

# Moral Mediums

## Spirit-Writing and the Cultural Construction of Chinese Spirit-Mediumship

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

Philip Clart addresses spirit-mediumship as a contested cultural field in Chinese popular religion. Drawing on his own field research, primary texts such as morality books, and studies of spirit-mediumship across the Chinese cultural sphere, he demonstrates the existence of different and sometimes competing interpretations of mediumship. In particular, he describes the views held among Taiwanese spirit-writing cults (“phoenix halls”), where mediumship is governed by the rules of a moral universe. Since the gods are moral forces, so the medium possessed by them must be a person whose moral cultivation renders him or her akin to the gods. Morality becomes the precondition and basis of transcendence, and the union of deity and medium is thus seen as occurring between two entities that are essentially alike.

## MORAL MEDIUMS

### Spirit-Writing and the Cultural Construction of Chinese Spirit-Mediumship

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How does a person become a spirit-medium?<sup>1</sup> For the Chinese cultural sphere<sup>2</sup> the answer most commonly reported is: a medium is chosen by the gods, mostly against his or her own will. Field researchers again and again stress the supposedly involuntary character of the process: prospective mediums suffer seizures, hallucinations, or strange ailments that are interpreted as a deity's call to surrender to it. Often they struggle against the god, refusing to lend their body to the divine spirit. Many, but by no means all, candidates ultimately succumb and restructure their lives to accommodate the possession experiences. Thereby they become important communication channels with the realm of the gods for their local community.

A brief look at some ethnographical accounts of spirit-mediums [*tâng-ki*] in Hokkien dialect areas will suffice to sketch this standard

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1. This article is based on a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in Chicago, 22-25 March 2001. I would like to express my thanks to the panelists (Brigitte Bapandier, Shin-yi Chao, and Scott Davis) for their useful suggestions for improvements. Special thanks go to the excellent discussant of the panel, Jean DeBernardi, for her insightful comments; to Daniel L. Overmyer, who read and commented on an earlier draft of this paper; to Alison Marshall for her careful editorial advice; and to the anonymous reviewers for *Ethnologies*.
  2. By Chinese cultural sphere I mean all those populations that, in spite of all their regional variations, are culturally part of Chinese civilisation. This includes the Han populations of the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and overseas Chinese communities throughout the world.

view of Chinese mediumism. Writing about late nineteenth century Amoy, Jan Jakob Maria de Groot states:

It is generally asserted, that the capacity to be an animated medium for gods and spirits is no acquisition, but a gift which manifests itself spontaneously. It happens indeed, especially at religious festivals, celebrated in temples with great concourse of people, that a young man suddenly begins to hop, dance and waddle with wild or drowsy looks, and nervous gestures of arms and hands. Bystanders grasp his arms and sustain him, knowing that, while in this condition, his fall to the ground may cause sudden death. All onlookers at once realize the fact that one of the gods whose images stand in the temple, or some other spirit, has “seized the youth” [*liáh tâng*], and the parish will henceforth rejoice in the possession of one more medium for its intercourse with the divine world (1910: 1270).

David Jordan, writing about the village of “Bao-an” in 1960s southern Taiwan, confirms the involuntary character of the medium’s selection and reinforces this image by referring to the prospective medium’s active resistance to the call:

The job is not one that people enjoy, or so it is claimed. Nearly all *tâng-ki* maintain that they tried every possible inducement to persuade the possessing god to select someone else before they finally surrendered before the inevitable (1989: 71).

Jordan goes on to relate the story of the village medium Guo Tian-huah who resisted the advances of the Third Prince for several years before finally becoming his medium (1989: 71-72). This pattern of resistance is indeed a common element in the life stories of many mediums. The first case described in Timothy Lane’s fascinating psychological study of Taiwanese mediums replicates this pattern. The “reluctant medium” Chen Ling-mei resisted for about two years before becoming a speaking medium [*qiaoshou*] in a sectarian group [*Yiguan Dao*] (1987: 52-53). In fact, the theme of resistance is so widespread that it is sometimes seen as a routinized stock feature of a medium’s career, serving to establish the sincerity of the medium in the eyes of the community (see, for example, Jordan 1989: 73; Xiaolingyi 1977: 31).

In folk theory, involuntary possession is usually explained as being due to certain defects in the medium’s “eight characters” [*baxi*], which predestine him or her to a short life-span. The defectiveness of his or her destiny simultaneously explains the medium’s susceptibility to trance

behaviour and indicates that the gods' sometimes violent advances are actually motivated by compassion, as mediums can lengthen their life-span by lending their body to a deity.<sup>3</sup>

The prospective medium's resistance is commonly explained by reference to the low prestige enjoyed by the spirit-medium. As with so many elements in our understanding of Chinese religions, this too goes back to de Groot's monumental *Religious System of China*:

Most of these dancing dervishes come from the lower classes. People of good standing seldom debase themselves to things which [...] were spoken of in terms of contempt by the holy I-yin thirty-five centuries ago, however frequently they may have recourse to them for revelation of unknown things (1910: 1270).

Echoing in de Groot's words are the attitudes of the traditional Chinese elite, who have looked down upon the practitioners of what de Groot calls "Wu-ism" ever since the firm establishment of a Confucian orthodoxy in the Han dynasty.<sup>4</sup> Were these attitudes shared by the "lower classes" from which the mediums were recruited? Here the consensus of the more recent ethnographic literature seems to be that the medium may play an enormously important and prestigious role in community affairs, but can wield his or her power only while in trance. In other words, respect is accorded to the possessing deity, not to the possessed individual, who out of trance typically occupies no particularly exalted position (see, for example, Jordan 1989: 73, 84-86; Sutton 1989: 113).

This pattern of involuntary mediumship dominates the image of Chinese spirit-mediumship among the Western academic community. However, alongside the highly visible and dramatic possession performance of the *tâng-ki* there exists a different form of spirit-mediumship, more subdued in style and more highly regarded by the traditional elite: spirit-writing. In the present article I shall explore beliefs and practices connected with spirit-writing, focussing in particular on the interpretations of the nature of mediumship maintained in Taiwanese spirit-writing cults. I shall argue that in this "literary" form of mediumism

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3. This folk theory is widely reported in the secondary literature, starting with de Groot (1910: 1269). It has been analyzed in the greatest detail by Brigitte Bapandier (see Berthier 1987; Bapandier 2001).

4. See de Groot (1910: 1187ff.) for a history of Confucian-"Wuist" relations. See Sutton (2000) for a more recent assessment.

the distinctiveness of its performance style and technique correlates with a construction of the relationship between the medium and the possessing spirit that differs significantly from the standard model summarized above. The presence of such an alternative model of mediumship should alert us to the fact that Chinese spirit-mediumship is not a single construct, but is instead characterized by diverse cultural constructions or, to use another term, folk theories. The present article focusses on one of these, that professed by Taiwanese spirit-writing cults, for which I use the somewhat cumbersome designation “moral-cultivational mediumship.” In addition, I will briefly address two other constructions, which are discernible in the data provided by previous researchers and which I shall tentatively call “martial” and “Daoist mediumship.” The result will be a more dynamic view of Chinese spirit-mediumship as a cultural field characterized by contestation and structural tensions between basic conceptual categories of Chinese civilization.

### Mediumship in Spirit-Writing Cults

Spirit-writing cults are voluntary religious associations focussing on the revelations received in spirit-writing séances. The minimum requirements for the holding of a séance usually are the presence of a medium (the “principal phoenix disciple” [*zhengluansheng*] who “supports the planchette” [*fujī, fuluan*]), a reader who reads and calls out the characters traced by the planchette on a sand-covered surface, and a scribe who records the revealed text on paper. In addition, a number of devotees and cult members may be present to observe the séance. The “planchette” in question is usually a Y-shaped wooden stick which is similar in function, but not in shape, to the planchette of Western spiritualism. I have observed spirit-writing séances in Singapore, in Vancouver, and in various temples in Taiwan, with the bulk of my material coming from an in-depth study of a cult group in the city of Taichung (central Taiwan), which I conducted from 1993 to 1994.<sup>5</sup> Consequently my discussion will focus principally on this group, the Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy [*Mingzheng Tang*].

The *Mingzheng Tang* was founded in 1976 as an offshoot of another Taichung phoenix hall, the Hall of Sages and Worthies [*Shengxian Tang*].

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5. The results of this study are presented in my dissertation, “The Ritual Context of Morality Books” (1996).

