THE RITUAL CONTEXT OF MORALITY BOOKS: A CASE-STUDY OF A TAIWANESE SPIRIT-WRITING CULT

by

PHILIP ARTHUR CLART

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Department of Asian Studies

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

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ABSTRACT

The present study focuses on the description and analysis of the religious beliefs and practices of a central Taiwanese spirit-writing cult or "phoenix hall" (luantang 鶴堂). A phoenix hall is a voluntary religious association of congregational character centring upon communication with the gods by means of the divinatory technique of "spirit-writing" (fuluan 扶鸞). While spirit-writing can be and is used as an oracle for the solving of believers' personal problems, its more high-profile application is for the writing of so-called "morality books" (shanshu 善書), i.e., books of religious instruction and moral exhortation. Spirit-writing cults are nowadays the most important sources of such works. Much attention has been given to morality books as mirrors of the social concerns of their times, but comparatively little work has been done on the groups that produce them and the meaning these works have for them. An adequate understanding of the meanings and functions of morality books, however, is impossible without some knowledge of the religious groups that produce them and the role played by morality books in their beliefs and practices. It is the objective of this thesis to provide a detailed description and analysis of one such group, the "Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy" (Wumiao Mingzheng Tang 武廟明正堂), a phoenix hall in the city of Taizhong that was founded in 1976 and has played a significant role in the modern development of the shanshu genre through the active and varied publications programme of its publishing arm, the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society. The study utilizes data extracted from the Hall's published writings as well as interview, observation, and questionnaire data collected during an eight month period of field research in Taizhong.
Part I provides a macrohistorical overview of the development of spirit-writing cults on the Chinese mainland (chapter 1) and on Taiwan (chapter 2) since the nineteenth century, leading up to the case-example’s microhistory (chapter 3). Part II is devoted to an account of the beliefs and practices of the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang, including descriptions and analyses of its organization, deities, ritual activities, concepts of moral cultivation, and of the body of morality book literature it has produced over the years. The appendix contains samples of the cult's morality book and scriptural literature, as well as of various liturgical texts.
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INTRODUCTION

1. Objectives of This Study

In the present study I describe and analyse the religious beliefs and practices of a central Taiwanese spirit-writing cult or “phoenix hall” (luantang). A phoenix hall is a voluntary religious association of congregational character centring upon communication with the gods by means of the divinatory technique of “spirit-writing” (fuluan; also called fuji). While spirit-writing can be and is used as an oracle for the solving of believers' personal problems, its higher-profile application is for the writing of so-called “morality books” (shanshu), i.e., books of religious instruction and moral exhortation. Spirit-writing cults are nowadays the most

1 “Phoenix hall” is not a strictly accurate translation for luantang. The luan  is a mythical bird akin to but not identical with the feng or fenghuang, which is usually rendered into English as “phoenix”. It has been proposed to translate luan as “simurgh” to differentiate it properly from the feng (Hargett 1989). Both “phoenix” and “simurgh”, fabulous birds drawn from Graeco-Egyptian and Persian mythology respectively, are of course merely conventions: there exists no intrinsic relationship between them and the Chinese concepts for which they are used. While philological exactitude may call for a differentiation of feng and luan, I feel that to translate luantang as “simurgh hall” would create an unnecessary opacity for the Western reader, who will most likely never have heard of the simurgh. I therefore render luan as the more familiar “phoenix”, following the precedent established by most authors who have studied spirit-writing cults so far. “Phoenix” is to be understood as a generic term for “mythical bird”.

2 Throughout this thesis I refer to phoenix halls as “cults” rather than “sects”. For the purposes of the present study I define these terms as follows: The term “sect” shall refer to religious movements that synthesize various religious traditions into a coherent whole and possess a well-developed, non-localized membership structure. The term “cult” refers to any form of small-scale religious institution, usually centred upon one temple or spirit shrine. If this institution possesses a well-developed system of doctrine and an organized membership, I shall call it a “sectarian cult”; many spirit-writing cults, including the Mingzheng Tang, fall into this category. For cults that provide mainly divinatory services without organizing a formal membership, I shall use the term “client cult”. These categories are not mutually exclusive. A client cult can develop into a sectarian cult which in turn can become a sect. Also, the same religious institution can simultaneously fulfill functions of several conceptual types. Thus the Mingzheng Tang is a sectarian cult for its core membership, but a client cult for the unattached occasional visitor.

This terminology is inspired by, but not identical with the church-sect-cult model developed by Stark and Bainbridge [1985].
important sources of such works. Much attention has been given to morality books as mirrors of the social concerns of their times, but comparatively little work has been done on the groups that produce them and the meaning these works have for them. An adequate understanding of the meanings and functions of morality books, however, is impossible without some knowledge of the religious groups that produce them and the role played by morality books in their beliefs and practices. It is the objective of this thesis to provide a detailed description and analysis of one such group, the “Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy” (Wumiao Mingzheng Tang 武廟明正堂, short: Mingzheng Tang), a phoenix hall in the city of Taizhong 台中 that was founded in 1976 and has played a significant role in the modern development of the shanshu genre through the active and varied publications programme of its publishing arm, the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society 鷺友雜誌社.

It is hoped that the results of this study will fill a gap in our understanding of the religious context in which morality books are produced and of the variety of meanings and functions they have in this context. A brief overview of previous research on morality books and spirit-writing will show us the present state of the field and clarify the nature of the contribution aimed at by this study.

2. Morality Books and Spirit-Writing Cults

Morality books (shanshu) are a genre of Chinese religious literature devoted to the dissemination of a body of moral teachings not specific to any
particular religious tradition, but representative of the religious consensus of late Imperial China. This corpus of religious beliefs and moral standards was shared widely throughout late Imperial society as a normative framework for the regulation of the individual’s conduct, and there existed a number of channels for its inculcation, affirmation, and reenforcement. Morality books were one such channel. The standard definition of the term shanshu, proposed by the pioneer in the study of the genre, Sakai Tadao, glosses it as “books exhorting to goodness” (quanshanshu).\(^3\) This definition has the advantage that it draws attention to the exhortatory nature of morality books. A shanshu is not an abstract scholarly treatment of morality, but first and foremost a didactic text, whose purpose it is to propagate morality. The generalized morality promoted by shanshu was a product of the social changes that marked China’s transition from its medieval to its early modern period around the tenth century. During the Song dynasty (tenth to thirteenth centuries) a new society developed that broke with the encrusted aristocratic structures of the medieval period; it was a society characterized by unprecedented social mobility, the growth of a powerful merchant class, and the broadening of literacy and education. The class-bound differential ethics of medieval society was replaced by generalized norms of moral conduct applicable to all classes within society. The homogenization of values was accelerated by the invention of printing which made knowledge more generally accessible than ever before. Though forms of morally exhortative literature of course existed throughout Chinese history, morality books proper are a product of this new era when the lines between social classes became more permeable and a new kind of society appeared

\(^3\) Cf. for example Sakai Tadao 1960:1; Brokaw 1991:3; Song Guangyu 1994:163. Occasionally, we even find “books exhorting to morality” (quanshanshu) as an alternative term for shanshu (see for example Yuan Xiaobo 1995:1-2; Li Gang 1994:129).
which required new moral norms equally applicable to all classes. If the term was not so controversial, one might say that morality books were attempts to formulate a "civil religion" for early modern China by defining generally and ecumenically valid moral standards. This is not to say that the values propagated in shanshu actually did represent a commonly accepted "civil religion", but merely that they aimed to institute such a system.

The generally recognized ancestor of the shanshu genre is a Southern Song dynasty text, called The Most High's Tract on Action and Response (Taishang gan ying pian 太上感應篇). Supposedly authored by the Most High Lord Lao 太上老君 himself, the Tract first appeared in published format (edited with a commentary by the literatus-official Li Changling 李昌龄 in about 1164. As it is ascribed to Lord Lao, the text most likely goes back to some sort of revelation; perhaps it was produced directly through spirit-writing or revealed in a dream. It contains a terse exposition of the inexorable workings of the laws of action and response (gan ying), which bring blessings to the doer of good and calamities to the doer of evil. It complements this with a short list of good and a longer one of bad deeds. As its designation "tract" suggests, the Taishang gan ying pian is a short text, comprising only about 1,280 characters, yet it may have been exactly this brevity that contributed to its lasting popularity. Having obtained imperial patronage during the Song, the text was later included in the Daoist Canon and has been reprinted to this day in numerous editions, often as part of composite morality books.

4 On this term and its history see Bellah 1970.
5 Brokaw 1991:41.
6 This technique of recording the utterances of the gods was gaining currency in the second half of the twelfth century. Cf. Terry Kleeman's study of the Sichuan spirit-writing cult dedicated to the Divine Lord Wenchang 文昌帝君 [1994].
As a revealed text, the Taishang ganying pian underlines the great importance of religion in the production of morality books. There exists a continuous tradition of revealed morality texts stretching from the Song to the present day, where it is being continued by cult groups such as the one treated in this thesis. There also exists, however, an equally continuous tradition of morality literature produced by human authors. Both kinds of texts are very similar in style and content and usually can be found side by side in many collections of morality texts.

When I speak of shanshu as a "genre", I do not mean to imply that all morality books share a specific literary format. My definition emphasizes a text’s content and intent; as for form, shanshu come in all shapes and sizes. They may be general expositions of moral principles, stories on karmic retribution, "ledgers of merit and demerit", collections of short moralistic mottoes, doggerel poetry, or songs. Frequently one text combines several of these forms and many late Imperial shanshu are collections of moralistic texts of different provenance and literary format. Modern shanshu written in Taiwan have pushed the formal diversification of the genre to unprecedented heights.

Although some attention has been given to shanshu as a genre, comparatively little is known so far about the social and religious background of their production. The important researches of Sakai and Brokaw have revealed much about the human authors of Ming dynasty shanshu, but very little study has been made of the religious context in which spirit-written morality books were and are produced. Spirit-written texts constitute the bulk
of the morality literature from the late Qing dynasty to the present day; therefore the Taiwanese scholar Song Guangyu (宋光宇), in an important state-of-the-field article on the study of morality books, lists the investigation of spirit-writing cults as one of three important future tasks for this field of study.

Wang Jianchuan (王見川) has sketched the history and present state of the study of Taiwanese spirit-writing cults. Although some research had been accomplished by Japanese scholars during the Japanese occupation, Wang traces the beginnings of a continuous line of research to the 1970's when Cai Maotang 蔡懋棠 published his articles on the morality books then circulating in Taiwan. These were followed by Zheng Xifu’s research studies of Taiwanese shanshu in the early 1980’s. That spirit-written morality books should suddenly come to scholars’ attention at this time was no coincidence; the 1970’s were a crucial period of transformation in Taiwan’s social, economic, and political development. This era of change also saw the emergence of a new kind of phoenix hall that responded to the spiritual needs of the time with a vastly increased output of spirit-written texts addressing the moral and religious issues of the decade. These “new-style phoenix halls” (xinshi luantang 新式鸞堂) were specialized religious associations that developed professional structures for the production of morality books, with full-time mediums and often their own publishing organs. This led to a greater quantitative visibility of morality books and also to high-profile innovations in the style and contents of the genre. One

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7 Song Guangyu 1994.
8 Wang Jianchuan 1996d.
particular successful such innovation was the appearance of the spirit-travelogue (youji 遊記) subgenre in the second half of the 1970's which opened a new readership for morality books with their lively and entertaining dialogue in the vernacular language. These and other modern morality books were widely investigated by Taiwanese scholars as manifestations of popular religious sentiment in the face of the rapid social and cultural changes then gripping Taiwan.\(^{11}\) As for the groups that produced these books, the first systematic study of them since the earlier somewhat superficial efforts of the Japanese colonial ethnographers was produced by a Western scholar, Gary Seaman. Seaman lived from 1970 to 1973 in a village near Puli 埔里 in Nantou County 南投縣 whose religious centre was occupied by a spirit-writing cult. Seaman's study, published in 1978, is the first well-developed ethnographic study of a Taiwanese phoenix hall and gives us much valuable information on its belief system, development, and ritual structures. It did not, however, have a great impact among scholars of Chinese religions, perhaps because its main focus was not on the phoenix hall as such but on its role in village politics. Also Seaman's spirit-writing cult was a traditional, village-based one and did not actively participate in the high-profile morality book movement carried by the urban new style halls. Phoenix halls eventually found their place on the research agenda with the publication in the 1980's of two studies, compiled independently from each other. First there was Zheng Zhiming's 鄭志明 long essay on the history and

\(^{11}\) See, for example, the studies by Song Guangyu (1982), Chen Zhuxian (1982), and in particular the numerous essays by Zheng Zhiming collected in a series of books: Taitou minjian zongjiao lunji 《台灣民間宗教論集》 (Taipei 1984), Zhongguo shehui yu zongjiao 《中國社會與宗教》 (Taipei 1986), Zhongguo shanshu yu zongjiao 《中國書籍與宗教》 (Taipei 1988), Taiwan de luanshu 《台灣的驚書》 (Banqiao, no date), Zhongguo wenxue yu zongjiao 《中國文學與宗教》 (Taipei 1992), Zhongguo yishi yu zongjiao 《中國意識與宗教》 (Taipei 1993).
ethnography of Taiwanese phoenix halls,\textsuperscript{12} which put them on the map for Taiwanese scholars; then, two years later, the publication of David K. Jordan's and Daniel L. Overmyer's \textit{The Flying Phoenix}\textsuperscript{13} did the same for the community of Western students of Chinese religions. Together these two studies inspired and laid the groundwork for all the subsequent research. Song Guangyu focussed on the historical study of the probably earliest centre of spirit-writing on Taiwan, the Penghu Islands (Pescadores 澎湖群島), providing us with insights into the late nineteenth century local development of these cults and their morality books.\textsuperscript{14} Wang Jianchuan concentrated on the historical development of phoenix halls in the north and centre of Taiwan proper, tracing lines of filiation between halls and surveying their morality book literature.\textsuperscript{15} In terms of time, both Song's and Wang's focus so far has lain in the late Qing and the Japanese period. The post-war period up to the present promises to be tackled by Wang Zhiyu 王志宇, a student of Song Guangyu, who is currently writing a Ph.D. thesis on the development of the "new-style phoenix halls", particularly in central Taiwan.\textsuperscript{16}

All of the Chinese language studies are broad overviews, either purely historical or in a combination of historical and ethnographic methodology, covering the development of large numbers of phoenix halls through several decades of Taiwanese history and over large geographical areas of Taiwan. By contrast, the particular contribution of the present thesis lies in its case-study

\textsuperscript{12} Zheng Zhiming 1984b.
\textsuperscript{13} Jordan & Overmyer 1986.
\textsuperscript{14} See Song Guangyu 1993a, 1995. His work is complemented by the historical overview of Penghu phoenix halls compiled by Ishii Masako [1992].
\textsuperscript{15} See Wang Jianchuan 1995a and 1996b.
\textsuperscript{16} Partial results have been published by in Wang Zhiyu 1995, 1996a, and 1996b.
approach. It focusses firmly on one influential new style phoenix hall and its output of revealed literature. In using this approach I continue the line of research begun by Gary Seaman, David K. Jordan, and Daniel L. Overmyer, but concentrate more clearly than these earlier studies on the investigation of a phoenix hall as a representative of a distinct religious tradition, addressing the religious doctrines propounded by it, its methods and goals of cultivation, the role of spirit-writing in the continuing elaboration of its mythological worldview, the development of its publishing programme, and the religious meaning of shanshu writing and sponsoring for the Hall and its adherents. The ultimate aim of this study is to produce the first fully integrated account and analysis of a prominent representative of an important form of religious organization which grew out of a tradition reaching back into the nineteenth century, but has adapted in a unique manner to the social conditions of modern Taiwan.

