

This study identifies a sharp cognitive divide and attitude polarization among contemporary teenagers regarding Folk belief culture. On one hand, heavily influenced by mass media and social media platforms that selectively report negative incidents at local temple festivals (such as violent altercations, deviant behaviors, or unrefined language among certain temple troupe

members), teenagers easily develop a "stigmatized" stereotype of Folk belief.

Moreover, youth students express strong disapproval of the environmental costs generated during traditional rituals, such as the burning of joss paper, the setting off of firecrackers, air pollution, littering, and noise disturbances. Some surveyed high school students went so far as to label peers involved in specific temple troupes as immature or marginalized groups (using the localized slang "monkeys"), demonstrating that specific ritual expressions have become major friction points impeding youth participation.

Conversely, when Folk belief is expressed through activities characterized by a strong "sense of collective ritual" and "physical participation"—such as the long-distance foot pilgrimages of the Dajia Mazu or Baishatun Mazu—teenagers exhibit high levels of curiosity, a desire for exploration, and positive emotional experiences, frequently showcasing their participation on social media. This crucial finding indicates that youth are not inherently averse to Folk belief; rather, the traditional pathways of socialization and media representations have failed to engage in rational dialogue and emotional connection with the contemporary adolescent value system.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on these conclusions, this study proposes the following practical pathways:

First, within the dimension of family education, family members must abandon purely instrumental demands for ritual compliance. During the early upbringing stage of childhood, elders should intentionally construct the historical and ethical meanings of Folk belief culture through oral history and behavioral guidance. This will lay a robust foundation of cultural capital, allowing students to develop deep identity resonance when encountering these curriculum entries in secondary education.

Second, within the dimension of school education and pedagogical practice, frontline instructors must fully exert their curricular agency. They should actively extract ubiquitous local ritual behaviors as teaching materials to explicate the operational logic and behavioral models of Taiwanese ordinary society. Pedagogical strategies must decisively abandon the traditional memorization of abstract symbols, widely incorporating documentaries, multimedia assets, and digital video content to create immersive learning environments.

Third, within the dimension of digital and media practices, local temple communities and cultural educators should leverage digital video content and social media platforms to foster positive cultural representation. Presenting the heritage, artistry, and community values of folk rituals online can provide contemporary youth with accessible pathways for emotional connection and rational engagement.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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