It quickly established itself as one of the most prolific phoenix halls in Taiwan, producing a large number of spirit-written books distributed by its own publishing house, the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society [*Luanyou Zazhishe*], which also published a fortnightly (later monthly) magazine called “*The Phoenix Friend*” [*Luanyou*]. All of the book publications were first serialized in *Luanyou*. These publications combined with interviews of cult members are my main sources for the following overview of mediumship in the context of a spirit-writing cult.

*The Taiwanese Phoenix Hall Tradition and the Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy*

The Mingzheng Tang is a modern manifestation of a Taiwanese tradition of planchette cults, the first of which was founded in 1853 in Magong, the capital of the Penghu Islands, which are located between the mainland province of Fujian and Taiwan proper.<sup>6</sup> The cults that subsequently sprang up all over Taiwan were literati-led religious groups that tried to counter the perceived decline of traditional values by having the gods themselves reaffirm these values through the planchette. The divine admonitions and moral lessons thus obtained were relayed to the general public through public lectures and morality books [*shanshu*]. These outward-directed activities are the most easily noticed ones, but planchette cults then and now also had internal functions, i.e., functions pertaining to the spiritual needs of their own members. In particular, as religious institutions, they were and are concerned with their members’ salvation.

Salvation, as the Mingzheng Tang’s members understand it, basically means deification. It is the cult member’s, or “phoenix disciple’s” [*luansheng*], aim to become a deity after death. This aim is worked towards during a long process of “cultivating the Way” [*xiudao*]. What constitutes “cultivating the Way” is taught by the gods in their planchette revelations, and the concrete contents differ slightly from hall to hall. However, there are a number of common denominators: first, cultivation first and foremost means cultivation of everyday morality. It means

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6. On the history of phoenix halls in Taiwan see the research of Sung Kwang-Yu (1995) and Wang Chien Chuan (1996), as well as the new monographic studies by Li Shiwei (1999) and Wang Zhiyu (1997). For an English overview of the early history of phoenix halls in Taiwan based on these articles and other relevant materials, see Clart (1996, part I, chapter 2).

realizing the basic Confucian virtues, such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and filial piety in one's everyday life. Once one has succeeded in incorporating this ethical pattern into one's daily life, the result will be a state of continuous sincerity [*cheng*] and peace of mind [*jing*] that will enable the practitioner to progress successfully in the cultivation of his or her inner or "numinous" nature [*lingxing*].

Cultivating the Way is conceptualized as a path of learning. A phoenix hall is like a school, with the gods as teachers and the cult members as students. This understanding is reflected in cult terminology: phoenix disciples will address their cult's gods as "benevolent teachers" [*enshi*], while referring to themselves as "students" or "disciples" [*sheng, dizi*]. Cult members are to study diligently the messages received by the gods. These "sagely instructions" [*shengxun*] are their textbooks. Progress (or lack thereof) in one's cultivation is measured in units of merit and demerit. For this purpose, many phoenix halls use "ledgers of merit and demerit" [*gongguo ge*], lists of good and bad deeds with amounts of merits and demerits attached to them.<sup>7</sup> The balance of one's merit account, the "phoenix register" [*luanji*] established in Heaven once one becomes a cult member, determines one's posthumous fate: one may fall into purgatory, be reborn as a human being, or ascend to Heaven. Ascension to Heaven requires a significant surplus of merit points. The amount of accumulated merit determines the rank of deity one attains: lower, middle, or upper. Even when one has attained divine status, however, one has to continue cultivating the Way in order to further perfect oneself. Spirit-writing journals are filled with accounts of virtuous people who after death became the earth god of some village. By continuing to diligently cultivate themselves and to fulfill their duties as earth gods in an unexceptionable manner, they manage after several years to rise to the position of city god. From there further cultivation leads them to the position of, say, Guan Gong in an important Guan Gong temple. Finally, if they do not stray from the correct path, they will eventually obtain a celestial office. By continuing to further cultivate themselves, they will then gradually rise up through the various layers of the heavens.

Thus, cultivation introduces a dynamic element into the celestial hierarchy of the popular Chinese pantheon, in that almost all the names

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7. On the history of these ledgers see Brokaw 1991. Gary Seaman discusses ledger use in a central Taiwanese phoenix hall in the 1970s (1978: 58-62).

of deities become simply names of divine offices, which may be held by a succession of different meritorious spirits. Even though the Chinese pantheon is large and varied, there are still not enough “reward positions” [*guowei*] for the many virtuous souls coming out of spirit-writing halls who have “realized the Way” [*zhengdao*]. Therefore spirit-writing halls tend to continually create new celestial offices to make space for them. Thus one is likely to find many deities in spirit-written texts that are not mentioned anywhere else. The ranks of the gods are further swollen by the practice of posthumously elevating one’s ancestors to divine status. Both members and non-members can transfer merit to their ancestors who may still be trapped in purgatory; this merit is credited to the ancestor’s merit account and may help bring it up to a level qualifying him or her for rebirth or deification. As the easiest and most straightforward way of creating merit for this purpose is to donate money to the spirit-writing temple, this is an important source of income for a phoenix hall.

#### *The Practice of Spirit-Writing*

A phoenix hall is first and foremost a receiving station for messages emanating from the divine realm by means of the spirit-writing séance. The written messages are received by the worshippers attending the séance during which they are recorded, but beyond that a phoenix hall usually takes it upon itself to make them available to the general public by printing them and distributing them in book format. The production of these spirit-written “morality books” is a central function of phoenix halls, the essential fulfillment of their mission of “proclaiming [moral] transformation on behalf of Heaven” [*daitian xuanhua*]. A phoenix hall’s function as a congregational religious body relaying divine teachings in written format to humanity is the key characteristic differentiating it from other procurers of divine knowledge in the Taiwanese religious economy.

The planchette is the principal instrument for the transmission of divine messages to humans. In addition, the planchette can also transmit the gods’ numinous energy for a variety of purposes, but most importantly for healing. The most common term used in the Mingzheng Tang for spirit-writing is *fuluan* [supporting the phoenix]. In this phoenix hall two forms of spirit-writing are being practised: writing on a sand-covered surface with a wooden stylus, and writing on yellow paper with a red marker. The latter procedure is called “marvellous method of the golden



indicator” [*jinzhi miaofa*] and is somewhat of a specialty of the Mingzheng Tang. Both methods are operated by a single medium and are considered more convenient and faster than the more traditional method of having two mediums operate a large and heavy wooden stylus. The Shengxian Tang’s phoenix hall catechism *Luantang shengdian* notes that the procedure of having a principal and an assistant medium holding the stylus “is a bit slow and transmission takes rather long; therefore nowadays one turns to using spirit-writing by a single person” (1989: 10). In the case of the Mingzheng Tang the transition to employing a single medium brought with it a change in the physical appearance of the stylus. Styli handled by two mediums tend to be long, heavy, and richly ornamented instruments whose manipulation by the principal medium is facilitated when an assistant provides some balance. By contrast, the styli used in the Mingzheng Tang tend to be shorter, thinner, lighter, unornamented, and thus better suited for rapid manipulation by a single person. A heavy, traditional stylus is still being employed in the Mingzheng Tang, but not for writing purposes. The medium Longbi uses it to apply a special kind of massage known in the hall as “spiritual healing” [*lingliao*].

A number of different terms are used in the Mingzheng Tang for the styli utilized in spirit-writing. As already mentioned, the marker used for the “marvellous method” is called “golden brush” [*jinbi*]. The wooden forked stylus is variously called “wooden brush” [*mubi*], “peach brush” [*taobi*], or “phoenix brush” [*luanbi*]. The most commonly used of these terms is *mubi*, which is used in juxtaposition to the *jinbi* of the “marvellous method”. *Taobi* indicates that the stylus’ body is made from peach wood. A piece of willow wood is inserted into the underside of the stylus’ lower end. It is this piece that touches the sand surface during writing.<sup>8</sup> Willow and peach are both credited with being able to ward off evil influences [*bixie*],<sup>9</sup> and these qualities were the only explanations given to me by Mingzheng Tang members for the use of these woods in the manufacture of styli.<sup>10</sup> The same protective function is served by the stylus’ red colour: the Mingzheng Tang possesses one large “dragon-

8. In this composite nature, Taiwanese styli differ from those seen by de Groot in late nineteenth century Amoy: these were made completely from one kind of wood, usually peach, occasionally willow (de Groot 1910: 1295).