3. Outline and Methodology

The thesis is divided into two parts. Part I gives an historical account of the development of spirit-writing cults on the Chinese mainland and on Taiwan. I trace the direct origins of modern Taiwanese spirit-writing cults to a revitalist spirit-writing movement arising on the Chinese mainland around the middle of the nineteenth century (chapter 1). It spread to Taiwan where phoenix halls experienced a first boom in the late nineteenth century. After several decades of continuous, but more subdued development under the Japanese regime (1895-1945), the retrocession of Taiwan in 1945 was accompanied by a renewed flourishing of phoenix halls, of which many new
ones were founded in the late 1940's and early 1950's (chapter 2). The
Mingzheng Tang has its roots in one of these post-war phoenix halls in the
central Taiwanese county of Nantou. Chapter 3 traces the history and
prehistory of the Mingzheng Tang from the 1969 founding of the Phoenix
Friend Publishing Society as an adjunct to a Nantou County phoenix hall,
over the Society's move to Taizhong and affiliation with an urban phoenix
hall there, to its secession from that cult group in 1976 and the founding of
the Mingzheng Tang in the same year. The subsequent history of the
Mingzheng Tang is carried up to the year 1996.

Part II contains the description and analysis of the Mingzheng Tang's
religious beliefs and practices, its seven chapters focussing respectively on the
Hall's organization (chapter 1), pantheon (chapter 2), rituals (chapter 3), its
function as a mediating agency relaying communication between humans
and the gods (chapter 4), its programme of moral cultivation revolving
around the concept of "merit" (chapter 5), the body of morality books and
scriptures spirit-written at the Hall over the years (chapter 6), and its self-
definition vis-à-vis other religious traditions (chapter 7).

A brief conclusion sums up the results of the study. The appendices
contain samples of the Mingzheng Tang's writings, including complete
translations of one of the Hall's morality books, one of its scriptures, and
translations and descriptions of a number of commonly used documents,
such as written memorials and charms.

Methodologically, this study is based primarily on the analysis of the
Mingzheng Tang's writings, which I collected during an eight month period
of field research in Taizhong between November 1993 and June 1994. The
textual analysis is supplemented with field data collected during this period of
research in Taizhong by means of participant observation, informal
interviews, and a questionnaire survey of about sixty members of the cult.
Unless indicated otherwise, where the present tense is used in the following
account it refers to the field research period of 1993/1994. As a rule, all names
of persons involved with the Mingzheng Tang are pseudonymized to protect
their privacy; such pseudonyms are marked with an asterisk "*". Conversely,
all personal and place names not marked with an asterisk are real.

Language use at the Mingzheng Tang oscillates between Mandarin and
Taiwanese according to the ritual context, spirit-writing séances, for example,
being conducted in Mandarin, but scripture recitation in Taiwanese. As my
field research was conducted almost exclusively in Mandarin, I use its
pronounciation for all Chinese terms, transcribed by means of the Hanyu
pinyin system. As a rule, at the first occurrence of a Chinese term, both
transcription and Chinese characters are given. All following occurrences are
marked in transcription only, unless the context demands Chinese characters
for further clarification. The characters for all Chinese terms occurring more
than once are listed in a separate glossary.
PART I: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

CHAPTER 1: THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY SPIRIT-WRITING MOVEMENT ON THE CHINESE MAINLAND

1.1 Introduction

The Taiwanese spirit-writing cults of today are successors to a religious movement that began on the Chinese mainland in the nineteenth century. The scholar Mao Xianglin 毛祥麟 describes in his Records Written with Leftover Ink (Moyu lu 墨餘錄, first published in 1870) two different kinds of spirit-writing cults active in his days:

There are those who transmit talismans and registers. Always late at night when the populace has settled in for the night they burn talismans and burn spells. The god then descends into the planchette and they ask it about the lucky and unlucky. Often these prove to be correct. Nowadays for the most part [spirit-writing cults] use the Way of the gods to establish the teaching. They make no use of talismans and spells. They only establish an altar, chant scriptures, and heal the sick. They do not talk about good and bad fortune. Most of their statements encourage one to do good and they use them to collect donations, saying they will do all kinds of good works.¹

Terry Kleeman, to whom I am indebted for this quotation, assumes that Mao Xianglin was mistaken in regarding such religious groups as a recent development. He argues that the twelfth century “Book of Transformations is the product of just such a devotional group; hence they must date from no later than the twelfth century.”² Indeed, spirit-writing had been practised in China for many centuries prior to the nineteenth and at times had become the focus around which voluntary religious groups crystallized. The descriptive evidence at hand for such groups prior to the nineteenth century

¹ Moyu lu, juan 6, p.92. Translation modified from Kleeman 1994:12.
² Kleeman 1994:12.
is rather sketchy; one thing that is clear, however, is their strong Daoist orientation. Spirit-writing had been adopted by Daoists as a revelatory technique at the latest by the twelfth century. According to Kleeman, the earliest surviving Daoist scriptures explicitly acknowledged to have been composed by means of spirit-writing are the texts revealed by the Divine Lord Wenchang 文昌帝君 to the Daoist Liu Ansheng 刘安勝 in the second half of the twelfth century. Unfortunately, Kleeman gives us very little information on the cult group that produced these texts. The principal medium receiving these revelation was Liu Ansheng, an educated man who “shared his religious enterprise with several relatives and had patrons in the community who could finance the publication of his revelations in deluxe illustrated editions.” It is not clear whether these persons formed an organized religious community, but apparently there existed enough of an esprit de corps among them to prompt them to pool their resources and construct a shrine (the Shrine of the Mysterious Union in Jade Vacuity, Xuanhui Yuxu Tan 玄會玉虛壇) in what seems to have been a pre-existing temple complex on a mountain near Chengdu 成都 (Sichuan province). It was in this shrine that in the following year (1181) the revelation of the Book of Transformations 化書 took place. In the later history of the nation-wide cult to the Divine Lord Wenchang there appeared so-called Wenchang Congregations (Wenchang Congregation).

3 Kleeman 1994:16. Of course, all Daoist scriptures are deemed to be products of some sort of revelation and it has been claimed that the fourth century Maoshan revelations were early examples of Daoist spirit-writing since they involved the transcription of revealed texts by a medium (cf. Kleeman’s brief discussion of this argument [1994:8]). I prefer, however, to restrict the use of the term “spirit-writing” to a specific divinatory and revelatory technique for whose existence the earliest clear evidence appears only in the tenth century. If we widen our definition of *fúji* to include any kind of revelation involving writing, we shall end up with a heuristically useless assemblage of heterogeneous phenomena. For example, one author employing an extremely loose definition of *fúji* claims that the Han dynasty apocrypha (chanwei) were produced in this manner (cf. Zhong Zhaopeng 1988), the only proof adduced being that their authorship is ascribed to deified figures of the past, such as Confucius.


which “transmitted his teachings through the planchette, edited and published his scriptures, celebrated his birthday with festivals, built and repaired his temples”. Unfortunately, Kleeman does not give much information on the organization of these “congregations”. We possess some such information for a presumably rather unusual Daoist spirit-writing cult in early Qing dynasty Fujian -- unusual because its membership included a group of learned Buddhist monks. According to Terence C. Russell, the cult was located in the “Observatory of the Nine Immortals” on Mt. Shizhu near the provincial capital Fuzhou and centred upon spirit-messages conveyed by the Daoist immortal Chen Tuan. The medium and driving force of this cult was a certain Master Zheng, a native of Fuzhou who had acquired his spirit-writing skills in Nanjing. On his return to Fuzhou he strengthened the cult to his spirit-familiar Chen Tuan on Mt. Shizhu and soon attracted the attention of the local literati and of Buddhist monks from the well-respected Wanfu Monastery on neighbouring Mt. Huangbo, including the abbot Yinyuan Longqi. These monks consulted on a regular basis with Chen Tuan, exchanging poetry with the immortal and asking him about various monastery affairs. A final example for a Daoist spirit-writing cult described in the secondary literature is the cult of the Daoist immortal Zhang Sanfeng in early nineteenth century Sichuan. According to the researches of Huang Zhaohan, there developed in southwestern Sichuan a Daoist movement focussing upon Zhang Sanfeng and calling itself “Western Sect” (Xi Pai) or “Sect of the Hidden Immortal” (Yinxian Pai). Its leader was a Daoist priest by the name of Li Xiyue whose activities fall mainly into the

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7 Russell 1990.
Daoguang 道光 period (1821-1850). These activities included spirit-writing by Li Xiyue at a number of “Daoist shrines” (daotan 道壇) principally in Leshan county 樂山縣 which attracted the adherence of a number of local people, mostly, it seems, literati, with even some jinshi 進士 among them. Our principal source of information on this movement are the Complete Works of Master Zhang Sanfeng (Zhang Sanfeng xiansheng quanji 張三丰先生全集), a compilation of texts attributed to Zhang Sanfeng, most of them products of the planchette. Again, we do not have much information on the organizational structure of these daotan, but they seem to have functioned as religious foci for a loose group of people interested in Daoist cultivation and devoted to Zhang Sanfeng. They would attend séances, ask for Zhang’s help in personal matters, and sponsor the printing of the immortal’s revealed writings.  

Although our data on these Daoist spirit-writing cults are still fragmentary, they are sufficient to indicate the existence of a long and widespread pre-nineteenth century tradition of congregational groups devoted to such deities and immortals as Wenchang, Chen Tuan, and Zhang Sanfeng. Was Mao Xianglin then, as Kleeman suggests, indeed mistaken in regarding as a new phenomenon his second type of spirit-writing cult, those that “make no use of talismans and spells”, but “only establish an altar, chant scriptures, and heal the sick” and encourage people to do good? I think not. It is my hypothesis that the second half of the nineteenth century, an age of turmoil and crisis, the twilight years of Imperial China, witnessed the emergence of a new type of spirit-writing cult, influenced, to be sure, by the example of the Daoist cults described above, but differing from them in several significant respects. The Daoist cults were circles of educated persons clustered around a successful medium and interested in learned intercourse.

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8 On this “Western Sect” and its writings see Huang Zhaohan 1988a and 1988b.
with perfected spirits, with whom they exchanged poetry and by whom they hoped to be guided in their personal quest for Daoist cultivation. They were clubs that met and performed spirit-writing for the benefit of their literate membership and/or clientele. The new cults arising in the second half of the century, by contrast, were driven by a millenarian sense of mission, a duty to assist the gods in changing the wicked ways of the world in the face of an impending apocalypse. To serve this purpose, they were not content to hold séances for their membership, but actively disseminated their revelations by means of public lectures to the illiterate masses. They were less concerned with the esoterics of Daoist cultivation than with the reaffirmation and promotion of traditional standards of morality. This ethical aspect had also played a prominent role in the Daoist cults, but in the new cults it became their very purpose of being. This difference is also apparent in the books of these groups. While Daoist cults tended to produce hagiographies of their patron immortals, including also the Perfected One’s poetry, essays on aspects of Daoist doctrine, and moralistic treatises, the new cults’ books tended to focus exclusively on the aspect of moral exhortation; both in name and in essence they were spirit-written morality books (shanshu). These new cults were not Daoist in a denominational sense, but were one institutional product of the nineteenth century movement of religious synthesis; and as such they were indeed a recent development and correctly perceived as such by Mao Xianglin. The specific and novel nature of these cults is not readily apparent from Mao Xianglin’s observations alone and I intend to bolster my argument by drawing on further sources that document the unfolding of this religious movement. Unfortunately, this topic has only been studied in a piecemeal fashion so far and thus we do not have a clear picture of it yet. A thorough investigation of the nineteenth century spirit-writing movement
would require a separate major study and would thus go beyond the confines of the present thesis which is focussed on a modern case-study. In the following I therefore restrict myself to drawing in fairly broad strokes the outlines of this religious movement as I was able to discern them from secondary and a limited number of primary sources.

1.2 The Uses of Spirit-Writing

Spirit-writing, though not as reputable as the canonically sanctioned divination by means of the Book of Changes, had been enjoying considerable popularity among the educated since the Song dynasty. In spite of official prohibition, it was widely practised for divinatory purposes, especially by examination candidates hoping in this way to gain some foreknowledge of the examination questions. Richard J. Smith gives an overview of the uses of spirit-writing during the Qing dynasty, stressing that spirit-writing shrines (jitan 謫壇) could be found "in virtually every prefectural and county capital" and that such shrines might be located in temples, association halls (huiguan 會館) or domestic residences.\footnote{See Smith 1991:225-230. De Groot, too, reports that "[t]he magical 'phoenix' thus 'soars and flies' undoubtedly everywhere in the Empire, in the Metropolis in Imperial circles, as well as in hamlets in the huts of the peasantry." [1892-1910, vol.6, p.1308].} The sources used by Smith lay particular emphasis on the divinatory function in the narrow sense of spirit-writing, i.e., its use as an oracle for the resolving of particular personal problems. And indeed, this was and still is an important function of spirit-writing, one that it shares with other forms of mediumistic communication. This type of divinatory spirit-writing seems to have been the main function of the first type of cult mentioned by Mao Xianglin, which uses the planchette to ask
about "the lucky and unlucky." Such client-oriented spirit-writing seems to have sometimes been practised by professionals, whose existence in early Republican period Fuzhou is mentioned in a Japanese report.\(^{10}\) Such spirit-writers provided services similar to those of fortune-tellers and shamans and may well have belonged to the same social class. De Groot may have had such religious professionals in mind when he wrote that in late nineteenth century Amoy

> [c]lubs which practise the system [of spirit-writing] are in many cases a shabby lot, their chapels or temples unknown to fame, their spirit-writing only appealing to the very lowest class.

He goes on, however, to say that

> there are many of a better sort. The gods of some clubs are in special repute for their oracles, so that their temples draw a considerable income from the purses of the well-to-do, and even the literary and the mandarin class. In such a case, the club will even contain educated men, transcription of divine language into legible human writing being no work for the rabble. There are large temples to which people of the best classes, and even high officials, resort for oracles in numbers so great every day, that it is necessary to register their names and their subjects for consultation, in order that everybody may duly have his turn.\(^{11}\)

Evidence for the firm place of divinatory spirit-writing in the religious life of the late Imperial elite is plentiful. Smith reports the case of a high-ranking official who often resorted to *fuji* oracles and sometimes even included the spirit-written pronouncements in his official proclamations.\(^{12}\) Joseph Edkins, a missionary active in China in the late nineteenth century, affirms that “[t]his oracular method has been in high favour during the present dynasty”

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\(^{10}\) Taiwan sōtokufu gaijibu 1941:54. De Groot records contractual planchette oracle consultations in Amoy, which may sometimes have been carried out by such religious professionals [1892-1910, vol.6:1306f.].

\(^{11}\) De Groot 1892-1910, vol.6:1297.

\(^{12}\) Smith 1991:228.
and that it “has been extremely popular during the present century.” He goes on to recount an occasion on which

when the Nien-fei were devastating Shantung, a consultation by oracle was set on foot in the city of Te-cheu by the gentry, because everyone wished to know if the city would be taken by rebels. It was appointed to be held in the chief Taoist temple, the Kau Chen-kwan. Two of the principal gentry held up the bow. They also held the hanging chopstick which was fastened to the bow-string and was attached to a sieve suspended midway, its end protruding far enough to mark the incense ashes which were spread on the platter below. It was they that put the questions and interpreted the writing, and the Tautai of the city was present on one occasion. Some persons were told whether they would succeed or not in some enterprise. Other persons were informed what medicine they should use for their ailments.

This testimony shows that the handling of the planchette was not always left to religious professionals, but was an activity not incompatible with the social position of "principal gentry," something hinted at as well in de Groot’s testimony quoted above.

Spirit-writing, however, had uses that went beyond the rather restricted function of an oracle for everyday problems. It could be and was used for writing books of moral instruction. De Groot says that the technique of spirit-writing

13 Edkins 1888:309.
14 Ibid. The Nian roamed Shandong during the 1850s and 1860s.
15 An interesting phenomenon is the private practice of spirit-writing by individual scholars for profoundly personal reasons and purposes. One fascinating case example is the early Qing poet You Tong (1618-1704) who complemented his secular social relationships with friendships with (mainly female) immortals which he cultivated in solitary séances [cf. Zeitlin 1995]. Another is the poet Gao Chuiwan of Shanghai who, griefstricken after the death of his daughter Yunfen in 1937, kept her alive in his mind by holding regular spirit-written conversation with her [see Zhou Yumin 1995]. In this endeavour, Gao had a predecessor in the late Ming poet Ye Shaoyuan who between 1636 and 1645 held séances at his home to communicate with the spirit of his deceased daughter Xiaoluan; in the course of these meetings, Xiaoluan wrote a large number of poems eventually published by her father as a posthumous collection entitled Perfume that Restores Life [Zeitlin 1995].
even serves the gods to work out the moral education of the human race. Indeed, exhortations and threats have for centuries been received by means of it throughout China in very large numbers; many are, by the care of virtuous men of erudition, printed to this day for circulation by thousands, reprinted over and over, and bound up into books for gratuitous distribution.\textsuperscript{16}

In other words, spirit-writing was used to produce the morality books discussed in the introduction of this thesis. This practice experienced a veritable boom in the second half of the nineteenth century with the emergence of a spirit-writing movement intent on the moral reformation of society by means of morality books and public preaching. There existed no central organization directing these cults; it was a diffuse assemblage of individual religious associations set up and run locally. They did, however, share a consciousness of belonging to a religious movement that had as its aim the moral reformation of a decadent age by means of instructions and exhortations handed down by the gods. Although there was no central leadership, spirit-writing cults tended to develop in regional movements triggered by some momentous seminal revelation. In many spirit-written books we find that reference is made to a charter myth: the Jade Thearch was greatly enraged by the depravity of humans and the general moral decline of the age and decided to bring about a great cataclysm destroying all of humanity. Other gods interceded, pleading with the Jade Thearch not "to burn the jade with the rocks," but to spare the good from his wrath. Furthermore, they requested that the apocalypse be postponed until the gods have had a chance to exhort humans to moral reform. The Jade Thearch relented and allowed his subordinates to descend by means of the planchette into the world and to try to transform humans by their teachings (\textit{jiaohua 教

\textsuperscript{16} 1892-1910, vol. 6, p.1309.
The gods then used the planchette to establish many spirit-writing cults which recorded the divine teachings and spread them by means of morality books, which were distributed both in printed form and by public lecturing (xuanjiang 宣講). The leaders of the group of deities involved in this heroic effort at saving humanity from the consequences of its own sins varied from cult to cult; most frequently, however, we find Guan Sheng Dijun 關聖帝君 and Fuyou Dijun 孚佑帝君 playing this role.

Sometimes a definite date is given for this event: for example, a very influential spirit-writing movement began in Sichuan province in the gengzi 庚子 year of the Daoguang reign period (1840). In the next section of this chapter I would like to take a closer look at this regional movement.

1.3 The Post-1840 Spirit-Writing Movement in Sichuan

1.3.1 The Gengzi Year Revelation at the Temple of the Dragon-Maiden

The Golden Basin of Jade Dew (Yulu jinpan 玉露金盤), a spirit-written book which was first published in 1880 and in the late 1940s became a charter text for the Compassion Society 慈惠堂 in Taiwan, claims that Maitreya "began to teach and sent down his blessings through the phoenix. In the gengzi year, i.e., forty-one years ago, he opened the province of Sichuan." 17 Further down in the text, we find more details. After a description of the moral decadence rampant among humanity, the text reports that

the three supervising deities 三司神 and the Master Who Oversees Fate 司命主 sent a memorial [on this state of affairs] to the heavenly court, [thus] enraging the Jade Thearch who [then] sent down calamities. In the gengzi year a heavenly decree was posted, ordering that the earth be swept clean. When the Venerable Mother 老母娘 heard this, tears rolled down her cheeks like pearls because of the scattered and lost ones about to be destroyed with no way of escape. She summoned all the many gods and Buddhas all of whom on the Mother's command opened the planchette oracle at the Temple of the Dragon Maiden, bestowing grace by means of the phoenix. [The Mother] dispatched the Three Perfected Ones 三真 who together with the Five Venerables 五老 went into the villages\(^\text{18}\) and divided their natures\(^\text{19}\) to open shrines of the gods 神壇, proclaim the Great Way and completely save the original humans.\(^\text{20}\)

We are fortunate to have the researches of Prof. Takeuchi Fusaji 武内房司 who has identified the location of said Temple of the Dragon Maiden (Longnú Si 龍女寺) as Dingyuan County 定遠県, near the city of Chongqing 重慶 in Sichuan province. A local gazetteer affirms that in 1840 spirit-writing was practised in the temple in question and “several tens of elixir scriptures and secret books were written.”\(^\text{21}\) Unfortunately I had none of these books at my disposal; indeed, it is not clear whether any of these writings have survived. The text with the closest connection to the Longnú Si cult that is known to scholars so far is a commentary on the Scripture Illuminating Sageliness (Mingsheng jing 明聖經) written by a certain Zhao Zhengzhi 趙正治. In the commentary’s preface, dated in the winter of the gengzi year, it is reported that after his premature death Zhao was made the city god of Xiangtan county 湘潭縣 (in Hunan); as such he appeared to a younger brother in a dream, urging him to print his commentary. At the time the thearch (di

\(^{18}\)Reading dao 到 for dao 倒.

\(^{19}\)“Dividing one’s nature” (fenxing 分性) probably refers to the gods’ ability to divide their personalities so they can appear in several places at the same time. A nowadays more common term for this concept is fenling 分靈 (“dividing one’s numen”).

\(^{20}\)Yulu jinpan, p.30; translation modified from Jordan & Overmyer 1986:59-60.

\(^{21}\)Quoted in Takeuchi 1990:70.
(Guan?) wrote by means of the planchette in the Temple of the Dragon Maiden, and the younger brothers of Zhao decided to submit the manuscript there for approval. The thearch appointed the Celestial Lord Gao Shouren 天君高詔守仁 to correct the manuscript and write a preface for it, which duty he completed within three days and nights. As the *Mingsheng jing* commentary was not written at the Longnū Si, but merely revised there, it apparently contains only very few references to the cult. From these Wang Jianchuan, who had access to the text, surmises that the Longnū Si was a phoenix shrine with a literati membership. This is made likely by the literati patronage of some groups explicitly inspired by the 1840 Longnū Si revelations. Wang mentions three cults in particular: the Shrine of Heroes (Qunying Tan 群英壇) in Sichuan, as well as the Palace of Assisting Fate (Zanyun Gong 贊運宮) and the Hall of Public Goodness (Gongshan Tang 公善堂) in Yunnan. I had access to the *Boat of Salvation* (*Jiusheng chuan* 救生船), a spirit-written book produced by the Qunying Tan. This work turned out to be a rich source of information on a Sichuanese spirit-writing cult of around the mid-nineteenth century, its beliefs, structures, activities, and sense of mission. In the following paragraphs I will try to draw the outlines of this cult that may be representative of a large spirit-writing movement initiated by the 1840 revelations at the Temple of the Dragon Maiden.

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22 According to the preface as quoted in Wang Jianchuan 1996a:216.
1.3.2 The Shrine of Heroes and The Boat for Saving Lives

The Boat for Saving Lives was first published in 1863. A short description of this book is contained in Jordan and Overmyer's The Flying Phoenix, where it is presented as one among a group of spirit-written books whose values "are conservative and Confucian" and with "no evidence at all of the sectarian mythology." I was only able to work from an incomplete version of the Jiusheng chuan, but from what I have seen of it, I can confirm its non-sectarian, "conservative and Confucian" character. The Jiusheng chuan is a highly interesting book in that it throws some light on a mid-nineteenth century spirit-writing cult that saw itself as part of a massive contemporary movement. It tells us both about this movement and about the particular cult that produced the Boat for Saving Lives. Its second volume contains a preface, dated 1861, by the Divine Lord and Martial Sage (Wusheng Dijun 武聖帝君, a title of Guan Sheng Dijun); in it he expands upon the mission of spirit-writing cults:

For the survival of the people I underwent I know not how many troubles to warn them by means of the oracles produced by the planchette, to guide them by means of journeys to the netherworld, to entice them by recording phoenix books. Diligently and earnestly I roam from place to place. With the severity of the gods' Way I aid the generosity of the Sacred Edict, save public lecturing from its decline, and transform the perversity of the customs of the world. Since about the gengzi year [1840] shrines have been opened in more than a thousand places, and several hundred books have been written. Of the teachings there are none that are not complete. Of meanings there are none that are not investigated. If you people of the world read them you are able to consider their meanings; if you enact them you are able to manifest them in your conduct. Thus the old books of ancient times will all be present. Why do I not shirk the exertion, but take up the responsibility of writing books? Because vast calamities have already come about, the waves of ruin have already broken [over humanity].

24 Jordan & Overmyer 1986:49.
How can it be that the people should have no way of crossing over this river [of doom]?

The leading role of Guan Sheng Dijun is reaffirmed in several places. A preface to *juan* 4 states that

since the *gengzi* year until today, i.e., for more than twenty years, the Martial Sage has been expounding the teachings earnestly and graciously and has been saving the multitudes of living beings.

The main deity of the cult, however, was not Guan Sheng Dijun, but Fuyou Dijun 孚佑帝君, the "Divine Lord of Reliable Succour," a Daoist immortal better known in the Western literature by the name Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓. In a preface written supposedly by this deity, Fuyou Dijun describes his role as ancillary to that of Guan Sheng Dijun:

Ever since the [effort of] transforming [humanity] was begun in the *gengzi* year, the Martial Sage has been supervising its affairs. I and the other immortals assist him in it. We point out merits and demerits, write poetry and prose, all destined to save the suffering of the world and to lift the people from the sea of sin.

The cult that produced the *Jiusheng chuan* was called the "Shrine of Heroes" (Qunying Tan 群英壇). The group was founded in 1861 most likely somewhere in Sichuan province. Its establishment is said to have been inspired by the appearance in the *gengzi* year (1840) of a "book of divine teachings" (*shenjiao shu* 神教書) in eastern Sichuan, which was so popular

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25 "Heroes" (ying 英) probably refers to the deified heroes of the past who descended to this altar to reveal through the planchette.

26 No exact location in mentioned in my (incomplete) version of the *Jiusheng chuan*. One preface, dated 6 February 1862, gives Kaijiang 関江 as location, a town in eastern Sichuan. This does not prove that the Qunying Tan actually was to be found there, since spirit-written prefaces are often composed in cults other than the one that wrote the main text. However, the Sichuan hypothesis is made probable by several references to this province in the text and by the colophon's statement that the printing blocks of the book were originally stored in Sichuan.
that everyone struggled to obtain a copy. The Qunying Tan was the result of several years of efforts to establish a spirit-writing cult, which was successful only in the winter of the gengshen 庚申 year (1860/61) when a certain Wuyuan 某子悟元 “came east” who “had revered the divine teachings for a long time already.” There is no further information on this person who is referred to only by what is obviously a religious name. He may have been an itinerant planchette-medium, because it is recorded that

the disciples firmly entreated him for instruction. Fortunately the Divine Lord of Reliable Succour sent down [oracular] signs and, because of the disciples’ piety and earnestness, established a shrine in this place. He (= Fuyou Dijun) also ordered the production of a book on which he conferred the title “Boat for Saving Lives”. ... This took place on the twenty-eighth day of the winter month of the tenth year Xianfeng (= 8 January 1861).27

The book was written between 1861 and 1863, with a supplementary section revealed in 1872. I will not go too much into the contents as such (which have been described by Overmyer and Jordan), but will instead try to distill some information on the cult group from data given in the text. It was a religious group with formal membership. When joining the cult (rutan 入壇, literally “entering the shrine”), new members were given a (religious) name (ci ming 賜名). This name represented some aspect of that person’s religious cultivation and could be changed by the gods to laud the individual’s moral strengths or to point out the weaknesses they had to work on. The name of a lapsed member would be erased completely. Many of the gods’ verse and prose revelations on general moral topics are followed by specific instructions given to individual members. Often these include laudatory or exhortatory name changes. Thus a “disciple Du” (Du sheng 杜生) is criticized by a deity

27 Jiusheng chuan, juan 1, pp.1a-1b.
for his opium addiction, admonished to give it up and given the name "Gaishan 改善" ("reforming to goodness"). A certain disciple Hong 洪生 is praised for his exemplary conduct and given the name "Shanti 善體" ("embodiment of goodness"). The Qunying Tan saw itself as homologous to other similar groups whose initiation was seen as equally valid. All members of the Qunying Tan saw themselves as "disciples accepted by the gods" (shensheng suo shou dizi 神聖所收弟子); this discipleship had begun for some when they were given their religious name in other shrines, for some when they joined the Qunying Tan (you xian zai ta tan ci ming zhe, you chu ru ben tan ci ming zhe 有先在壇賜名者，有初在本壇賜名者). Spirit-writing served in the Qunying Tan as a way of allowing members to receive concrete guidance in their moral cultivation from their divine teachers. The ultimate aim was attainment of immortalhood and entry into paradise. Fuyou Dijun holds up this promise in the following words:

Although the path of goodness cannot be exhausted even if trodden for a whole life, from now on I wish even more that you disciples will walk it sincerely and without [becoming] remiss. How could only flying immortals cross over to the Penglai [islands] and the Weak Waters [of the realm of the Queen Mother of the West]? I will wait for you on the other shore, saying: "Here it is most blissful. This is the place where teacher and disciples come together."29

Beyond this internal function of guiding its membership to salvation, the Qunying Tan believed itself entrusted with the mission to save all of humanity. This mission was given some urgency by the belief in an apocalypse that had only been postponed temporarily, but was sure to arrive soon. In fact, in some respects this apocalypse had already begun. We remember the Martial Sage saying in his preface quoted above that "vast

28 Jiusheng chuan, leixu, p.1b.
29 Jiusheng chuan, juan 4.
calamities have already come about, the waves of ruin have already broken [over humanity].” This gloomy view of their times was not unwarranted in the early 1860s when the ravages of the Taiping rebellion were still going on. That the location of the Qunying Tan was directly affected by military conflict is made clear by a statement in the introduction that the printing of the book was delayed through “repeated disruption by soldiers and bandits.”