9. For a discussion of these protective functions of peach and willow wood see de Groot (1910: 955-962, 997-999).

10. More sophisticated explanations can be found in the literature. See for example the cosmological interpretation of the willow in *Luantang shengdian* (11). In a

headed” stylus that is lacquered red, and a number of lighter styli used for spirit-writing are wrapped with red cloth tape.

All these facts show that the stylus is seen to be in need of protection from demonic forces intent on disrupting the divine revelations. This protection is further strengthened by restricting the styli to closely circumscribed safe areas within the temple. Use of the stylus for spirit-writing or healing is confined to the inner sanctuary [*neitang*], a square area in front of the central deity image that is fenced off with a low aluminium railing. This *neitang* may be entered only with the gods’ specific permission. When not in use, the stylus rests on top of the sand tray in the *neitang*, covered with a red cloth. Styli that are not used regularly are stored inside the glass cases containing the images of the main deities. Thus protected, a stylus does not need to be purified before every use; the only time I have witnessed a precautionary purification by means of incense was in the case of a stylus that had not been used for a long time.

The same array of protective measures does not surround the markers used for spirit-writing of the “marvellous method” variety. The only safeguards here are that the pens always use red ink and that for each session a new pen is used. In fact, the pen is laid out in its plastic wrapping, which is only removed by the medium shortly before entering into trance.

The terms *luanbi* and *fuluan* point to a mythical connection of the *luan-bird* [phoenix]<sup>11</sup> with spirit-writing; the stylus is said to resemble a luan in shape. Xu Dishan proposed that, as the *luan-bird* serves as a conveyance for deities, it came to be viewed as a mediator between the sacred and the profane realms (1941: 7). This, however, is only an educated guess and there seems to exist no direct documentary evidence for the etymology of such terms as *fuluan* and *feiluan*. Considering the great significance of the luan-bird for Taiwanese phoenix halls, the lack

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phoenix hall in Tanzi (Taichung county) I was told that peach wood represented yang and willow wood yin. This was not further elaborated upon, but the implication seems to be that the stylus represents a union of the two cosmic forces, an embodiment of the Taiji emblem.

11. Strictly speaking, the *luan* is different from the *feng*, which is usually translated as “phoenix”. In translations of poetry, the Persian word *simurgh* is often used for *luan* to distinguish it from the *feng*. In the context of spirit-writing, however, the use of “phoenix” for *luan* has become conventional, and I see no need to replace it with the (rather obscure) *simurgh*. On the *luan-bird* see Hargett (1989).

of knowledge concerning its connection with spirit-writing must have irked them. This gap was filled by an explanatory myth, which seems to be of recent origin, but is now generally accepted among phoenix disciples. Its earliest incidence to my present knowledge is found in a morality book published by a southern Taiwanese phoenix hall in 1970: here Zisi Fuzi, a disciple of Confucius, reveals that in the beginning of the Han dynasty a luan-bird wrote with its beak in snow and sand to transmit the divine will, to give warning to rebellious elements and rectify the customs of the time. These writings were called “luan writings” [*luanwen*]. In imitation, the deities and sages thereafter used a stick made from peach and willow wood to write on a sand tray and proclaim their teachings. This practice continues until today and from it the phoenix halls derive their name (*Ruzong Shenjiao de kaozheng*: 44). This explanatory story was affirmed by its retelling in volume 78 of the Phoenix Friend (*Luanyou* 78, 1972: 35) and given further divine sanction in 1973 by a revelation from Taiyi Zhenren (*Luanyou* 109, 1973: 11). The latter revelation also answers a question raised by the original story, namely, why the gods stopped using the luan-bird and instead developed the stylus as a substitute. Taiyi Zhenren explains that the luan-bird vanished and upon praying to Heaven, the Divine Lord Guan provided them the stylus, whose shape resembles that of the luan-bird, as a substitute. This was not the last word on this matter, however. The myth continued to develop, and in 1980 the Mingzheng Tang’s medium Yongbi revealed a new version that connected the luan-bird with Confucius:

Near the end of the Zhou dynasty the Perfected Sage and First Teacher Confucius travelled through the various states. Originally he embraced a mind of the Way and wished to transform others, but how could he have known that the Way was not practised in the world and that the people therefore could not understand Confucius’ teachings and compassionate concern? Thereupon Confucius tired and returned home. Despondent and discouraged he accidentally saw a numinous *luan-bird* land on a patch of sand and write characters in it with its beak. Because of this his [Confucius’] numinous consciousness was aroused and he penetrated the secrets of the cosmos and obtained the mandate of Heaven. Realizing that the spiritual *luan-bird* transmitted the will of Heaven, [Confucius] recorded its poems and prose. Word for word they were [like] gold and jade, sentence for sentence [like] pearls; all were texts to admonish the world and save the people. Thereupon the master ordered his disciples to assemble at fixed times to earnestly pray to Heaven-on-High and piously ask for the *luan-bird*

to descend. Every time the *luan-bird* responded to the request and descended to compose essays by pecking in the sand, thus expounding the marvellous principles of the Way of Heaven and opening the gate of the Great Way. This was the beginning of spirit-writing in the Confucian school.

Later, Confucius felt that it was very inconvenient to request the numinous *luan-bird* to compose characters by pecking in the sand, because sometimes it would not come even though requested. Thereupon he asked Heaven-on-High to allow him to fashion a peach branch into the shape of a *luan-bird's* beak, with two handles extending from it to substitute for the numinous *luan-bird*. He also made a sand tray, selected a person with numinous capacities, and trained him, hoping to make the human numen penetrate the immortals' numen so as to transmit the will of Heaven. This was the "principal *luan*[-medium]". Furthermore he selected an "assistant *luan*[-medium]" to help the principle *luan* support the *luan*-stylus and invite the immortals' numen, wielding the *luan* on the sand tray (*Luanyou* 267, 1980: 9).<sup>12</sup>

The medium selected by Confucius was his disciple Zilu; Confucius and his followers thus were the first spirit-writing cult. This myth fulfills the double function of explaining the *luan-bird's* connection with spirit-writing and claiming Confucius himself as the founder of the phoenix hall tradition. The story seems to be widely accepted in central Taiwanese phoenix halls, as it was recounted to me with slight variations in three different temples.

### Theories of Spirit-Writing

Folk theory is somewhat ambiguous as to whether the stylus is moved directly by the gods or whether it is moved by the medium as an agent of the gods. Elliott, working from data gathered in colonial Singapore in the 1950s, gives expression to this ambiguity by writing that

[t]he principle of automatic writing is that the dragon's head is moved by the *shen* to write characters on the sand, while the stick is being held by two persons .... Although it is the stick itself which is considered to be the "medium", it is still necessary to have these two persons holding the handles as "conductors" for the psychic power of the *shen*.

12. This story gained wide currency through its inclusion in Lin Yonggen's bibliography of spirit-written works [*Luanmen ji Taiwan shengtang zhuzuo zhi shanshu jingchan kao*]: 4-5.

Of the two, it is the one in the left-hand position, holding the stick with his right hand, who is considered to have the necessary mediumistic powers. His partner on the right is only meant to hold the stick as a passive agent, following all its motions without any interference (1955: 141-142).

De Groot is not much clearer when he says that the assistant medium “merely behaves neutrally and passively, abstaining from disturbing the movements of the medium, which are those of the spirit *which is in him and in the ki*” (1910: 1297, my emphasis). Chao Wei-pang relates the opinion of his sectarian informants that

the action of the *fu chi* is the “contact of the spirit force” between the gods and men. During the performance, the “gods procure the assistance of the spirit of the men and the men procure the assistance of the spirit of the gods”. In other words, the planchette is neither moved by the gods themselves, nor by the men who hold it. The gods and men cooperate through the contact of spirit force (1942: 11).