Humanity could be saved by repenting of their evil ways and returning to a thoroughly moral conduct of life, thus replacing their demerits with merits. It was the Qunying Tan’s mission to receive the gods’ instructions for moral reformation and to relay them on to its membership and to outsiders. Members would receive the instruction by attending the séances. Outsiders were to be reached by two methods: on the one hand by the printing and distributing of the received messages and on the other hand by their oral proclamation by means of public lecturing (xuanjiang 宣講). The two methods went hand in hand, together reaching both the literate and the illiterate population. Particular emphasis was put on public lecturing for which a rather complex ritual procedure is included in the Jiusheng chuan. I would like to give a summary of the Qunying Tan’s public lecturing procedure. This is for two reasons: first, public lecturing occupied a position of great importance in nineteenth century spirit-writing cults and thus the reader should be given some impression of the nature of religious public lecturing at that time. Second, basic patterns of this public lecturing ceremony have survived until today and continue to shape the rituals of modern Taiwanese phoenix halls:

30 jiusheng chuan, leixu, p.1a.
Ceremony for Public Lecturing as Determined by the Sagely Thearch 聖帝定宣講儀式

For public lecturing [one needs to] rise early and sprinkle and sweep [the chosen locality]. One takes the tablet of the Sacred Edict, the incense table, the lecturing platform, and the seats for the male and female listeners and arrange them one by one in a well-ordered manner. It does not matter whether flowers and fruits, wine and must, tea, incense and candles are present in plentiful or frugal amounts; what counts is that they are refined and pure. After daybreak, the leaders and lecturers solemnly arrange their gowns and caps, burn incense, light the candles, and stand in rows in order of rank. The supervisor ascends the platform. In a loud and clear voice he reads out: “The Martial Sage and Divine Lord’s Ten Rules for the Public Lecturing Shrine 武聖帝君宣講規十條”:

(the disciples stand in order of rank on both sides and listen in silence)

1. Within the shrine everything must be arranged in a well-ordered manner. The ceremonies must be pure.
2. The bodies of all who enter the shrine must be clean, their clothes must be orderly.
3. The words used in lecturing must be genial and cultured, comprehensible and clear.
4. Recite and uphold past lessons every morning when you rise.
5. With a humble mind take your inspiration from the morality books. Do not present yourself as clever.
6. Admonish your companions to goodness and censor their transgressions. You must not let your mouth utter the right while harbouring the wrong in your mind.
7. In the ceremonial observances when entering or leaving do not boast of your wealth or prestige.
8. The ceremonies towards honoured teachers must be solemn. You must not treat your elders and betters with the disrespect arising from undue familiarity.
9. When you see the wife of another, whether she is older or younger than you, you must have not even the smallest depraved thought.
10. When the time comes to withdraw from the shrine, [first] sit still and quietly contemplate. There must be no frivolous words and reckless behaviour.”

Having finished reading, [the supervisor] says: “The proclamation of the Sacred Edicts truly involves important ceremonies. We should each of us diligently keep the shrine regulations, rectify ourselves, transform others, and not bring sins upon ourselves.” Having finished speaking, [the supervisor] descends from the platform. (The master of
ceremonies says:) “Sincerely carry out the rite of greeting the sage.” First three bows are performed towards the sky, then three kneelings and nine kowtows. After that the tablet of the Sacred Edicts is set up. Then (the master of ceremonies says:) “Greet the sage!” 31 Three kneelings and nine kowtows are performed. Thereafter the memorial is proclaimed.
Some write a new one, some use an old one. Both procedures are permissible.
Once this is finished, [the reader] performs three kowtows and rises. Those who have not yet greeted the sage finish doing so in proper order. (The master of ceremonies says:) “The lecturer shall proceed to his place. Perform the four rites. Go to the lecturing platform. Bow. Reverently read the Six Instructions of the Sacred Edict of Shizu Zhang Huangdi 世祖章皇帝聖諭六訓:”

[text of the Six Instructions omitted] 32

(The master of ceremonies says:) “Reverently read the Sixteen Items of the Sacred Edict of Shengzu Ren Huangdi 聖祖仁皇帝聖諭十六條:”

[text of the Sixteen Items omitted]

(The master of ceremonies says:) “Reverently read the Twelve Interdictions of the Divine Lord [...] ... 帝君十二戒規:” 33

[text of the Sixteen Interdictions omitted]

(The master of ceremonies says:) “Reverently read The Divine Lord Wenchang’s Ten Rules of the Banana Window 文昌帝君蕉窗十則:”

[text of the Ten Rules omitted]

(The master of ceremonies says:) “Reverently read the Divine Lord of Reliable Succour’s Ten Family Rules 孫佑帝君家規十則:”

[text of the Ten Family Rules omitted]

(The master of ceremonies says:) “Reverently read Master Stove Lord’s

31 The “sage” (sheng 世) here must refer to the spiritual presence of the emperor embodied by the tablet of the Sacred Edict.
32 The principal purpose of this translation is to give an overview of the ritual structure of public lecturing sessions. The various collections of moralistic injunctions read out at the beginning of a session are rather lengthy and do not add to our understanding of the ritual structure. I have therefore decided to omit them.
33 My photocopy of the text misses the first two characters here.
Public lecturing played a central role in the Qunying Tan’s effort of “transforming by teaching” (jiaohua 教化). It is admitted that the dissemination of morality books is a more effective method of influencing one’s contemporaries than public lecturing, because books can reach every
corner of the empire and be transmitted for many years, while “the usefulness of public lecturing is restricted to one place and one point in time” (xuanjiang zhi gong zhi zai yi di yi shi 宣講之功祇在一地一時). In a society whose population was largely illiterate, however, public lecturing was a necessary adjunct to printed morality books; it was the only way of getting their message to the vast majority of the population. Public lectures were therefore functionally probably more important in the Qunying Tan than the printing and disseminating of books, a fact evidenced by the frequent references to xuanjiang in the Jiusheng chuan. In fact, it seems that the publication of the Jiusheng chuan was delayed for some time, “because at first transforming by teaching was pursued on such a large scale that there was no time to record” the book (shi yin jiaohua da xing, wei ji tenglu 始因教化大行，末及撰錄).37

Lecturing was the responsibility of educated members of the cult. This we can glean from one message of a deity to a certain disciple Hong: Hong’s high moral qualities are praised, but nevertheless he “cannot ascend the platform and lecture, because his speech is blunt and crude” (yuyan dunzhuo, bu neng deng tai xuanjiang 語言鈍拙，不能登臺宣講).38 The Qunying Tan seems to have included a fair number of educated people who were able to appreciate the fact pointed out in the Jiusheng chuan’s introduction that the flawed and crude poetry of earlier shanshu had in recent times been replaced by more refined products.39

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35 Jiusheng chuan, leixu, p.2b.
36 In modern Taiwanese spirit-writing cults, which operate in a largely literate society, this relation is reversed. The distribution of morality books plays a much more significant role than public lecturing.
37 Jiusheng chuan, leixu, p.1a.
38 Jiusheng chuan, juan 2, p.3a.
39 Jiusheng chuan, leixu, p.2a.
Public lecturing was seen as a highly meritorious activity that benefited not only its audience, but also the religious cultivation of the lecturer. In *juan* 4 of the *Jiusheng chuan* we meet the new guardian deity (*zhentan)* of the Qunying Tan, a certain He Wuding (賀悟定), who according to his own testimony "had not refined the golden elixir and had not practised meditation," but still "had been made a deity because of [his] public lecturing." It is likely that He Wuding was a cult member of high merit who had been deified after his death -- a pattern still very common in modern spirit-writing cults.

The *xuanjiang* ceremony as outlined above was a very solemn occasion divided into basically three parts: The reading of two sacred edicts (*shengyu* 聖諭), the reading of "divine edicts" (*shenyu* 神諭), i.e., various spirit-written collections of injunctions concerning moral conduct, and finally, one or more lectures on moral topics using "maxims" (*geyan* 格言) and stories. A congregation, separated according to gender and arranged in rows according to rank, attended the lecturing session, venerating the tablets representing the emperor and the gods and communally vowing to uphold the teachings they received. The "sacred edicts" are two collections of moral injunctions, the first consisting of "six instructions" (*liuxun* 六訓) here ascribed to the Shunzhi emperor, but in fact originally promulgated by Ming Taizu. These are followed by the sixteen items of the Kangxi emperor's *Sacred Edict*. The reading of the latter text, with or without the former, was originally the key purpose of the Qing dynasty official public lecturing system. On the first and

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40 p.1a.
41 For a translation see Mair 1985:327.
fifteenth days of each moon magistrates were required to read and lecture upon the Sacred Edict to the local populace for their moral edification. This is not the place to go into the history of the official xuanjiang system, which has already been treated elsewhere.\textsuperscript{42} What is important for our purposes is the fact that this official effort had largely faltered by the early nineteenth century. Public lecturing sessions had either degenerated into pure formalities or been abandoned altogether. The ensuing lapse in the moral indoctrination of the people was a matter of serious concern to local elites, leading directly to private efforts to fill the vacuum. The Qunying Tan clearly and declaredly was such an attempt. In the passage quoted above, the Martial Sage said that

\begin{quote}
with the severity of the gods' Way I aid the generosity of the Sacred Edict, save public lecturing from its decline, transform the perversity of customs of the world.
\end{quote}

The book's introduction states even more clearly that

\begin{quote}
the divine teachings originally were to aid the Sacred Edict. Therefore the shrine regulations are recorded first, followed by the laws of the government and then the regulations of the divine edicts. If everything is in proper order, the method of public lecturing is complete.
\end{quote}

If we believe the Jiusheng chuan's claim that there were hundreds more such cult groups (and I think we can), there must have existed around the middle of the nineteenth century a very significant movement of spirit-writing cults devoted to the moral reformation of the general population by means of public lecturing.

\textsuperscript{42} Mair 1985; Chen Zhaonian 1992.
1.4 The Development of Public Lecturing by Private Associations

To better understand the specificity of these mid-nineteenth century fuluan-cum-xuanjiang associations, let us take a short look at private lecturing activities in earlier centuries. Official public lecturing began in the framework of the community compact (xiangyue 同約) system of the Song dynasty. During the Ming dynasty, the xiangyue system was reinstituted, featuring regular lectures on the “Six Maxims” (Liuyu 六諭) formulated by Ming Taizu. For the benefit of the lecturers the Six Maxims were supplemented with stories, songs and vernacular expositions of the moral principles involved in works with titles such as Explanations of the Sacred Maxims (Shengyu jieshuo 聖諭解說), Talks on the Six Maxims to Narrate to and Instruct the People (Yan jiao min liuyu shuo 演教民六諭説), Song of the Six Maxims (Liuyu ge 六諭歌), and Romance of the August Patriarch’s Six Regulations (Huangzu liutiao yanyi 皇祖六條演義). Although intended for use in the official community compact lectures, these works were usually not directly commissioned by the government, but were authored by private individuals. Completely private lecturing activities were conducted by popular religious sects that propagated their teachings through oral expositions of their “precious scrolls” (xuanjuan 宣卷, “proclaiming the scrolls”). Near the end of the Ming dynasty, a new form of public preaching appeared, organized by charitable societies. These were voluntary associations recruiting their members first mainly from the local gentry, and later incorporating more and more merchants. Probably the first charitable society was founded in 1590 in his hometown by an official named Yang Dongming 楊東明 (1548-1624). He named it “Society for Sharing Goodness” (Tongshan
Hui 同善會). Tongshan hui was later to become a generic name for such associations. While Yang's society and a local rival formed in 1591, the "Society for Spreading Benevolence" (Guangren Hui 廣仁會), may have been the earliest charitable associations; most later associations looked to the societies founded in 1614 by Gao Panlong 高攀龍 (1563-1626) and in 1632 by Chen Longzheng 陳龍正 (1585-1645) as the standard-setting examples.

On the material side, the main activities of these societies were the giving of alms to the poor and the donation of coffins for the burial of indigents. Why did this new social formation arise at this point in history? Joanna F. Handlin Smith, in her study of late Ming and early Qing benevolent societies, argues against a simplistic interpretation of these organizations as reactions to the unstable social conditions of the period. Rather, they were complex and enduring institutions with a multitude of functions, the most interesting in our present context being their moral and educational ones. According to their regulations, Gao's and Chen's societies were to meet on the fifteenth day of the middle month of each season, on which occasion a society officer "in charge of lecturing" (sijiangzhe 司講者) was to address the assembled membership, giving a morally exhortatory talk in the vernacular language. These lectures were to be recorded and afterwards posted on the walls of the society's meeting house.

To Gao and Chen, the benevolent societies were fundamentally moral institutions, designed to effect moral improvement in society through their lecturing and the practical example of their charitable activities. In this context it becomes understandable that Chen Longzheng associated his benevolent society not so much with other types of charitable

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44 Smith 1987:313.
45 Cf. Smith 1987:319; Sakai 1980:303. According to a Qing dynasty source, the Deyi lu 得一錄 by Yu Zhi 余治 (1809-1874), these lectures were also collected, printed, and distributed in book form among present and prospective society members (cf. Chen Zhaonan 1992: 124).
institutions, but rather with "three institutions devoted to education and moral or religious education: the private academies [shuyuan], the rural lecture system or community compact [xiangyue], and the Societies for Releasing Life [fangsheng hui]." While sharing similarities with these three institutions, the benevolent societies differed from the private academies in their non-scholastic approach to moral education, from the community compact system in their private nature, and from the fangsheng hui in their rejection of an affiliation with Buddhism. Handlin Smith concludes that Chen Longzheng's benevolent society thus both assumed the educational functions of the rural lecture system (sponsored by officials) and expressed the religious fervor of the Societies for Releasing Life (supported by the common people). The amalgamation of these two institutions was not, however, a simple matter of elite co-optation of popular beliefs; it required an adjustment, indeed an acquiescence, by the local elite to popular values.

It comes as no surprise then that the surviving benevolent society lectures by Gao and Chen closely resemble morality books in their treatment and promotion of a morality of everyday life without much concern for classical precedent. Indeed, Chen used contemporary morality books, such as the Taishang ganying pian and others, in his lectures, and we know that Gao wrote prefaces for two new editions of the Taishang ganying pian. In the Qing dynasty, benevolent societies took on an ever more popular character reflected both in their membership and leadership structure and in the

46 Smith 1987:318. The connection of the societies' lectures to the xiangyue lectures was particularly emphasized by Chen Longzheng who in one of his lectures called his benevolent society a "helper" to the community compact lectures ("zhe hui zhi dang shi jiang xiangyue de bangshou", quoted in Chen Zhaonan 1992:124).

47 Smith 1987:320
48 Sakai 1980:305.
contents and style of their lecturing activities. As Joanna F. Handlin Smith states,

[i]n the interests of community solidarity, [Chen Longzheng] tried to incorporate the spirit of the Societies for Releasing Life into the tradition of [xiangyue]. As this synthesis evolved into a benevolent society, however, the leadership slipped from the officials and gentry to a local elite that included merchants and prosperous peasants. As members of the gentry discussed moral cultivation in terms that would appeal to people with an investment mentality, they abnegated the distinct basis for their own leadership and unwittingly turned the benevolent societies into publicly accepted tools that merchants could share with them and, by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, even come to control.\(^50\)

While generally plausible, Smith seems to be overstating the differentiation of the scholar and merchant classes in late Ming and Qing society. After all, this was the age of these two classes' growing amalgamation, where we find locally prominent families engaged in commerce and scholarly/official pursuits at the same time. The changing nature of the benevolent societies' leadership structure thus may not be a symptom of the scholars' losing out against the merchants, but rather of the increasingly heterogeneous composition of local elites. This development was reflected in the societies' lecturing activities, which came to rely more and more on raw materials provided by popular morality books.