If these reports faithfully reflect believers’ theorizing about spirit-writing, we are dealing with a complex interpretation, localizing the process of mediation simultaneously in the stylus and in the human medium. Occasionally, however, the idea that the gods move the stylus directly appears on its own. Jordan describes a rudimentary form of spirit-writing practised in the village of “Bao-an” in southern Taiwan, where two men “support” [*fu*] a “divination chair” [*kiô-â*] scribbling characters on a tabletop. Here the deity is believed to descend into the chair, which consequently goes into a sometimes violent rocking motion with the two bearers barely able to hold on. The bearers actually are believed to be merely “supporting” the chair which is being moved directly by the deity. Accordingly one does not need to be a trained medium to support the *kiô-â*; theoretically, every male villager can do it (1989: 57-59, 64-67).<sup>13</sup> Concerning spirit-writing proper, it is also sometimes claimed that the deity could move the stylus on its own without the intervention of a human medium. The phoenix hall manual *Luantang shengdian*, for example, describes the former practice in the Sichuan centre of the Wenchang cult of suspending a wooden luan-bird with a brush in its beak from the central rafter, which would write automatically and without human intervention (9-10). Historical sources do indeed describe such a practice for the Wenchang cult centre,

13. On the other hand, villagers are keenly aware that some people are better than others at getting the chair to move; see Jordan’s informant’s statement (1989: 66).

although they also give us the additional information that such séances were conducted in a closed and sealed room with no witnesses present (Kleeman 1994: 17).<sup>14</sup> The *Luantang shengdian* indicates that this method is properly called “flying phoenix” [*feiluan*], while the later method of using one or two mediums to hold the stylus is called “supporting the phoenix” [*fuluan*]. This work further argues that the change from *feiluan* to *fuluan* was made because belief in spirit-writing had been sufficiently established by the former method (10). A member of the Mingzheng Tang, however, expressed the opinion that *feiluan* was given up because it was “too slow”. However that may be, nowadays no fully automatic spirit-writing is practised and believers and practitioners have to come to terms with the division of forces among the parties involved in spirit-writing, namely, the medium, the gods, and the stylus.

What are the prevalent theories concerning the process of spirit-writing in the Mingzheng Tang? Here the gods’ written responses to questions posed by believers concerning doctrinal matters are a prime source of information. From these it becomes clear that in spirit-writing as practised in the Mingzheng Tang the mediating function is clearly located in the human medium. This is expressed by the great concern for the medium’s purity of mind. As it is through the medium’s mind that the gods transmit their messages, this mind has to be calm [*jing*], clear [*qing*] and “oblivious of its self” [*wangwo*] so as not to interfere with the flow of the gods’ thoughts. Only then is the medium able to transmit the authentic words of the gods [*chuanzhen*].<sup>15</sup> Any interference by the medium’s mind inevitably leads to “losses of authenticity” [*shizhen*]. These concerns are expressed concisely in the following exchange:

[The disciple Lin asks], “What prerequisites does the principal phoenix disciple (planchette disciple) need to have so that in transmitting the

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14. There exists a more recent reference to spirit-writing by means of an unassisted planchette. Paul De Witt Twinem reports that in the early 1920’s the Nanjing branch of the sectarian Society for Enlightenment to Goodness (Wushan She) contained a room for “a smaller suspended planchette which may be operated by the spirits without the help of even one man” (1925: 469).
  15. The term *chuanzhen* originally refers to a masterful portrait painting that “transmits the authentic” personality of the person depicted. Mediums give expression to this “mindless” quality of their trance experience by claiming to have no sensation at all during trance and no memory of their actions afterwards.

gods' intentions everything will be correct and no losses of authenticity occur?"

The Benevolent Teacher Yue replies, "The principal phoenix must cultivate himself until his mind is firm so that when he enters the inner sanctum and grasps the peach brush he can completely enter the state of self-forgetting. If he cannot reach this state, then losses of authenticity in the transmission will occur easily. Or sometimes erroneous transmissions may appear because [the medium's mind] was controlled by his own consciousness." (*Shiyi chandao lu*, vol.1: 12)

There seems to be no idea involved that the revealing deity controls the stylus in any direct manner. Instead the deity "borrows the body" [*jieti*] of the medium to move the stylus, which accounts for the fatigue felt by the medium after coming out of trance (*Shiyi chandao lu*, vol.1: 13). This borrowing of the medium's body is further explained in the following dialogue:

[The Benevolent Teacher:] "In spirit-writing the deity transmits its numinosity into the body of the medium and uses the medium's body to wield the phoenix brush and express its intentions."

The disciple Lin asks, "Is the peach brush wielded purely with the physical force of the medium or with the deity's force? Or is it a numinous force generated at the time of contact between deity and human?"

The Benevolent Teacher replies, "It is carried out jointly." (*Shiyi chandao lu*, vol.7: 56)

The interaction between medium and deity, usually captured in the formula "deity and human become one" [*shen-ren heyi*], is sometimes interpreted in "scientific" language. Once a vice-chairman of the Mingzheng Tang sought the gods' approval for his semiotic model to explain the mechanism of spirit-writing:

1. The medium's body is a signal receiver which must be empty and without interfering signals. That means the brain has to be empty and no intentional thoughts must exist in the mind.
2. The divine numen is the signal emitter. When the receiver receives the signal sent out by the emitter, it immediately transmits the received signal onto the sand tray, i.e., when the planchette disciple receives the divine ideas he will wield the peach brush to write on the sand tray (*Shiyi chandao lu*, vol.7: 56-57).

Although the deity's assent to this construction was somewhat lukewarm, such explanations of spirit-writing using scientific analogies

are not uncommon among the more thoughtful phoenix disciples. In our conversations, Mr. Weng (a pseudonym), a young primary school teacher from Hsinchu, repeatedly compared *fuluan* to radio transmissions: a good medium is a person whose mind can work on the same frequency as that of the communicating deity; he is like a radio set whose transmissions become clearer the more finely it is able to tune in to the signal-emitting station. The training of a medium serves to “fine-tune” [*weitiao*] his mind so as to produce clear transmissions. Further extending the analogy, mistakes in revelatory texts are thus due to the “atmospheric interference” accompanying imperfect tuning. Such analogies are not drawn arbitrarily. They are grounded in a worldview that does not recognize a discontinuity between the natural universe and the moral cosmos. Since these two are one, they are subject to the same laws and their elements are identical, though they may carry different names. Thus “matter-energy” [*qi*] is commonly equated with “electricity” (*Tiandao aoyi* 1996 chapter 8: 421). If we bear in mind that “numen” [*ling*] in turn is defined as highly refined matter-energy (468), the interpretation of divine-to-human communication in the language of physics appears to be more than a mere metaphor.

The myth of the *luan-bird* indicates some residual awareness of the planchette as an agent potentially independent of the medium holding on to it. This view underlies the protective practices applied to the instrument in the Mingzheng Tang, such as using peach and willow wood for its body, painting it in auspicious red or wrapping it with red cloth, storing it near the divine images, and purifying it with incense after long periods of disuse. De Groot reports similar customs for late nineteenth century Amoy, mentioning in particular that the planchette is stored near the god images “so that the spirit of the latter can pervade it perpetually and thoroughly, and no other spirits can infect it” (1910: 1300). Thus, on the one hand, a complex of practices linked to the idea of the planchette as the actual medium persists in the Mingzheng Tang. On the other hand, however, explicit rationalizations of the process of spirit-writing pay little attention to the wooden instrument and focus instead almost exclusively on the human medium.

That the human medium has taken over virtually all mediating functions is illustrated by the fact that the term for planchette, *ji*, can be and often is used for the human medium. Thus in the quote above, what I translated as “the medium’s body” reads in Chinese as *jishen*, “body of the *ji*”. Indeed, when Taiwanese people hear the word *ji* they



would usually think right away of the *jitong* [*tâng-ki*], the type of human medium who speaks the words of the gods. *Jitong* are often distinguished from spirit-writers by the terms “martial *ji*” [*wuji*] and “literary *ji*” [*wenji*], respectively (see, for example, *Ruzong baodian*, vol.6: 301). The status of the human medium as the genuine channel of the gods’ writings is further expressed by his “pen name”, which typically (though not always) ends with the character for “brush” or “stylus”, *bi*: *Yongbi*, *Mingbi*, *Zhengbi*, etc. The human medium and not the planchette is thus the true brush of the gods.<sup>16</sup>

This interpretation is borne out by the testimony of the Mingzheng Tang’s present principal medium, Mingbi. He reports that in his very first training séance he stood for one hour with the planchette raised over his head; Mingbi tried with all his strength to push it down onto the sand tray, but the planchette seemed to counteract by pulling upwards and he was unable to bring it down. At first glance this looks as if Mingbi was experiencing the planchette as an antagonistic entity separate from himself, but this is not how he interpreted it. According to him, the resistance he felt actually originated from his own consciousness which at this early stage of his training was still “too heavy”. It took several training séances for him to reach a state of mind that allowed him to produce some characters on the tray. In my interviews with him, Mingbi never attributed any autonomy to the planchette; instead he consistently stressed the importance of the state of the medium’s mind for successful spirit-writing.

Carried to its logical conclusion, this reasoning also serves to address the sceptic’s doubts whether or not it is actually the gods that communicate through the medium. From the planchette medium’s perspective, the gods are pure spirits that exist in union with the Dao; if the medium’s mind is pure and “self-forgetting”, it also enters into union with the Dao. Therefore everything that comes forth from a mind in this state ultimately originates from the Dao, whether or not a personal deity is thought to intervene as a messenger.<sup>17</sup> This point is made quite clear in the advice given by one of the Mingzheng Tang’s deities to a

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16. See the similar argumentation on the primacy of the mind in planchette-mediumism in the passage translated in Thompson 1982: 100-107.

17. A lengthy revelation received in the Shengxian Tang on the nature of spirit-writing affirms this interpretation. It concludes (in Thompson’s translation): “[If all our actions are in harmony with the mind of Heaven,] we are already of

troubled *tâng-ki* from the island of Jinmen who was unsure of the authenticity of his own trances. The deity said: “The gods are transformations of correct matter-energy. It is all right if you can solve other people’s problems with correctness and sincerity” (*Luanyou* 564, 1994: 22). In other words, if the *tâng-ki*’s mind is “correct and sincere” [*zhengcheng*], the purity of its numinous nature fills it with the “vast correct pneuma” [*haoran zhengqi*] of the Dao; in effect, the *tâng-ki*’s mind itself becomes divine and is thus able to exert its penetrating powers without fail.<sup>18</sup> The medium should therefore not be overly concerned with the authenticity of the spirits that visit him, but rather he should focus on the purity and worthiness of his own mind, because this is the ultimate guarantor of his link to the divine realm.

#### *The Planchette Medium’s Training*

Mingbi believes that since spirit-mediumship depends mainly on one’s purity of mind it is essentially learnable. All human beings have the capacity for purifying the mind and have the potential to be spirit-mediums if they apply themselves to the necessary process of cultivation. However, it is not that congenital factors do not play a role at all. Even at birth an individual’s mind is not a *tabula rasa* but is conditioned by the karma carried over from previous existences. People whose minds are weighed down by numerous “karmic obstructions” [*yezhang*] will find it more difficult to persevere in their efforts to cultivate themselves than those whose minds are less encumbered, or who may even benefit from a surplus of merit accumulated in previous existences. Karma as a factor influencing the mind’s turbidity/heaviness or clarity/lightness, however, does not impose absolute limits on what people can achieve. It is counterbalanced by the individual’s will to goodness which is rooted in human nature. When this will is able to assert its dominance in determining the individual’s conduct, it can gradually whittle away the karmic obstructions and thus purify the mind. Depending on the mind’s

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the same mind (or, heart) as immortals and buddhas, we ourselves are spirits and holy ones in this world. What need is there for us to look further, outside our own minds (or, hearts), beseeching the spirits and inquiring of the buddhas?” (Thompson 1982: 107)

18. On “vast correct matter-energy” (a term derived from the *Mencius*) as a manifestation of a pure and virtuous mind and precondition for the union of Heaven and humanity see *Tiandao aoyi* (chapters 4 and 7); *Dahan tiansheng* (*Luanyou* 264, 1980: 5); *Zhenli, dunwu, chan* (40-41).

condition at the outset, the process of purification may thus take longer for one individual than for another; for some people it may even take more than one existence to complete it. Ultimately, however, the original goodness of human nature guarantees that everyone can engage and succeed in the endeavour.

It is important to underline that a planchette medium is not an especially gifted person. Rather, spirit-mediumship is the practical application of an ability attainable by anyone at a fairly high level of cultivation, namely, the ability of “penetrating numinosity” [*tongling*] (see *Tiandao aoyi* 1996: 482-485). Thus the planchette medium is a person of higher attainment in moral cultivation than the average person, but his or her level of attainment can theoretically be achieved by anyone willing to undergo the long and arduous process of cultivation. In the sectarian Compassion Society the recognition of the general human capacity for spirit-mediumship has led to its practice of group séances where every member of the congregation is encouraged to go into trance (Jordan and Overmyer 1986; Lane 1987).

Because spirit-mediumship is tied to cultivational success and moral worthiness, being a spirit-medium is perceived to be prestigious among phoenix disciples. It has been a source of persistent discontent for some of the Mingzheng Tang’s members that the gods have for years been refusing to allow the training of any new planchette mediums. A number of younger people were eager to be considered for mediumship. During my stay at the Mingzheng Tang the gods decided to give in to these demands at least halfway: one of the Hall’s vice-chairmen was ordered to train as a medium. However, he was restricted to learning how to use the planchette in “numinous healing” [*lingliao*] and was not authorized to train in spirit-writing. When in 1995 Mingbi suffered a minor stroke and was unable to act as a medium for several weeks, the pressure for the training of new mediums mounted again and eventually, in August of 1995, permission was given by the Hall’s presiding deity Guan for new mediums to be trained. So as to avoid discontent among the membership no particular individuals would be appointed by the gods. Instead any male phoenix disciple under forty years of age could register for training (the training of female mediums was to be “temporarily postponed”) (*Luanyou* 584, 1995: 2-3). Eventually two new mediums successfully completed their training and were given the pen names “Heroic Stylus” (Yingbi) and “Chaste Stylus” (Zhenbi) respectively (*Luanyou* 586, 1996: 1).

The training of a medium is formally called *xiabi* or *xiaji* (also pronounced *yabi* and *yaji*, respectively); informally it is referred to as *xunlian* [training]. The term *xia* is difficult to translate. Its root meaning is “hot” or “to heat”, “to burn”. In the composite *xialian* [to heat and refine] it refers to the Daoist alchemical practice; the term *xialian* is sometimes used to refer to the training of a planchette medium. “Heating the brush” or “heating the planchette” thus may indicate that the training of a new medium involves a quasi-alchemical process of gradual refinement and purification of the candidate.

A medium’s training is to last seven times seven, i.e., forty-nine days. During the forty-nine day period the prospective medium engages in meditation, keeps a strictly vegetarian diet, and practises spirit-writing. He or she is guided by a human teacher [*renshi*], typically an experienced planchette medium, and an “immortal teacher” [*xianshi*] who will remain the medium’s guiding deity throughout his life. Towards both the human and the immortal teacher the medium forthwith owes the respect traditionally accorded a teacher in Chinese culture.

During the first days the candidate usually is unable to write any clear characters. As described above, on the first day Mingbi actually was not able to bring down the planchette onto the sand tray. When he had achieved that, he at first could only move the planchette around in circles. It took a further day before he was able to write a few intelligible characters. On the seventh day he and his co-trainee Zhengbi were writing coherently enough for their texts to be formally called out, recorded, and published in the Phoenix Friend (*Luanyou* 308, 1982: 14). It is interesting to note that coherent texts appeared so soon in the period of training. There was quite a sudden jump within a few days from incoherent scratching on the sand tray to well-constructed essays and poems. Although the candidates still had to go through the whole forty-nine days, by the second week their productions were, as far as I could judge, fairly accomplished. An exception was Zhengbi’s poetry, which was repeatedly criticized by the gods as sub-standard and a sign of insufficient “numinous penetration” [*lingtong*] (see for example *Luanyou* 309, 1982: 15). The texts written during Mingbi’s and Zhengbi’s training were believed to be authored mostly by their respective immortal teachers, with occasional appearances by the Mingzheng Tang’s presiding deity Guan and other divine functionaries of the Hall. They consisted of poetry, theoretical essays on moral topics, and laudatory as well as critical comments on the candidates’ progress.

The training of a medium has to be formally authorized by the gods. In the Mingzheng Tang this authorization is typically given by the Jade Emperor. A complicating factor enters in with the so-called “marvellous method of the golden indicator,” which is seen as the Venerable Mother’s (Wuji Laomu) own method of spirit-writing. It has to be studied separately from the traditional planchette writing and needs to be authorized by the Venerable Mother. Thus, Mingbi actually underwent two forty-nine day periods of training, learning first the “marvellous method” in 1981 and then the wooden planchette in 1982. While his human teacher was the same in both instances (Moxianzi), his immortal teachers were different: the “marvellous method” was taught by the Mysterious Woman of the Nine Heavens (Jiutian Xuannü), while he was instructed in the “wooden brush” by Han Xiangzi, one of the Eight Immortals. The two mediums newly trained in the Mingzheng Tang in 1995 so far have only studied the “marvellous method”, again under the guidance of Jiutian Xuannü.