There seems to be little evidence for lecturing activities by private benevolent associations in the early decades of the Qing dynasty, a fact that some scholars attribute to the reinvigorated official public lecture system under the new regime.\(^51\) Even so there is a report of a Society for Expounding

\(^{50}\) Smith 1987:329.
the Scriptures of the Three Sages (Jiang Sansheng Jing Hui 講三聖經會), which was organized by a certain Li Zhengfang 李正芳 in the Shunzhi years (1644-1661). It met on the first and fifteenth of every month on a rotating basis in a member’s home to

set up an altar and worship Heaven. Afterwards they would seat themselves in order of seniority and ask one in their midst who was cognizant of principles to expound upon the Scriptures of the Three Sages.52

If Li Zhengfang’s society really existed, it would be an early indicator of the increasingly religious flavour which benevolent societies were to acquire during the Qing dynasty. Indeed, Li’s group was not a benevolent society anymore but a specialized religious body centring on communal worship and lecturing activities.

With the gradual decline of the official public lecture system, private efforts started to regain higher profile, and so we find growing evidence for lecturing activities by individuals and private associations from about the middle of the eighteenth century. In 1755 the “Society for Sharing Goodness” (Tongshan Hui) of Fengjing 楓涇 (in modern Zhejiang province) erected a building for its use (Tongshan Huiguan 同善會館), in which an image of the Divine Lord Wenchang was installed. Special worship ceremonies for Wenchang were to be held on the third day of the third month and on the ninth day of the ninth month. Other activities of the society, according to its regulations, were to include alms to the poor, aid to those in immediate

52 Quoted in Chen Zhaonan 1992:253. The Scriptures of the Three Sages (Sansheng jing) were the Taishang ganying pian, the Yinzhi wen 隱懿文, and the Jueshi zhenjing 覺世真經. Sakai (1980:313) quotes the same material, however, here the society is Called “Society for the Expounding of the Taishang ganying pian” (Jiang Taishang ganying pian Hui 讲大上感應篇會).
distress, distribution of free medicine, and the donation of coffins. Its lecturing activities were much broader than those of its late Ming predecessors whose example is explicitly invoked. While Gao's and Chen's societies met for lectures only four times per year, and lectures were only given to members in the society's meeting house, the Fengjing Tongshan Hui was to appoint two lecturers (sijiang er ren 司講二人) who were to spend ten days each month in public lecturing (xuanjiang) on "maxims and [stories about] karmic retribution 格言果報". The first three days of the month they were to lecture at the "public office" (gongsuo 公所), while during the remaining seven days they were to make a round of the local temples, lecturing one or two days at each location. These activities were subsumed in the society's regulations under the heading "transforming and guiding" (huadao 化導). Furthermore, the society was to print and disseminate "books of the Society for Sharing Goodness" (Tongshan Hui shu 同善會書) and other easily understandable morality books.\textsuperscript{53} We notice that the Fengjing society had a ritual focus (worship of the Divine Lord Wenchang) and a sense of a mission to "transform and guide" not just its members, but the people in general through public lectures and the printing of morality books. Sakai Tadao sees the Qianlong era as a crucial period when the

\textsuperscript{[official]} xuanjiang amalgamated [on the one hand] with the tradition of xuanjuan, the proclamation and recitation of scriptures and precious scrolls which had been practised by popular religious associations since the Ming dynasty, and [on the other hand] with the expounding and lecturing on the Ganying pian and other morality books by associations of commoner literati and intellectuals, ...\textsuperscript{54}

In the nineteenth century this infusion of benevolent societies with a

\textsuperscript{53} All of these materials are quoted in Sakai 1980:304-305.
\textsuperscript{54} Sakai 1980:311.
religious focus and a sense of public mission continued and produced a
gamut of different kinds of associations, some with a stronger focus on
traditional charitable activities, others with a stronger emphasis on religious
matters. For our purposes a particularly interesting development is the
combination in some groups of spirit-writing with xuanjiang, of which the
Qunying Tan is a prime example.

For a charitable society, the step from using spirit-written books in
public lecturing to producing them itself by spirit-writing was not such a big
one and many tongshan hui may thus have come to practise spirit-writing as
a supplement to their xuanjiang activities. Alternatively, spirit-writing cults
may have been set up as such from the beginning, but patterned themselves
after the example of the charitable societies, complete with their typical
emphasis on lecturing. In any case, a close functional connection existed in
the nineteenth century between spirit-writing and public lecturing, and
between spirit-writing cults and charitable societies. This is reflected in the
common appellation of spirit-writing cults as “halls of goodness” (shantang
善堂), a name they shared with many charitable societies.

1.5 Spirit-Writing and Heterodoxy

Just as charitable societies, spirit-writing shrines were often supported
by a heterogeneous local elite consisting of gentry, merchants, and wealthy
peasants. This elite, while generally Confucian in orientation, was also closely
enmeshed in the local religious scene and usually had few qualms about
synthesizing the various religious traditions of China. Thus we find that cults
such as the Qunying Tan, while staunchly promoting a generalized “Confucian” morality, combined the latter with Daoist concepts of immortalization. The synthetic nature of the religious doctrines developed by spirit-writing cults made them suspect in the eyes of Confucian purists. In 1875, the Qing statesman Zhang Zhidong 张之洞 (1837-1909) remarked in his Youxuan 语轩语 that

in recent years the depraved custom of spirit-writing has been greatly en vogue in the province of Sichuan. Those who practise this technique fuse together the [Neo-Confucian] study of principles with the methods of Buddhism and Daoism. Lately, in the provincial capital there is a scholar who has written a book mixing up the Yinzhi wen, Ganying pian, [as well as texts] propagated by vulgar Daoists like the so-called Scripture of the Nine August Ones 九皇经 and the Scripture for Awakening the World 觉世经, with the Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean. He talks recklessly about “nature and principle 性理,” “the Way of the [Book of] Changes 易道,” “divine efficacy and karmic retribution 神靈果報,” “elixir cauldrons, talismans, and registers 丹鼎符籙,” throwing everything together in a vulgar manner, confused like a raving lunatic. This causes great harm to the human mind and customs. [Such talk] should forthwith be severely censored and eliminated. Scholars who understand principles urgently must come to this realization and need to know that this is what is vulgarly called “the Demonic Way.” It has nothing whatsoever to do with Buddhism and Daoism.

Furthermore, there are here villainous people who pretend to lecture on the Sacred Edict. Actually, just as in the above example, [in these cases] only the name is right, while the substance is wrong. [However, this pretence] makes it impossible for magistrates and village heads to clearly prohibit them. Such cunning is very alarming.

Scholars ambitious for success in the examinations often like to talk about the Yinzhi wen and the Ganying pian. The purpose of these two

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This probably refers to a (spirit-written?) scripture with the full name Xiantian Shenhou Doumu Yuanzun dadao jiuhuang zhenjing 真天神后斗姆元尊大道九皇真经 (True Scripture of the Primordial Worthy Bushel-Mother, Divine Empress of Prior Heaven, on the Nine August Ones of the Great Way); it was produced in the first half of the nineteenth century within a Sichuanese Daoist movement called the “School of the Hidden Immortal” (Yinxian pai 隱仙派) that focussed on the cult of the immortal Zhang Sanfeng 张三丰. On this school and the dating of the scripture see Huang Zhaohan 黄肇涵 1988a and 1988b. The scripture’s text can be found in the Collected Works of Zhang Sanfeng (Zhang Sanfeng quanji 张三丰全集), chapter 8.
books is to transform the ignorant by admonishment; they definitely
do not cause harm to the empire. However, while these two books do
address great principles and important affairs, those who honour them
according to present customs apply their mind only to their irrelevant
little details. This is very strange! The Confucians themselves have the
Thirteen Classics that teach humans to be good. What is there that [the
Classics] do not expound in detail? If really you can forcefully and
without fail carry out your moral obligations, be loyal and sincere in all
your affairs, be upright and natural, then practising the Way will bring
you blessings. Why seek other paths and short-cuts?56

Similar concerns were uttered by Weng Zulie 翁祖烈, who served as local
magistrate at various places in Sichuan during the Tongzhi reign period
(1862-1875). He complained that in many places in Sichuan under the
pretence of public lecturing people talked recklessly of disasters and blessings,
collected donations, worshipped god images, and said prayers. The rustic and
ignorant liked to believe in the words of the heterodox spirits that descended
by means of the planchette, and what was yet more serious, gentry members,
too, thought them true. Harm would come to customs and the people’s
minds if these things were not severely prohibited.57

Purists who were concerned about the religious syncretism of spirit-
writing cults had occasion to be even more worried about sectarian influences
cropping up in the writings of these groups. Popular sects had from their
inception in the Ming dynasty appealed mainly to the uneducated lower
classes. There was little contact between them and elite religious institutions.
In particular they did not usually employ spirit-writing, which would have
been meaningful neither to their membership nor in many cases to their at
best functionally literate leadership. There do exist imperial decrees from both

56 Zhang Zhidong, Youxuan yu 1 (p.3756-3757).
the Ming and the Qing dynasties prohibiting the use of spirit-writing. These seem to have been prompted by the state's concern about possible sectarian misuse of this technique to obtain divine authority for rebellious action. However, there seems to exist little evidence that spirit-writing was used in such a way before the nineteenth century. Until then spirit-writing had largely been the domain of Daoist circles, professional mediums, and scholars. An exception was the Xiantian Dao 先天道 sectarian tradition that shared some common doctrinal ground with the Daoist Jindan Dao 金丹道 and probably had been employing spirit-writing already in the eighteenth century, perhaps even earlier. In the nineteenth century, the role of spirit-writing in Xiantian Dao sects become gradually more important. We can only speculate what prompted this development. One possibility is that the social upheaval of the mid-nineteenth century caused the social decline of large numbers of relatively educated people. With no hope of ever rising to the scholar-official class, these individuals had no vested interest in that class's ideology, but were free to pursue other venues of thought, including so-called "heterodox" ones. The fifteenth patriarch of the Yiguan Dao 一贯道, Wang Jueyi 王觉一 (? - 1884), seems to have been such a person. Though not from a literati family background, he was a literate man who combined a livelihood as itinerant fortune-teller with sectarian proselytizing, mostly in the province of Sichuan. He practised spirit-writing and wrote a number of books on Xiantian Dao doctrine. These were modelled more after the type of scholarly treatise than after the sectarian "precious scroll" tradition. Joseph Edkins describes one of these works, the Investigation into the Origins of the Three Books of Changes (Sanyi tanyuan 三易探源), and comes to the conclusion "that the author is a well read scholar." 58 By Wang Jueyi's time it had already become an

58 Edkins 1888:305.
established practice within Xiantian Dao sects to choose new patriarchs by means of spirit-writing.

Spirit-writing in the nineteenth century thus was a ritual practice shared by both sectarian and non-sectarian religious groups. It was this commonality that facilitated the exchange of ideas between the two religious traditions, leading to their partial fusion. A good example is the spirit-writing movement spawned in 1840 by the above mentioned Longnü Si. The original Longnü Si cult most likely focussed on the cult of Guan Sheng Dijun and its revelations centred on this deity as a saviour figure delaying an already decreed apocalypse. Interestingly, however, despite the non-sectarian character of these seminal revelations they soon came to be adopted by sectarian groups, with references to the gengzi year events cropping up in sectarian spirit-written books like the Yulu jinpan, from which I quoted above. Now, however, the revelations of 1840 appear in a new light, having been inserted into a sectarian cosmological framework. The Yulu jinpan, for example, postulates the Venerable Mother rather than Guan Sheng Dijun as the driving force behind the great effort at universal salvation that commenced in 1840. Another sectarian text, the Precious Scroll for Pointing out Confusion and Leading to Truth (Zhimi yinzhen baojuan 指迷引真寶 巻), interprets the gengzi year as the beginning of the general salvation accompanying Maitreya’s assumption of cosmic reign.59

How did this fusion of sectarian and non-sectarian spirit-writing come about? We are fortunate to have a case example illustrating one possibility for such contact to occur. In 1856 a spirit-written book by the title of Precious Raft

Pointing the Way (*Zhilu baofa* 指路寶筏) was completed. It is a text firmly embedded in a sectarian view of the cosmos. In it the world, ruled by a high deity called Heavenly Worthy of the Limitless (Wujì Tiānzūn 無極天尊), is described as passing through three epochs: “upper antiquity” (*shànggu) the time up to the Zhou dynasty, is governed by the Dipamkara Buddha (Randeng Fo 燃燈佛), an emissary of Wuji Tianzun. In this epoch the Dipamkara Buddha manages to save two of the ninety-two myriad “children who have lost their home” (*shìxiàng ér nǚ* 失鄉兒女). In the next epoch, “middle antiquity” (*zhōnggu* 中古), beginning in the Spring and Autumn period, Wuji Tianzun sends down the “Tathagata Buddha” (Rulai Fo 如來佛) who saves another two myriad “children.” The present age of “lower antiquity” (*xiàgu* 下古) is the time when Amitabha Buddha comes to earth to redeem the remaining ninety-two myriad. This is fairly standard sectarian soteriology, except that the supreme deity is called “Heavenly Worthy” instead of “Venerable Mother” (*lǎomǔ* 老母) and that the Buddha of the final age is identified as Amitabha instead of the more usual Maitreya. That this clearly sectarian mythology is linked to the Xiantian Dao tradition is evidenced by the occurrence in the *Zhilu baofa* of a list of thirteen Xiantian Dao patriarchs.