### **Moral Mediumism as an Alternative Model**

What emerges from the above description of mediumship in the Taiwanese phoenix hall context is an alternative model of spirit-mediumship, alternative, that is, to that of the *tâng-ki* as the passive and reluctant mouthpiece of the gods. Here mediumship is seen as operating through the voluntary cooperation of a deity and a human being of great moral purity, the partnership between a divine master and his or her favourite human disciple. Being chosen as a planchette medium therefore confirms the cultivational success of the individual in question and endows him or her with great prestige in the eyes of cult members who share this particular interpretation of mediumship. Hence mediumship is actively aspired to by cult members.

When I first thought about the topic of this article, I connected the two models of mediumship with the concepts of “martial” and “literary mediumship” [*wuji*, *wenji*], the former corresponding to the traditional view of *tâng-ki*, the latter to planchette mediums. However, while *wuji* is an alternative term for *tâng-ki* and *wenji* is commonly used for spirit-writers, on closer investigation it turns out that phoenix disciples make no corresponding distinction in their theoretical view of spirit-mediumship. Whether *wuji* or *wenji*, all spirit-mediumship is seen to

work through the cooperation of deities and pure and sincere humans. The difference is merely one of performance style and field of application.

The principle of mediumship is the same for literary and martial mediums: they need to be sincere and upright, so that their selfish desires do not distort the messages of the gods (see for example *Ruzong baodian*: 301; *Luantang shengdian*: 18; *Ruzong Shenjiao de kaozheng*: 44-46; *Manghai zhigui*: II, 67, 73-74, 80, 90). This point was stressed by Mingbi to the *tâng-ki* who was worried about having his own thoughts interfere with the divine will. It is sincerity that controls your desires and thoughts and keeps them from interfering with the divine spirit. As long as you are sincere, you have nothing to worry about. In theory, a sincere *tâng-ki* thus can be as good a communication channel as a sincere planchette writer.

In practice, however, things look somewhat different. Having conceded that a single moral principle governs all forms of mediumship, planchette texts frequently go on to reveal a rather critical attitude towards the martial mediums. For one thing, not many of them are said to be sincere. A revelation in the Mingzheng Tang claims that more than 70% of all *shentan* are fraudulent (*Shiyi chandao lu*, vol.5: 32), and the dishonest *tâng-ki* is a stock character encountered by planchette mediums in their journeys through the underworld (see for example *Diyu youji*, ch.29: 109; *Journey to the Underworld*: 158). Even the minority of *tâng-ki* who are sincere, however, are seen to be more limited in their ability to serve the gods than are planchette mediums. Usually they only act “to give relief to the world” by providing advice on everyday problems and healing diseases. The nobler task of leading the world to moral reform by composing uplifting texts is left to the literary mediums (*Ruzong baodian*, vol.6: 302; *Shengxue yaoyi*: 79). “Giving relief to the world” [*jishi*] is a technical term among phoenix halls, referring to the practice of the gods giving individualized advice and healing to believers. While giving relief to the world is an indispensable part of every phoenix hall’s schedule of events, it should be only an ancillary activity, the main focus being the composition of (morality) books [*zhushu*]. Accordingly, phoenix halls that neglect the composition of uplifting literature in favour of the lucrative relief services are looked down upon by disciples of a prolific book-writing hall such as the Mingzheng Tang. Their emphasis on relief services is seen at best as a sign that the gods do not hold such a phoenix hall in high regard, since

they have not entrusted it with the more important task of “proclaiming transformation on behalf of Heaven” [*daitian xuanhua*] by means of spirit-written books.<sup>19</sup> At worst it suggests to the pious phoenix disciple a lack of proper intentions and understanding of principles on the part of the hall’s functionaries.

Thus, even *shentan* run by honest *tâng-ki* rank below phoenix halls, because they focus almost exclusively on “giving relief to the world.” This lower status is further confirmed by the supposedly lower status of the deities possessing *tâng-ki*. The deities possessing literary mediums prove their high celestial rank by the medium’s dignified deportment in trance, by their literary skills, and (usually) by their insistence on vegetarian sacrifices. By contrast, the spirits possessing *tâng-ki* show the violent behaviour of lower-ranking gods such as “*wangye*, *yuanshuai*, and *qiansui*” (*Shengxue yaoyi*: 11),<sup>20</sup> and often insist on meat sacrifices (*Shengxue yaoyi*: 67).

Spirit-writers thus construct on the one hand a unified theory of spirit-mediumship *qua* moral qualification, but on the other hand relegate “martial mediums” to the lower position in a hierarchical structure between the poles of *jishi*, violent behaviour, and bloody sacrifice on

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19. The tension between the planchette oracle’s two functions of writing books for the instruction of humanity and of giving practical assistance for the problems of daily life is negotiated in different ways by different cult groups. See Jordan and Overmyer’s discussion of this question (1986:125-126).

The Mingzheng Tang’s phoenix disciples criticize phoenix halls that emphasize relief services over the writing of books. Such halls are deemed to be of a lower order. An object of such criticism is, for example, the Shengshou Gong, an exceedingly rich phoenix hall located quite close to the Mingzheng Tang, just in the neighbouring valley. The Shengshou Gong comprises a huge temple complex and nowadays focuses mainly on providing healing services, while producing only a meagre output of spirit-written texts.

The differentiation of these two functions of phoenix halls apparently also applied to earlier spirit-writing cults on the Chinese mainland. E.g., in a planchette text written in Beijing around the turn of the twentieth century, the Divine Lord of Reliable Succour (Fuyou Dijun) complains that during the several decades that he has been conducting spirit-writing in Beijing, “there have been very many shrines that give relief to the world [*jishi*], but only very few that have requested books [*qingshu*]” (quoted in Fan Chunwu 1996: 124). The juxtaposition of *jishi* with *qingshu* parallels the Mingzheng Tang’s categories of *jishi* and *zhushu*.

20. See the distinction made by Seaman’s Pearl Mountain spirit-writing cult between “true gods” and *wangye* (Seaman 1978: 55).

the bottom, and *zhushu*, refined conduct, and vegetarianism at the top. This bipolar hierarchy is not limited to the group-specific value system of phoenix halls, but resonates with basic categories of Chinese culture concerning purity and impurity, the civil and the martial. Not everyone outside the sphere of spirit-writing cults will agree with the assignment of the planchette medium to the higher of the poles. In fact, people critical of mediumship in general will group spirit-writers together with martial mediums and regard all of them as lowly *tâng-ki*. In doing so, however, they apply the same cultural categories, except that they position planchette mediums at the lower pole. By contrast, phoenix halls are trying to position themselves at the civil (and thus higher) end of the civil-martial polarity in Chinese culture — a position that is no longer generally recognized by modern sectors of Taiwanese society that tend to categorize all forms of mediumship together as “superstition” [*mixin*]. This may well have been different in late Imperial times when *fuluan* was a part of elite culture and was recognized (though never without contestation) as a respectable form of mediumship outside the specific groups organized for its practice. Viewed from this angle, the insistence of phoenix halls on their place at the upper pole of the Chinese value system may actually be a defense of spirit-writing’s former place in traditional society and a claim to its continuing occupancy of that place in modern times.<sup>21</sup>

Having looked at the differences between martial and civil mediums, let us now look at what they share. At the outset I was aware of the structural polarities in the phoenix halls’ views of spirit-writers and *tâng-ki*. What I was not fully aware of was their insistence that there is a single principle underlying all forms of mediumship, namely, moral purity. The presence of this unifying principle should warn us not to

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21. The moralistic rationale may also explain why the prevalent elite disdain for spirit-mediums in the Late Imperial period was never fully extended to planchette mediumship. Donald Sutton (2000) argues that at the basis of this disdain lay a deep rift between elite and popular culture in this period, with the elite insisting on a moral and orderly (but not rationalist!) cosmos in the face of the disorder and amorality of popular mediumistic performance and cult activity. As many planchette mediums shared the elite’s view of a moral and orderly cosmos and displayed these shared values in their texts and their performance style, little friction arose in their interactions with the elite. In fact, some spirit-writers were members of this elite. Formal prohibitions of spirit-writing in the Ming and Qing legal codes thus were more politically than culturally motivated.



think too rigidly in terms of structural oppositions between types of mediumship. We should not pigeonhole all spirit-writers on one side of a dichotomy and all *tâng-ki* on the other, going simply by the external criterion of whether the medium writes or speaks. The fact that their mediumship supposedly rests on the same principle makes it possible to move between value categories without switching one's specific practice. A speaking *tâng-ki* with aspirations to "respectability" can appropriate a number of "civil" markers without becoming a full-blown planchette medium.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, a planchette medium can incorporate martial elements into his or her trance performance to make it more compelling or to broaden the range of themes and behaviour patterns permissible in a spirit-writing context.<sup>23</sup>

Individual mediums thus locate themselves in the Chinese web of values by drawing selectively on different value categories. This is also visible in Jean DeBernardi's study of Malaysian-Chinese spirit-mediums. She distinguishes between orthodox and heterodox (or socially marginal) mediums. Orthodox mediums usually have a middle-class following and see themselves as protectors and champions of traditional morality, interspersing their (spoken) pronouncements liberally with moralistic discourse (DeBernardi 1987: 321-325).<sup>24</sup> As "morality and social status appear to be inextricably related" (DeBernardi 1994: 152), this discourse in itself already signals aspiration to higher status. This aspiration is further strengthened by a less violent, more controlled trance performance, on the grounds that only low deities behave violently, while high ones conduct themselves in a dignified manner. "Self-control and self-transcendence thus are translated into high spiritual status, while passion marks those ranked lower" (DeBernardi 1994: 151). DeBernardi applies this statement to differences in rank among the

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22. One wonders if part of the attraction of the "Republic of China Association of Mediums" (Zhonghua Minguo Lingji Xiehui) for its members lies in its provision of civil markers of self-cultivational effort such as formalized coursework and diplomas. See Paper 1996.
  23. The former principal planchette wielder of the Mingzheng Tang, Yongbi, was famous (or in the view of some, notorious) for his way of playing with *tâng-ki* patterns. This characteristic made him more interesting and less predictable than other planchette mediums, but also threatened his, and his phoenix hall's, legitimacy and eventually led to his expulsion from the Mingzheng Tang in the 1980s.
  24. DeBernardi (1996) presents us with a lengthy oral morality text delivered by a Penang spirit-medium.

gods — a view similar to the one we find in Taiwanese morality books that *tâng-ki* are possessed by lesser gods. I wonder whether we could further extend this difference to the mediums' understanding of the nature of mediumship itself, whether, in other words, these orthodox mediums understand themselves not just as being passive mouthpieces of a deity, but as chosen emissaries, worthy partners of the gods in their mission to exhort the world to moral transformation.

There is an explicit correlation between a medium's degree of active control and his or her status in ethnographic data from Singapore. Ju Shi Huey describes a semi-sectarian spirit-medium cult, the *Sanshan Liufa Xianfa Zongtan*, which offers training in mediumship as part of a programme of spiritual cultivation. The "immortals' method" [*xianfa*] taught by this group can only be acquired voluntarily through meditative practice, as well as communication with one's "immortal teacher" [*xianshi*]. Proper practice of the *xianfa* does not lead to possession, but to a kind of state of intimate communion with one's immortal teacher, allowing the practitioner to function as an intermediary between the deity and the client, rather than as the deity's unconscious mouthpiece. Not surprisingly, adherents of this cult claim their *xianfa* to be vastly superior to the *shenfa* of the ordinary *tâng-ki*, a superiority that is partly based on the greater cultivational investment of the *xianfa* practitioner and his/her greater conscious control of the communication with the spirits (Ju 1983). Tong Chee Kiong cites Ju's example in support of a broader argument for control (of the possession state) and knowledge (of rituals and sacred texts) as two criteria that raise the standing of a *tâng-ki* in Singapore Hokkien society (Tong 1989). Similarly, one of the orthodox mediums described by DeBernardi "achieved his religious authority by building a reputation through the performance of difficult religious practices such as forest meditation and fasting" (DeBernardi 1987: 324). This would suggest that he is building his authority not primarily on his possession by a god, but rather on his own efforts at self cultivation. From there it would only be a short step towards defining his mediumship in terms of the phoenix hall model presented above: mediumship is not an affliction, but a confirmation of moral cultivation and a reward for a high degree of self-control achieved in long, arduous practice. Thus, it appears that the phoenix halls' moral-cultivational model of spirit-mediumship is more widely available as an alternative or perhaps parallel discourse to mediums outside the spirit-writing cult scene proper. With its affinity to the (traditional) elite worldview, the

adoption of such discourse may reflect a medium's upward social mobility or sometimes serve to deflect criticism of martial mediumship as superstitious or backward.

In a recent article, Peter Nickerson describes instances of the use of this alternative/parallel discourse when he speaks of “devotees of the medium cults in fact superscrib[ing] — to borrow Prasenjit Duara’s term — meanings on their own activities that are highly consistent with the views of elites” (Nickerson 2001: 209). He cites instances of elite values in medium cults as evidence that an autonomous popular culture is unable to communicate itself to society without taking recourse to that society’s dominant discourse (and thus blunting its own subversive potential). I am doubtful whether it is useful to conceptualize instances of moral-cultivational discourse in medium cults as superscriptions of autonomous spaces of popular culture. I would rather take the examples cited by Nickerson as evidence that no such “autonomous space” exists, but that instead the cultural field of spirit-mediumship in modern China (including early modern China) is created in the interplay of different “folk models” of mediumship. These may be heuristically linked to elite and popular worldviews, but in any concrete manifestation of mediumistic practice all of them are potentially available — and often actually present, as Nickerson’s description shows.

### **Other Alternative Constructions**

For the sake of clarity, I have so far developed my presentation along the lines of two discourses, that of involuntary mediumship and that of moral-cultivational mediumship. Below I briefly address two other variations found in the secondary literature that diverge from the “involuntary mediumship” pattern, and add them to our increasingly complex picture of the cultural construction of mediumship in Chinese popular religion.

#### *Mediums and Martial Cultivation*

Alan J.A. Elliott, the author of the first monographic study of Chinese mediumship, states that “[a] man, or woman, can become a *dang-ki* either by involuntarily displaying signs of spirit possession, or by cultivating the powers consciously”, and goes on to emphasize that “in most cases, a man becomes a *dang-ki* by the conscious encouragement of the power that is meant to be latent within him” (1955: 59). Elliott

describes group séances in which hopeful candidates under the supervision of an experienced medium try to go into trance and attract possession by a deity. Typically only a few of this group succeed, and even for them it may take numerous such sessions before they begin to show signs of possession (1955: 60-61). Here mediumship is a desired and prestigious asset that candidates will make a strenuous effort to achieve (1955: 59).

The key difference here may lie in the social context of mediumship. David Jordan's account of involuntary mediumship, cited at the beginning of the present article, is situated in a rural setting where mediumship is an integral part of village life. Elliott by contrast studied spirit-mediumship in the urban setting of colonial period Singapore, where mediums operated mostly in specialized cult groups that did not merge completely with the local community, even though they may have been patronized by it. This separation allowed them to maintain a value system in which quite naturally (this being the whole *raison d'être* of the group) mediumship carried high prestige. This group-specific value system was apparently not shared by the wider Chinese community in 1950s Singapore. Elliott states that "[h]owever widely mediums may be patronised, their profession is not very highly esteemed" (1955: 44). Mediumship appears desirable mostly to those who have grown up in a social context strongly linked with mediumistic practices.

[Voluntary candidates for spirit-mediumship] have almost invariably been associated with the practice of spirit mediumship from an early age. Even when men take up mediumship at a more advanced age there is usually found to be a history of familiarity with spirit-medium cults when very young. While they were babies, they were carried about in temples during performances. As young children, they were educated in the stories of shen and heroes. They used the temple precincts as their playground, often while performances were taking place. By the age of nine or ten, they were among the boys who beat drums and gongs, and perform other minor functions. On hundreds of occasions they have seen and heard the performances of dang-ki. It is among youths such as these that the status of the *dang-ki*, who is the chief centre of attraction in the temple, must appear particularly exalted. If they wish to emulate his feats, they can begin their careers when they are about twelve or fourteen (Elliott 1955: 59).

To these young men, the *tâng-ki* would seem to appear as an heroic performer of feats of prowess, a voice of authority, and a charismatic personality worth emulating. The ability of Nanyang Chinese spirit-

medium cults to support such revaluations of spirit-mediumship and subvert mainstream values has been demonstrated by Jean DeBernardi in her study of “black society” medium cults in Penang (1987).