Now, this book makes repeated reference to the Longnü Si revelations of 1840. Indeed, it seems that the three leading figures of the cult that produced the *Zhilu baofa* had begun their religious careers under the influence of the Longnü Si cult. Takeuchi Fusaji, in a 1990 article, interprets the *Zhilu baofa*’s references to the Longnü Si as indications that the book was actually spirit-written in this temple. Wang Jianchuan disagrees, pointing out that while the *Zhilu baofa* shows strong sectarian influences, the Longnü Si
cult most likely was of a more orthodox nature.\textsuperscript{60} The evidence is somewhat ambiguous; it deserves to be looked at a little closer, not just for what little it tells us about the Longnü Si revelations, but for the picture it paints of one way a mid-nineteenth century spirit-writing cult could unfold. The three central personages behind the writing of the Zhitu baofa are three men whom we only know by their religious names: Yuanjue 阮觉, Yuantuo 圓陀, and Yuanguang 圓光. According to Yuanjue's (posthumous) testimony they were sworn brothers, \\

.... one playing at being a hero, making mischief everywhere; one liking to host his friends, ever grasping incense and forming sworn brotherhoods; one working in the office of the Yamen. [...] Unexpectedly a good affinity came to fruition and it became possible to provide against the terminal kalpic disaster when in the gengzi year in the Temple of the Dragon Maiden the planchette admonished the world, ordered public lectures, strengthened morality and transformed the ignorant by teaching. Fortunately, we brothers had a certain moral foundation. We did not shirk the exertion of expounding the Sacred Edict and admonishing people. We did good works, created merit, donated our talents and our labour. And it was not in vain that we three worked together so closely and harmoniously. The Sagely Thearch sent down a mandate to let the brush descend in the shrine. My younger brother reported the characters, my elder brother recorded them, and I supported the planchette. We did so every day, without any slackness, until our spirits were worn out. Because of this we expunged our sins from past existences until our merit was good and our names were recorded [in Heaven].\textsuperscript{61}

According to this statement our three spirit-writers were certainly inspired by the Longnü Si revelations to take up public lecturing on the Sacred Edict and eventually to become a spirit-writing team themselves. What is not clear is whether at this time they were actually members of the Longnü Si. Takeuchi Fusaji thinks they were, while Wang Jianchuan believes they were merely

\begin{footnotes}
\item[61] Quoted in Takeuchi 1990:71.
\end{footnotes}
influenced by the Longnü Si's example. In the following passages it is reported that they received an order from the gods to write a book entitled *Collection on Rectifying the Mind* (Zhengxin ji 正心集), whereupon Yuantuo provided the cult group with a house in which they set up a permanent shrine.62 This implies that hitherto the group had operated on a more informal level, setting up formal structures only after having received a mandate to write a book. This would seem to argue against Takeuchi's view that Yuanjue, Yuantuo, and Yuanguang had been operating out of the already established Longnü Si. The writing of the *Zhengxin ji* took about a year and half, during which time many gods descended into the shrine. The three leaders were honoured by being given their religious names and celestial offices. Guanyin transmitted to them the secrets of the golden elixir and instructions on how to refine the mysterious pearl (xuanzhu 玄珠). The Divine Lord (Dijun Ye 帝君爺) revealed that the three sworn brothers had been karmically linked for several existences already; originally they had been denizens of Heaven who had returned to the secular world to write books and transform the world by public lecturing. Thus strengthened in their sense of mission, our three sworn brothers became itinerant preachers and spirit-writers once the *Zhengxin ji* was completed. They obeyed a divine message to head west and set out in spite of the summer heat. As a result they met an "enlightened teacher" (mingshi 明師) in a place called Yingyang 影陽 "who pointed out secrets and expounded on the marvellousness of the Dao and the need to get rid of one's selfish mind." The enlightened teacher obviously was a sectarian leader of the Xiantian Dao tradition, as is evidenced by the list of Xiantian Dao patriarchs contained in the *Zhilu baofa*, the post-conversion product of the three men's spirit-writing activities. While they do not seem to

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62 *Zhilu baofa, juan xia*, p.57a.
have encountered any difficulties in their early religious career, trouble started as soon as they became disciples of their new teacher. Faced with tribulations sent down by Heaven to test their steadfastness, their teacher ordered the three to go into hiding. Yuanguang escaped to a far away place, Yuanjue returned home to lie low for some time, while only Yuantuo stayed behind to bravely face the storm. Takeuchi surmises that these difficulties were caused by a persecution campaign against the “Religion of the Blue Lotus” (Qinglian Jiao 青蓮教, another name for the Way of Prior Heaven) around the year 1843. After things had quieted down, the three sworn brothers got together again, resuming their lecturing and spirit-writing activities, eventually producing the Zhilu baoifa, a book mirroring the strongly sectarian turn the religious thought of its authors had taken. Unlike its non-sectarian predecessor, the Zhengxin ji, the Zhilu baoifa attracted the authorities’ attention and “fearing they would suffer calamities, the friends reduced the printing blocks to smoke,” i.e., burnt them. It took a second effort to finally get it printed.63 The Zhilu baoifa itself contains indications of the doctrinal break separating the Zhengxin ji, which the cult had produced under the inspiration of the Longnü Si revelations, from the sectarian Zhilu baoifa. It records that after the Zhengxin ji had been completed “unexpectedly the Great Way was transmitted to the world, and subsequently the Zhilu baoifa was added.”64 This source thus provides us with a fascinating historical glimpse at a group of faithful who were first inspired to take up spirit-writing and public lecturing by the example of the Temple of the Dragon Maiden. Interestingly, these three men were not gentry members; one apparently was a yamen clerk, another a kind of local tough, and the third of unspecified

63 Zhilu baoifa, yong ji, juan xia, p.64a-b.
64 Zhilu baoifa, yong bu, p.65b.
occupation. Perhaps they belonged to that literate, yet dependent class in local society that, according to David Johnson, "may have produced more than its share of rebels and members of millenarian cults." They were educated enough to be interested in spirit-writing as a way of formulating and organizing their religious ideas, yet their subordinate position in local society did not give them a vested interest in the ruling orthodoxy. They first took up spirit-writing under the influence of an "orthodox" spirit-writing cult, the Temple of the Dragon Maiden, and produced the Collection for Rectifying the Mind, a book that did not incur any negative reactions from the authorities. Afterwards, however, they felt free to experiment with "heterodox" ideas, eventually again employing spirit-writing to give their new ideas a public shape by authoring the Precious Raft Pointing the Way.

This episode shows one way by which the Longnü Si revelations came into contact with the Xiantian Dao tradition, thus creating the situation that both orthodox and sectarian spirit-writing cults in Sichuan looked back to the 1840 events at the Temple of the Dragon Maiden as the beginning of their respective efforts of universal salvation.

There thus developed a sectarian subtradition that combined sectarian devotionalism and millenarianism with scholarly modes of philosophical inquiry and fuluan as a literate method of communicating with the transcendent realm. This subtradition shared a lot of common ground with the salvationist spirit-writing cults that mushroomed all over Sichuan after 1840: a millenarian outlook, an interest in fusing China's main religious traditions, and the practice of spirit-writing. That in some places these

commonalities led to a fusion of the two types of religious organization should therefore come as no surprise. We have seen that the conversion of an originally non-sectarian spirit-writing team led to the production of the Zhilu baoifa which is an early example of a subsequent tradition of sectarian-influenced spirit-written literature, exemplified by such works as the Yulu jinpan and the early Republican period Dongming baoji 洞冥寶記 and Pantaoyan ji 蝙桃宴記. This literature was produced partly by independent spirit-writing cults that had adopted sectarian themes, and partly by planchette-using branches of the Xiantian Dao, such as the Yiguan Dao and the Tongshan She, and largely supplanted the traditional “precious scrolls” (baojuan 寶卷) as the preferred mode of expounding sectarian doctrines.

It also has to be kept in mind, though, that this fusion was far from complete and that probably the majority of nineteenth century spirit-writing cults did not claim allegiance to any sectarian tradition and did not show in their writings any influence of sectarian mythological themes.

1.6 Spirit-Writing Cults Outside of Sichuan

Unfortunately, my evidence of the development of spirit-writing cults outside of Sichuan is somewhat sketchy. It is clear that they existed in most corners of the empire; it is not clear how far the influence of the 1840 spirit-writing movement in Sichuan reached. It seems that in other places other

66 The Tongshan She illustrates the fusion of sectarian and Confucian concerns by its very name. An offshoot of the Xiantian Dao tradition, the founder Peng Huilong 彭迴龍 chose as the name for his sect “Society for Sharing Goodness,” a term traditionally denoting a charitable society engaged in good works and lecturing on morality books.
seminal revelations were effective in initiating spirit-writing cults. E.g., in Guangdong province an outbreak of the bubonic plague in the 1890s occasioned a flurry of spirit-writing activity, which was first used to write charms and prescriptions for the treatment of the disease. When such treatment proved to be successful, spirit-writing cults could establish themselves on a permanent basis, adding moral instruction to practical assistance. A well-studied example of such a process in this area of China is the Wong Tai Sin 黃大仙 temple of Hong Kong and its Guangdong predecessors.\(^{67}\) The Cantonese spirit-writing cults, often called *daotan* 道壇 ("shrines of the Dao"), seem to be quite free of Xiantian Dao influence. Instead they have adopted characteristics of the locally influential Quanzhen 全真 school of Daoism.\(^{68}\) It would go beyond the scope of this chapter to attempt an overview of the different types of spirit-writing cults in various areas of China. I will therefore confine myself to one reasonably well-documented example outside of Sichuan. This is a spirit-writing and public lecturing movement active in what is now Liaoning province during the last years of the Qing dynasty. My evidence is drawn from the memoirs of Wang Fengyi 王鳳儀 (1864-1937), who was an important figure in the Republican period religious society Wanguo Daode Hui 萬國道德會 and who is accorded among modern Taiwanese spirit-writing cults an almost saintly status. His memoirs, being transcripts of oral reminiscences, employ a very lively style and I would therefore like to quote from them at length. Wang writes:

In the twentieth year of the Guangxu reign period [1894], after the Sino-

\(^{67}\) See Lang & Ragvald 1993.

\(^{68}\) There exist differences in opinion as to the exact relation between spirit-writing cults and Quanzhen Daoism in Guangdong and Hong Kong. Bartholomew Tsui sees in Hong Kong spirit-writing cults such as the Qingsong Guan 青松觀 authentic successors to the Quanzhen tradition [1991]. By contrast, Shiga Ichiko sees them as basically Confucian-minded *shantang* with only a veneer of Quanzhen inspired liturgy [1995].
Japanese war, the Qing court sent down a decree calling upon the *juren* and *xiucai* in the whole country to instruct the people for the nation, to lecture on morality books, and to rectify the human mind. First they did this in the [local] temples, later they also toured the districts and villages, engaging there in public lecturing. In the year when I was 37 *sui* old [= 1900], the allied troops of eight nations entered Beijing (today's Beiping City). Determined patriotic scholars concerned about the nation and the people, but without a method of saving the nation, congregated in the temples, burnt incense and supported the planchette. They earnestly beseeched the gods and Buddhas to reveal a way out of their confusion.

A revelation was received through a shrine of the gods: they should establish halls for public lecturing, proclaim and transform on behalf of Heaven, admonish people to study goodness, and reveal oracles by means of the flying phoenix. Thereupon in Liujiazi in Chaoyangfu 朝陽府六家子 a hall for public lecturing 宣講堂 was established. Yang Bo 楊柏 served as chairman 善東, Zhang Mingzhai 張銘齋 as lecture supervisor 督講, Li Yunqing 李韻卿 as principal lecturer 主講. It was because these three were degree-holders and very well regarded that we were led by them in doing good works.

For the public lecturing hall, I personally plastered the walls, built a *kang*, partitioned the rooms, and swept the courtyard. After lecturing had begun, the Boat of Compassion Ancient Buddha (Cihang Gufo 慈航古佛) sent down a mandate: we were to promote the five human relationships and the eight virtues; gods and humans together were to build a life-saving boat, greatly opening general salvation. Male and female believers became more numerous every day. In other places as well public lecturing halls were established one after another. I helped out in the hall while at the same time studying how to lecture on morality books.

I had just learned how to lecture on one chapter of a book, when the hall asked a *xiucai*, Mr. Xing Jiu 邢 九, to act as its principal lecturer. When he saw that I used vernacular speech in lecturing, he thought it too vulgar and not as good as a scholar's pedantically articulated discourse. He became even uneasier when he noticed that the audiences enjoyed my lectures very much. So he said to me, “In this kind of association no non-degree-holders are allowed to lecture their nonsense. [The lecturers] have to be *juren* or *xiucai*. As you are a peasant, you had better return home and plant your fields.” I said, “Having only just got here, you right away want to drive me out?! That won’t do! The public lecturing hall has been established by the gods and Buddhas; I plastered the walls; I built the *kang*. You can’t drive me out!” When I spoke thus, he did not know what to say. I continued,
"You scholars can do good works, but are illiterates all evil people? Since you cannot abide me, I don’t want to be a burden and cause you trouble; just give me a copy of the Xuanjiang shiyi 宣講拾遺 70 and I will on my own go outside and lecture."

Mr. Yang gave me a book and I went off to Bajiazi 八家子. [...] After I had begun to lecture, the audiences were very numerous. Because I used the vernacular language in lecturing, everyone could easily understand it. After I had lectured in Bajiazi for three days, the public lecturing hall in Liujiabazi sent somebody to fetch me back. Subsequently I consorted with the young people, lecturing and studying, and also went often to the villages to give public lectures. 71

This little vignette gives some insight into a turn of the century northern Chinese spirit-writing cult. There is no reference to the gengzi 幽 year revelation; in this case the divine call for spirit-writing and public lecturing seems to have come through a revelation received at a moment of national crisis, the occupation of Beijing by foreign troops following the "Boxer rebellion." The "public lecturing hall" (xuanjiang tang) described by Wang Fengyi was a spirit-writing cult led by local lower degree-holders, at least some of whom saw public lecturing as a task best left to the educated. The latter, thoroughly familiar with the classical literature, were presumed to be best qualified to communicate classical values to the ignorant masses. This was frustrating to an ambitious autodidact like Wang Fengyi, who in protest chose to become an itinerant lecturer.

This was not a novel idea of his; the itinerant lecturer of morality books was a well-established profession at the time and we find frequent references to these men who combined the craft of the story-teller with that of the preacher. None other than Guo Moruo 郭沫若 has left us a lively description of the performance of such professional lecturers:

70 A manual for public lecturing.
71 Yisheng yanzing lu, pp.57-59.
Lecturers on the *Sacred Edict*, who told stories about loyalty, filial piety, and fidelity from the morality books (*shan-shu*), often came to our village.

[...] At a street corner, they would set up a dais composed of three square tables, one placed atop the other two. On the dais, incense and candles were lit as offerings to the plaque of the *Sacred Edict*. On top of the right-hand table was placed a chair. If two people performed together, then a chair was placed on each of the side tables.

When it became time for the lecturer on the Sacred Edict to preach, he, dressed as though going to have an audience with the emperor, would knock his head audibly on the ground four times as he faced the plaque of the *Sacred Edict*. Then he would stand up again and, drawing out his voice, would recite the ten [sic] maxims of the *Sacred Edict*. After that he would get back up on the platform and start telling stories. [...] This type of simple storytelling was a form of entertainment that people in the village liked to listen to very much. They would stand before the platform of the *Sacred Edict* and listen for two or three hours. ...72

Some of these men probably were a specialized kind of professional storyteller, others may have been emissaries from local “halls of goodness” (*shantang*), sent out to preach to the masses.73 Both kinds based their performances on the same kinds of public lecturing manuals, which contained lively stories illustrating the moral exhortations of the *Sacred Edict*.74 This guaranteed that public lecturing was usually a rather entertaining performance that drew crowds. As for its effectiveness in achieving its stated aim, i.e., the moral transformation of the people, Victor Mair thinks that “[t]here can be no doubt that the diffusion of Confucian ideals was far more efficiently accomplished through this type of grass-roots...”

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72 Quoted in Mair 1985:354-355.

73 D.C. Graham reports for 1930’s Sichuan that “[o]ne often sees on the streets a scholar sitting on a platform, preaching the Sacred Edict or expounding moral principles. They are paid to do so by people who are interested in good morals.” [1935:366] This evidence suggests that there was no firm line between professional and charitable lecturing. Apparently individuals (and perhaps associations?) “interested in good morals” could hire a professional story-teller to perform public lecturing in the streets.

74 These books, including the *Xuanjiang shiyi* mentioned by Wang Fengyi in the passage quoted above, are analyzed in Chen Zhaoran 1992.
activity than through the pompous, ritualistic, and often lifeless ceremonies presided over by local officials." Guo Moruo concurs: "Before I had begun my schooling, I was already able to understand the morality books of these lecturers on the Sacred Edict."