Such cult groups are not limited to Singapore and Malaysia, even though they may possibly be more prevalent there due to the importance of voluntary associations in Nanyang Chinese society. De Groot reported the existence of apparently homologous “clubs” organized as sworn brotherhoods in late nineteenth century Amoy (1910: 1272), and modern ethnographic accounts confirm the existence of institutionally differentiated spirit-medium cults in Taiwan.<sup>25</sup> An interesting question for the purposes of the present essay is whether inside such cult groups the high prestige value of mediumship is accompanied by a different understanding of the nature of mediumship. In other words: is the medium within spirit-medium cults viewed as other than the unwilling mouthpiece of a deity, hampered by a defective destiny? Our discussion of spirit-writing cults suggests that voluntary mediumship tends to go along with an understanding of the nature of mediumship that stresses the medium’s active partnership with rather than his or her passive submission to the possessing deity. In spirit-writing cults this active self is defined and evaluated in terms of moral cultivation. The partnership, of course, is not one between equals: it is that between a master and his favourite disciple; but this master-disciple relationship leaves room for the personality and cultivational development of the disciple/medium. In martial medium cults we might be looking at a similar model of spirit-mediumship where the medium sees him or herself also as a master’s disciple rather than an unconscious

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25. See for example the cult group surrounding “Mr. Cun”, described by Richard C. Kagan and Anna Wasescha (1982: 125ff.). Another example is the group described by Gary Seaman (1980), in which the leading role is played by its manager (“Mr. Lim”) rather than any of the mediums. While neither of these two case studies explicitly reports active endeavours by cult followers to achieve mediumship, Shin-yi Chao (2001) provides a case study of a cult group in Taipei in which the medium functions as spiritual master, and mediumship or at least trance is sought after by the core membership. Avron Boretz’s study of medium and martial arts cults in Taidong provides a picture similar to the Nanyang scene. Here, too, possession trance offers the cult followers an “opportunity to appropriate the image of the capricious but righteous knight-errant”, allowing them to clothe themselves in the garb of a role linked to mainstream values, yet at the same time in tension with them (Boretz 1996: 222-223).

tool. The difference to the planchette medium could be that the master-disciple relationship focuses primarily on the transmission of martial arts and virtues (which would be in keeping with these cults' ideals of knight-errantry). Here too we would then find a positive understanding of active mediumship, judged however not according to the civil morality of the phoenix halls, but to the Chinese alternative canon of martial values. At present, this is no more than a hypothesis that awaits further confirmation from researchers working on such cult groups.<sup>26</sup>

#### *Mediums and Daoist Cultivation*

Finally, Brigitte Baptandier has supplied us with yet another model of mediumship: the example of female mediums associated with Lüshan Daoism in Fujian province. Though predestined by her fate as expressed in her “eight characters”, the candidate takes an active role in the long training required in becoming a medium. These “immortal maidens” [*xiangu*] engage in a long process of ascetic and meditational practice, during which they redefine their self by incorporating and appropriating a deity. This deity is fashioned, shaped by the medium to become an alter ego. Baptandier rejects the term possession for this process, because it is the medium that acts to “fashion” the deity within herself, not the deity that violently takes possession of the medium (Baptandier 2001; see also Berthier 1988: 275-287). Here again we find a model of mediumship that involves cultivational effort on the part of the medium, this time following a Daoist rather than a moralistic or martial structure.

### **Conclusion**

Let me take up again the question posed at the beginning of this essay: how does a person become a spirit-medium? Looking for an answer to this question, we have found four different models stressing either involuntary submission or cultivation of some kind, be it moral, martial, or Daoist. Social location, ideological structures, and political expediency all influence which one gets chosen by a specific medium or group at a specific time. Frequently, several may operate

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26. Avron Boretz's Ph.D. dissertation (1996) describes how the whole ideological structure of the medium cults he studied is based on a reversal of the dominant civil/martial value hierarchy. It would be strange if this did not extend to the understanding of mediumship itself within these groups.

simultaneously, for example, by being held by different members of the same cult group. What is important is to keep in mind that the pluralism of Chinese popular religion in other areas (e.g., in the interpretation of rituals and deities) applies to the cultural field of spirit-mediumship as well. Its meaning is as contested as that, say, of the ghost festival (see Weller 1987) or a plague god ritual (see Jordan 1976). The four models described here constitute part of this cultural field of spirit-mediumship. Further research may discover more models, and will perhaps bring us a better understanding of how these options are utilized. Further research may also help us understand the broader applicability of the insights drawn from the material presented here.

While I have been speaking rather confidently of “Chinese” spirit-mediumship throughout this article, the truth is that practically all data are drawn from Hokkien speaking areas of the Chinese cultural sphere: Taiwan, Fujian, Singapore, Malaysia. It may well be that what we are looking at are specifically Hokkien constructions of spirit-mediumship, and that field data from other parts of China may afford us glimpses of completely different ways of construing mediumship. However, given the generality of the cultural categories involved in these Hokkien models (civil/martial, refined/violent, vegetarian offerings/bloody sacrifices, written/spoken word), I am confident that they provide a grid of values that we can expect to have relevance in any region that is culturally part of Chinese civilisation.

## Glossary

- bazi* 八字  
*bi* 筆  
*bixie* 避邪  
*cheng* 誠  
*chuanzhen* 傳真  
*daitian xuanhua* 代天宣化  
*enshi* 恩師  
*feiluan* 飛鸞  
*feng* 鳳  
*fu* 扶  
*fuji* 扶乩  
*fuluan* 扶鸞  
*Fuyou Dijun* 孚佑帝君  
*gongguo ge* 功過格  
*Guan Gong* 關公  
*guowei* 果位  
*haoran zhengqi* 浩然正氣  
*Han Xiangzi* 韓湘子  
*ji* 乩  
*jieti* 借體  
*jinbi* 金筆  
*jing* 靜  
*jinzhi miaofa* 金指妙法  
*jishen* 乩身  
*jishi* 濟世  
*jitong* 乩童  
*Jiutian Xuannü* 九天玄女  
*kiô-á (Hokkien)* 轎仔  
*liáh tâng (Hokkien)* 掠童  
*ling* 靈  
*lingliao* 靈療  
*lingtong* 靈通  
*lingxing* 靈性  
*Longbi* 龍筆  
*luan* 鸞  
*luanbi* 鸞筆  
*luanji* 鸞籍  
*luansheng* 鸞生  
*Luantang shengdian* 《鸞堂聖典》  
*luanwen* 鸞文  
*Luanyou Zazhishe* 鸞友雜誌社  
*Luanyou* 《鸞友》  
*Mingbi* 明筆



Mingzheng Tang 明正堂  
*mixin* 迷信  
 Moxianzi 墨仙子  
*mubi* 木筆  
*neitang* 內堂  
*qi* 氣  
*qiaoshou* 竅手  
*qing* 清  
*qingshu* 請書  
*renshi* 人師  
 Sanshan Liufa Xianfa Zongtan 三山六法仙法總壇  
*shanshu* 善書  
*shen-ren heyi* 神人合一  
*shenfa* 神法  
*sheng, dizi* 生、弟子  
 Shengshou Gong 聖壽宮  
 Shengxian Tang 聖賢堂  
*shengxun* 聖訓  
*shizhen* 失真  
 Taiyi Zhenren 太乙真人  
*tang-ki (Hokkien)* 童乩  
 Tanzi 潭子  
*taobi* 桃筆  
*tongling* 通靈  
*wangwo* 忘我  
*wangye, yuanshuai, and qiansui* 一般王爺、元帥、千歲等神靈  
*weitia* 微調  
*wenji* 文乩  
 Wuji Laomu 無極老母  
*wuji* 武乩  
 Wushan She 悟善社  
*xia/ya* 煨  
*xiabi/yabi* 煨筆  
*xiaji/yaji* 煨乩  
*xialian/yalian* 煨練  
*xianfa* 仙法  
*xiangu* 仙姑  
*xianshi* 仙師  
*xiudao* 修道  
 Xu Dishan 許地山  
*xunlian* 訓練  
*yezhang* 業障  
 Yiguan Dao 一貫道  
 Yingbi 英筆  
 Yongbi 勇筆  
 Zhenbi 貞筆  
 Zhengbi 正筆

zhengcheng 正誠

zhengdao 證道

zhengluansheng 正鸞生

Zhonghua Minguo Lingji Xiehui 中華民國靈乩協會

zhushu 著書

Zilu 子路

Zisi Fuzi 子思夫子

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