1.7 Summary

From about the middle of the nineteenth century, spirit-writing cults sprang up all over the Chinese mainland. They usually were initiated by a seminal revelation declaring that humanity by its immoral conduct was bringing great catastrophes upon itself. In order to avert these calamities, a group of saviour deities decided to try to bring about the moral reformation through the spirit-writing of morality books and their oral exposition by means of public lecturing. People concerned about the plight of their times, often members of the local elite, responded by establishing spirit-writing-cum-public-lecturing cults which were patterned after the traditional charitable societies (tongshan hui, shantang). An early such movement was triggered in Sichuan by a revelation in 1840 at the Dragon Maiden temple near Chongqing. Other regional movements were set off by revelations in the context of epidemics (e.g., in Guangdong in the 1890s) or national political disasters (e.g., in Liaoning in 1900). Such movements were coloured by the particular composition of the local religious scene. In Guangdong they tended to have a pronounced Quanzhen Daoist flavour, while in Sichuan the locally strong Xiantian Dao tradition occasioned a fusion of some spirit-writing cults.

75 Mair 1985:355.
76 Quoted in Mair 1985:355.
with popular sectarianism. This latter development was to become significant for the post-1945 development of spirit-writing cults in Taiwan, as we shall see further down. Whatever the regional differences, however, all of these cults were centrally concerned with the restoration of traditional standards of morality, which were shaped principally by Confucianism. These aims they tried to achieve by receiving written messages from the gods and relaying them on to the populace by means of printed morality books and public lecturing.
CHAPTER 2: THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPIRIT-WRITING CULTS ON TAIWAN

2.1 Phoenix Halls Prior to the Japanese Period

During much of the Qing dynasty, Taiwan was a marginal area of the Chinese empire. It was a rough frontier region, still in the process of being colonized by Chinese settlers. Conflicts between settlers and aborigines, and among subethnic settler groups, were common. During the 19th century, the upheaval subsided gradually and social structures more similar to those of the Chinese mainland started to appear. This included the formation of a local gentry, living off the rents produced by their extensive landholdings and emulating the lifestyle of the mainland literati-official class. The presence of a wealthy upper class devoted to literary pursuits was a prerequisite for the development of spirit-writing cults, and so it is not surprising that spirit-writing took a firm foothold on the island only in the second half of the 19th century.

There exists one earlier reference to spirit-writing on Taiwan, which Lin Wenlong 林 文 龍 has described and discussed. The earliest documentary account is contained in The Flying Phoenix by David K. Jordan and Daniel L. Overmyer who base themselves mainly on colonial period Japanese reports. The Flying Phoenix stimulated much of the subsequent research which broadened the data base by including spirit-writing cults' own writings and oral history. Still, the history of spirit-writing in Taiwan is only beginning to be investigated thoroughly, and the scholars working in this field, principally Zheng Zhiming, Wang Shiqing, Song Guangyu, Wang Jianchuan, and most recently Wang Zhiyu and Paul Katz, are still in disagreement on many details.

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1 This section will only present an outline of the general history of spirit-writing on Taiwan. The earliest English language account of this history is contained in The Flying Phoenix by David K. Jordan and Daniel L. Overmyer who base themselves mainly on colonial period Japanese reports. The Flying Phoenix stimulated much of the subsequent research which broadened the data base by including spirit-writing cults' own writings and oral history. Still, the history of spirit-writing in Taiwan is only beginning to be investigated thoroughly, and the scholars working in this field, principally Zheng Zhiming, Wang Shiqing, Song Guangyu, Wang Jianchuan, and most recently Wang Zhiyu and Paul Katz, are still in disagreement on many details.

2 A paradigmatic example for this development is the history of the Lin 林 lineage of Wufeng 雲峰 (Taizhong county), which came all the way from modest peasant-settler conditions, over local bullyhood and militia commandery, to respected gentry status. Cf. Meskill 1979. On the development of a gentry class in Taiwan in general see Lamley 1964.
reference to spirit-writing found so far appears in the *Gazetteer of Fengshan County* (*Fengshan xianzhi* 鳳山縣志), edited in Kangxi 58 (1719), which tells us about a “Hall of the Immortals” (*xiantang* 仙堂) in the village Qian’ashe 前阿社 in Changzhi li 長治里 (southern Taiwan), founded by a local man named He Kanjiu 何侃鳬. This temple was devoted to the worship of the “Five Wenchang” (*Wu Wenchang* 五文昌), who were said to be “able to descend into the planchette” (*neng jiangji* 能降乩). In addition to the Five Wenchang, the Queen Mother of the West (*Xi Wangmu* 西王母) and the King of the East (*Dong Wanggong* 東王公) were also worshipped. In the Qianlong 29 (1764) revised edition of the gazetteer, the “Hall of the Immortals” is still mentioned, but the reference to spirit-writing has been deleted; presumably, spirit-writing had ceased by that time.  

This early ephemeral pioneer, however, probably had no significant influence on the development of spirit-writing in Taiwan, which really got started only with the founding of the “Society for Universal Exhortation” (*Puquan She* 普勸社) in Magong 馬公, the main town of the Penghu Islands 彭湖群島. The Penghu Islands, in Western sources often referred to by their Portuguese name, the Pescadores, are located between Taiwan and the mainland province of Fujian. In 1853, a group of Magong literati sent a prospective medium to the city of Quanzhou 泉州 in Fujian, there to be taught the use of the planchette by the Society for Public Goodness (*Gongshan She* 公善社). After the return of the medium, the Society for Universal Exhortation was founded in Magong in the same year, with the purpose of carrying out spirit-writing, lecturing (*xuanjiang*) on the *Sacred Edict*, and admonishing the people to moral conduct. However, the activities of the Society dwindled over

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3 These Five Wenchang were: (1) Zitong 樟潼, (2) Guan Di 閘帝, (3) Kui Xing 魁星, (4) Zhuyi 朱衣, and (5) Lù Zu 呂祖.

the years, until it completely ceased operation when French forces occupied
the Penghu islands during the Sino-French war of 1885. Two years later, in
1887, under the leadership of a group of six "government students"
(shengyuan 生员 ), funds were raised for the revival of the Society for
Universal Exhortation, which was then renamed "Society for Complete
Renewal" (Yixin She 一新社 ). In the following year they applied to the local
magistrate for official support of the Society’s public lecturing activities. In the
petition, the Society points out the important educative function of its public
lectures, carried out by carefully chosen "speakers" (jiangsheng 讲生 ), among
whom we find such respectable persons as the eighth rank button bearer Lin
Sheng 林陛和 the "Confucian apprentices" (tongsheng 童生) Guo Ezhi 郭鶚
志, Xu Zhankui 許占魁, Gao Sheng 高昇, and Chen Bingheng 陳秉衡. However, the speakers seem to have experienced difficulties in upholding
their audience's discipline. The petition complains that during the lectures,
"the one wants to remain silent, while the other wants to chat," and asks the
magistrate to give an official mandate to the speakers so that they may rely on
the Imperial court’s power to enforce order and exert a beneficial influence on
the people. The magistrate acceded to the request within ten days of its
submission, stating that the people of Penghu "should know that proclaiming
the Sacred Edict and expounding morality books serves to admonish people
to do good, and benefits individuals and families. It is your duty to gather and
listen respectfully, to receive [the teachings] reverently and carry them out
with determination. Under no circumstances must you chat and make noises,
or you will be subjected to official inquiry." 6

6 The petition and the magistrate’s response are reproduced in Song Guangyu 1995:12-13.
It is significant that besides the official *Sacred Edict*, the public lectures also expounded upon “morality books”. What morality books were they? The 1892 edition of the “Gazetteer of Penghu county” (*Penghu xianzhi* 澎湖縣志) mentions that public lectures treated the “Amplified Instructions on the Sacred Edict” (*Shengyu guangxun* 聖誥訓), the “Tract on Action and Response” (*Ganying pian*), and the “Essay on Secret Virtue” (*Yinzhi wen*)—stock texts for those concerned with public morality. In 1891 the Yixin She set up as an organizational subunit the “Hall of Taking Joy in Goodness” (*Leshan Tang* 樂善堂), which was to devote itself exclusively to spirit-writing, producing new morality texts, presumably for use in the Society’s public lecturing activities; the texts composed between 1891 and 1903 were collected and published as one of the earliest spirit-written morality books produced in Taiwan, entitled *Selected Novelties of Enlightenment* (*Juewu xuanxin* 覺悟選新).  

Let us pause here and reflect upon the significant features of this early spirit-writing cult. First, its founders were lower degree holders and “students”, i.e., members of the local literate elite. Second, they combined public lectures, for which they received an official mandate from the county magistrate, with spirit-writing, which strictly speaking was an illegal activity under Qing rule. Third, spirit-writing was used to generate morally exhortatory texts which were fed back into the public lecturing system.

It seems that in the declining years of the Qing dynasty, the official public lecture system deteriorated on Taiwan as much as it did on the

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mainland. The resulting gap was filled by associations of public-minded local literati, who would hold their own lecture assemblies. These “societies” (she 社) did not necessarily practise spirit-writing. They could rely on a large stock of ready-made morality books and other exhortatory texts, such as the “New Edition of the Complete Book for Public Lecturing” (Xinbian xuanjiang daquan 新編宣講大全), a collection of moralistic stories with such uplifting titles as “filial impiety receives its retribution” (wuni shoubao 忌逆受報), “different retributions for good and evil” (shan’e yibao 善惡異報), and “good retribution for honouring the stove god” (jing Zao meibao 敬灶美報). The “Society for Complete Renewal” was such a private public lecturing association, as was the “Society for the Permanence of Blessings” (Fuchang She 福長社), founded in 1884 by a group of Xinzhu 新竹 literati. In addition to these benevolent societies, zealous individuals and professional storytellers would also conduct public lecturing sessions. These usually took place in a central public space, such as in front of a temple, where a provisional “shrine” (tan 坛) or “platform” (tai 臺) was erected, in front of which those willing to listen would sit on benches and stools, sipping the tea gratuitously provided.

Moral instruction was a religious activity in itself and was embedded in a ritual procedure, which would often involve sacrifice to deities. It was only a small step from worshipping the gods to establishing communication.

9 The edition in my possession, published 1976 by Ruicheng Shuju 瑞成書局 in Taichung, contains a preface by the “Knight of the West Lake” (Xihu Xiahan 西湖侠漢) in Hankou 漢口, dated 1908. According to the preface, this is a reprint of an earlier collection. Public lecturing manuals have been the topic of a recently completed Ph.D. thesis (cf. Chen Zhaonan 1992).
10 Song Guangyu 1995:16.
11 Illustrations of two public lecturing platforms are reproduced in Song Guangyu 1995:5-6.
12 Cf. the description of the Qunying Tan’s public lecturing ritual in the preceding chapter.
links, in the form of spirit-writing, with them. We have seen this happen, when within the “Society for Complete Renewal” the “Hall of Taking Delight in Goodness” was established. Around the same time, local literati were engaged in similar activities in Yilan county, in the northeastern corner of Taiwan proper. Here, in 1891, the “Hall for Renewing the People” (Xinmin Tang 新民堂) was completed. The most prominent member of this spirit-writing cult was a juren 舉人 and retired official by the name of Li Wangyang 李望洋 (1829-1901), who also wrote a preface to the group’s first collection of planchette texts, the Inscribed Vessel for Warning the World (Jingshi panming 警世盤銘), published in 1891. Here again we find evidence of official support: the magistrate of Yilan county contributed a preface to the Inscribed Vessel. It demonstrates the orthodox character of these early spirit-writing cults that officialdom obviously did not consider the Qing legal code’s explicit prohibition of spirit-writing applicable in these cases, and not only tolerated their activities, but actively endorsed them.

The Hall for Renewing the People was not the only spirit-writing cult in the Yilan area. In the year of the Inscribed Vessel’s publication, three more collections of planchette texts came out: the Golden Book [Containing] Records of Goodness (Shanlu jinpian 善錄金篇) published by the “Hall for Awakening the World” (Xingshi Tang 醒世堂); the New Book of Strange Dreams (Qimeng xinpian 奇夢新篇) by the “Hall for Examining the People” (Jianmin Tang 鑑民堂); and the Essay for Calling Awake [the People] (Hexing

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13 The following is based on Wang Jianchuan 1996b.

14 The term “inscribed vessel”, literally “inscription on a bathtub”, is an allusion to a passage in the commentary to the Great Learning (Daxue 大學), where it is said that Tang, the founder of the Shang dynasty, possessed a bathtub (pan 盤) inscribed (ming 銘) with an admonition to daily moral renewal. This is then linked to the renewal of the people (xinmin 新民), a project claimed as its own in its name by the Xinmin Tang. Cf. Legge 1982, vol.1, p.361.
wen 喚醒文) by the Moxin Studio (Moxin Zhai 末信齋). We do not have much information on these cults, but what we know points to their gentry character: the Moxin Zhai evolved out a scholar's studio (shuzhai 書齋), while the Jianmin Tang, founded in about 1887, was attached to a private Confucian academy, the Dengying Shuyuan 登瀛書院.\textsuperscript{15} Wang Jianchuan, in his study of the development of spirit-writing cults in the Yilan area, concludes that the spirit-writing cults appearing during that time in Yilan were "mainly frequented by literati."\textsuperscript{16} This pattern of cult foundings by local gentry members continued into the Japanese period. An important spirit-writing cult in Yilan county stems from this period, the "Hall for Awakening [the People]" (Huanxing Tang 喚醒堂). In 1895, a certain Wu Chunlin 吳春麟 had converted his own studio into a spirit-writing hall, which he called Huanxing Tang. When this building was destroyed in the fighting ensuing upon the Japanese occupation of Taiwan, a new hall was established in 1896. In the same year, the group attending this temple published its first book, the Compassionate Boat for Saving the World (Dushi cifen 渡世慈帆);\textsuperscript{17} a prominent cult member, the jinshi 進士 Yang Shifang 楊士芳 wrote a preface to this volume.\textsuperscript{18}

So far we have discussed two early cult centres, one on the Penghu islands, the other in Yilan county. The Yixin She was highly influential on the Penghu Islands and was involved in the foundings of all subsequent phoenix halls there.\textsuperscript{19} However, apparently it did not play a major role in the

\textsuperscript{15} Wang Jianchuan 1996b:175. This phoenix hall produced in 1890 the probably earliest spirit-written book on Taiwan, the Lanshu shanlu 福書善錄.
\textsuperscript{17} Wang Jianchuan 1996b:176.
\textsuperscript{18} Wang Jianchuan 1996b:177.
\textsuperscript{19} See Ishii 1992 on the development of phoenix halls on Penghu.
Phoenix hall movement on Taiwan proper, except perhaps in some areas of southern Taiwan. Unfortunately, the history of southern Taiwanese phoenix halls has largely been left unstudied so far and therefore I shall have to exclude this area from my historical outline, which will focus on the development of phoenix halls in northern and central Taiwan. And for these areas we again have to return to Yilan county as one of the earliest locations of spirit-writing activities. As already mentioned, the earliest known phoenix hall in the area, the Jianmin Tang, had been founded in 1887, the same year that the Yixin She was revived in Magong. The Jianmin Tang wrote its first spirit-written book in 1890, i.e., one year before the Yixin She founded its spirit-writing subsidiary, the Leshan Tang, in Magong. The Yilan county phoenix halls served as inspiration, both directly and indirectly, for phoenix hall foundings in various parts of northern and central Taiwan.

When an epidemic struck the Xinzhu area in 1899, for example, the Hall for Awakening dispatched a group of members there, with the mission to expound the *Golden Book for Warning the World* (Jingshi jinpian 警世金篇), copies of which were given to temples and to individuals of some learning. In the same year, under the direction of three disciples of the Hall for Awakening, the "Hall for Proclaiming Transformation" (Xuanhua Tang 宣化堂) was established in Xinzhu. Still in the same year, disciples of the Xuanhua Tang founded the "Hall for Admonishing and Transforming" (Quanhua Tang 勅化堂, later renamed Zanhua Tang 贊化堂, "Hall for Aiding in Transformation") in Xinzhu county. Again, disciples of the Huanxing Tang from Yilan were involved in the establishment of the new hall.20 The Xuanhua Tang meanwhile unfolded a vigorous spirit-writing

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activity, producing in the year of its founding its first book, the *Immortals' Elixir for Saving the World* (*Jishi xidan* 濟世仙丹).21

Another pattern of the founding of phoenix halls appears in the case of the Hall for Enacting Loyalty (*Xingzhong Tang*) in Danshui. In 1899 two men from Danshui visited the Huanxing Tang and discussed the founding of a phoenix hall. This was accomplished later in the same year and the new hall was given the name *Xingzhong Tang*. Here local men from Danshui, wanting to found a phoenix hall, apparently travelled to Yilan to get practical advice on how to go about it. Similarly, in 1902, a group of local gentry members decided to set up a spirit-writing cult in Zhushan (present-day Nantou county 南投縣) and requested a temple name from the Xuanhua Tang in Xinzhu. They were given the name *Keming Gong* and a medium was trained by the Xuanhua Tang. When the training remained unsuccessful, two teachers from the Bixia Gong in Yilan were invited to Zhushan, who eventually succeeded in training a medium for the Keming Gong.22

It was probably a common pattern for the establishment of a phoenix hall to have a group of local elite members take the initiative to set up a phoenix hall and then approach an already existing hall for advice and instruction. Wang Zhiyu 王志宇 describes a formal ritual procedure by which a branch hall (*fentang*) defines its relationship with its “mother hall” (*mutang*). This involves presenting a formal petition to the gods at the mother hall for permission to set up the branch hall. When permission has

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been given (through the mother hall’s spirit-writing), two lanterns and sacrificial fruits are presented to the mother hall. In a ceremony called “acknowledging the mother [hall] by hanging up the lanterns” (renmu guadeng 認母掛燈) the two lanterns are suspended in the mother hall’s main sanctuary. Next the prospective medium and other functionaries of the new hall are dispatched to the mother hall to undergo training in spirit-writing, liturgical procedures, scripture recitation etc. The mother hall also is responsible for “opening the eyes” (kaiguang 開光) of the branch hall’s god images. Then these images and some incense ash from the mother hall’s burner are taken back to the new hall, where the mother hall’s planchette medium performs the inaugural séance. From then on the branch hall can perform its own séances. Although a division of incense is involved in the ceremony (i.e., the taking of ash from the mother hall’s incense burner), Wang Zhiyu stresses that this process of filiation is quite different from the fenxiang 分香 of territorial temples, and he calls this procedure “lamp transmitting system” (chuandeng xitong 傳燈系統).23

As far as I am aware, Wang Zhiyu is the first scholar to describe this procedure of “transmitting lamps;” he obtained this information through the oral testimony of a functionary of a Dounan 凤凰 hall and it is not at all clear at what time and in what areas this procedure was or is customary. It is my impression that hierarchical relationships of filiation are much less important among phoenix halls than among territorial temples. This is probably due to the fact that each phoenix hall obtains its legitimacy by way of direct communication from the gods and thus does not need to legitimate itself by claiming derivation from another, older and more powerful phoenix

hall. Accordingly, questions of historical filiation are not very important to phoenix disciples and relevant documentation tends to be scarce. It is also for this reason that no hierarchical pilgrimage system such as exists among territorial temples has developed among phoenix halls, making the investigation of hall filiations yet more difficult.

Attempts to link all of the early Taiwanese phoenix halls genetically to either the Penghu or the Yilan centres have not brought about satisfactory results and that may not simply be due to a lack of documentation. For example, Paul Katz convincingly refutes Wang Jianchuan's claim that the Taipei area “Palace of Guidance” (Zhinan Gong 指南宮) was established by division of incense from the Yilan county Huanxing Tang, arguing instead that the Zhinan Gong grew out of a cluster of phoenix halls active in the Taipei-Muzha-Jingmei area. Katz, however, does not address the question of these halls’ provenance.24 Building on new research, Wang Zhiyu also rejects attempts to trace all Taiwanese phoenix halls back to a couple of seminal centres. Instead, he argues, many phoenix halls were established separately, the initial idea for each having been brought back to Taiwan from the Chinese mainland by travelling merchants and examination candidates. Wang has studied a Zhanghua county 彰化縣 phoenix hall named Sanxing Tang 三興堂 which he claims is the ancestor of a large number of phoenix halls in central Taiwan, including ultimately the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang. This case shows some of the complexities facing any attempt at historical reconstruction of lines of filiation: According to the oral testimony of an old Zhanghua county planchette medium, the Sanxing Tang is ultimately derived from Fenghua village in Putian county 莆田縣奉化庄, Fujian

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province, from where a spirit-writing cult was transmitted in the early Daoguang years (1820s) to a temple called "Grotto of the Immortal Master" (Xiangong Dong 仙公洞) in the northern Taiwanese port town of Jilong 基隆. From there this transmission supposedly percolated slowly south leading in the last years of the Xianfeng period (early 1860s) to the founding of two phoenix halls in the Zhanghua area, the Yuyi Gong 玉依宮 and the Guangshan Tang 廣善堂. From these eventually originated the Sanxing Tang. This account is highly interesting in that it postulates the introduction of a line of spirit-writing cults to Taiwan several decades prior to the Puquan She in Penghu. As Wang Zhiyu points out, however, this account is highly problematic. Oral testimonies and written records from the Yuyi Gong and the Guangshan Tang suggest that they were founded much later than the alleged "last years of the Xianfeng period." According to this evidence, spirit-writing in the Yuyi Gong began in the early Japanese period after a local man had witnessed the procedure in Xiluo 西螺 (Yunlin county 雲林縣). The Guangshan Tang was only founded in 1901, after having requested the images of the Three Benevolent Lords (San Enzhu 三恩主) from another phoenix hall in Taizhong county. The latter hall, called Jiangdao Tang 江道堂, in turn had been founded in 1891 and traced itself back to a hall in Miaoli county 苗栗縣 whose spirit-writing cult had been transmitted there in 1882 from Zhangzhou 彰州 (Fujian province).25

I do not want to further burden the reader with such intricate details. Let us summarize what the (imperfect and still evolving) current scholarship allows us to say about the nineteenth century Taiwanese phoenix halls. First, phoenix halls were initiated by members of the local elite, including officials,

merchants, and teachers. Second, these men usually sought the assistance of already existing phoenix halls either on Taiwan or on the mainland in establishing their own halls. Third, the ostensible purpose of spirit-writing halls was to “admonish to transformation” (quanhua 劝化) by transmitting the teachings of the gods, a mission frequently summed up in the phrase taken from the Book of Changes, “establishing the teachings by means of the Way of the gods” (yi shendao she jiao 以神道設教). Fourth, while the Puquan She on Penghu was already founded in 1860 and future research may turn up evidence for even earlier cults elsewhere on Taiwan, the historical record indicates that a boom in phoenix hall foundings began in the late 1880s and continued well into the early years of the Japanese period.

What prompted this boom? Partly it was a carry-over from the flurry of spirit-writing activity on the Chinese mainland in the second half of the nineteenth century, which accompanied the massive processes of sociocultural change and dynastic decay of the period (cf. chapter 1). We have seen that at least for some early Taiwanese cults we can document a direct derivation from mainland phoenix halls, mainly in Fujian province. Wang Zhiyu suggests that merchants and students visiting the mainland may in many cases have imported spirit-writing to Taiwan. In other cases such as the Yilan county phoenix halls where we are not sure about their provenance, it is known that they maintained connections with the mainland. For example, most (if not all) of the early shanshu spirit-written in Yilan were printed and published in Fujian province, by printing shops and temples in Amoy, Quanzhou, and Zhangzhou.26 Thus there existed enough exchange between Taiwan and the mainland to make it plausible that the Taiwanese phoenix

hall movement at the end of nineteenth century was inspired by the religious fervour prevalent among mainland cults at the time.

In addition, local conditions provided fertile ground for phoenix halls. The forces of change felt on the Chinese mainland did not go unnoticed on Taiwan. Due to its exposed position, Taiwan was especially vulnerable to the designs of the Imperialist powers, and the Taiwanese elite was acutely aware of the Chinese empire's weakness vis-à-vis these powers. In 1884 the governor of Fujian, Liu Mingchuan 劉銘傳 (1836-1895), had to defend Taiwan against an invasion by French forces that succeeded in capturing the northern port town of Jilong. These events convinced both the court in Beijing and Liu Mingchuan of the necessity of strengthening Taiwan. In 1885 Liu was appointed governor of Taiwan, with a mandate to modernize the island and its defenses.27 Only ten years later Taiwan was ceded to the Japanese, who continued Liu Mingchuan's efforts much more forcefully and successfully, building roads, railways, and telegraph lines. Late nineteenth century Taiwan thus gradually ceased to be a backwater of the Chinese empire and was directly affected by the social and political changes gripping China at the time.

The Taiwanese elite, besides being influenced by the mood of religious fervour on the mainland, thus was able to observe the passing of the traditional order in their own home communities. Their concern is expressed in the juren Li Wangyang's (1829-1901) preface to the Xinmin Tang's first spirit-written book, the Jingshi panming:

... in the renshen 壬申 year [1872] I had been asked to fill an official function in Gansu. In the summer of the yiyou 乙酉 year [1885], on my

27 On Liu Mingchuan's efforts in Taiwan see Chu 1963.
return to my home county, I had occasion to observe the state of the
times at my leisure. I came to realize that though the scenery of this
land is still beautiful, the moral feelings of its people are very different
from those of the past. Now, I have been born here, grew up here, and
all my relatives are here. Although I wield no political authority,
nevertheless I often think of changing [the people’s morality]. I will not
speak of “Tortoise Mountain impeding the state of Lu,” and will not
merely cry out, “whatever can be done?!.”28 Now that we face the
imminent advent of the end of the age, the gates of Heaven have
opened again. We have received the command of the Heavenly
General Ma 馬天將 and have been favoured by the Benevolent Master
Li of the Thunder Department 恩 主 雷 部 李, on whom has been
conferred an imperial decree to descend into the world to relieve it by
means of the flying phoenix. In the flower [= second] month of the
geng 庚 year [1890], our group practised spirit-writing provisionally in
the house of the Jiang 蒋 family. Soon the people of the town and the
rural districts came in droves to request judgments. Because the Jiang
family’s house was of only humble proportions, we thereupon built
the Hall for Renewing the People at a central location in the town of
[Yi]lan. ...
Respectfully written after washing his hands by the corrector and
general manager Li Wangyang, the former department magistrate of
Hezhou 河州 in Gansu 甘 肅, on an auspicious day in the flower
month of the xinmao 辛 卯 year of the Guangxu reign period [1891].29

While this passage demonstrates Li Wangyang’s great concern for the state of
his times (he even has premonitions of an imminent “end of the age,” mojie
末 災 ), it also shows that the Xinmin Tang fulfilled functions that went
beyond relaying the high moral teachings of the gods to the people. The
“judgments” requested by so many people refer to the god’s pronouncements
on personal problems put to their decision by local believers. And indeed,
while hitherto we have only discussed the moralistic-reformist aspect of
Taiwanese spirit-writing cults, expressed in their production of morality
books and their public lecturing, a cult’s long-term survival probably

28 A reference to a zither lyric (Guishan cao 龜 山 操 ) ascribed to Confucius, in which he decries
the ruler’s infatuation with beautiful women as a menace to the state of Lu.
depended to a considerable extent on its successful provision of practical ritual aids for the resolution of life crises. In the case of late nineteenth century Guangdong, we saw spirit-writing cults spring up as providers of efficacious prescriptions and charms during local outbreaks of bubonic plague. Similar practical concerns have played a significant role in the development of Taiwanese phoenix halls. In accounts of the founding of early phoenix hall we frequently find references to epidemics. E.g., in 1895 the Yilan phoenix hall Huanxing Tang was set up in his study by a certain Wu Chunlin 呉春麟 in response to a situation characterized by “local chaos, a lack of instructors, rampant epidemics, and a dearth of good physicians.” We have seen above that the same Huanxing Tang used the occasion of the 1899 epidemic in the Xinzhu area to encourage the founding of new phoenix halls there. Of another Yilan phoenix hall, the Kanxing Luantang (“Kanxing [Street] Phoenix Hall”, 坎興鸞堂), founded in 1896, it is reported that ...

... following its opening after the fifteenth day of the fourth month, those seeking healing and inquiring after affairs followed closely on each other’s heels. There was no case that was not penetrated in its minutest details. Within three months a lot of people had been saved and relieved. In autumn, in the last third of the seventh month, a further imperial mandate was received [ordering the Kanxing Luantang] to continue [its activities] by creating morality texts and disseminating them to admonish the world. For twenty days the sages and perfected ones wrote one after the other and then the book was completed. As it describes both purgatory and the heavens, it is named Golden Needle for Ordering the World (Zhishi jinzhen 治世金針), with the alternative title Emphasizing the Three Powers (Zhongshi sancai 重視三才).31

Here we have a case of a phoenix hall that apparently was first founded to provide healing and oracular services and only later came to include morality

book writing in its ritual programme.

2.2 Phoenix Halls in the Japanese Period

One particular healing service was to produce a veritable boom of phoenix hall foundings: a cure for the opium habit. At the beginning of the Japanese period, about 170,000 to 180,000 opium addicts lived on the island, making up about 6.5% of the total population. At first the Japanese colonial government was undecided as to what to do about the opium trade. There were calls for its radical prohibition and even for the deportation of all opium addicts to the Chinese mainland. Eventually, however, a gradualist approach was adopted. The sale of opium was made a government monopoly and the drug was to be sold at fixed prices to certified addicts only. It was hoped that through these controls the spread of opium addiction could be stopped and present addicts could gradually be cured. Within a short time, however, the opium monopoly became a major revenue source for the colonial government, whose anti-opium zeal then lessened considerably.

In the sixth moon of 1897 an opium addict named Peng Shuzi 彭樹滋 of Shuqilin jie 樹杞林街 (modern Zhudong) travelled to a spirit-writing hall in Guangdong province, where he had heard the gods helped to cure people of their addiction. After achieving a successful cure, Peng Shuzi returned to Taiwan, where he recounted his experiences to Peng Dianhua 彭殿華. The latter was very impressed and decided to set up a similar facility in Shuqilin

32 The following account follows mainly the researches of Wang Shiqing [1986] and Wang Jianchuan [1996b].
He invited a planchette medium from one of the Yilan phoenix halls to come to Shuqilin jie and cure local addicts by spirit-writing. As the Yilan medium was not familiar with the method, however, the attempt failed. In 1898, Peng Dianhua sent someone to Guangdong to invite a spirit-writing team to Taiwan. A five-man team arrived and in 1899 Peng Dianhua established a phoenix hall in his own house, where the Guangdong spirit-writers practised their healing craft. As a result several dozen people, including Peng Dianhua himself, were healed of their addiction. Soon these private quarters became too small and the cult moved into the temple of literature (wenmiao 文廟) in Jiuqionglin 九芎林莊, a village whose headman had himself been healed. This phoenix hall, called the Hall of Restoring Goodness (Fushan Tang 復善堂), specialized in curing the opium habit and was said to have successfully healed more than two hundred people. The Guangdong spirit-writers taught their method to several people before returning to their home province later in 1899. This marked the beginning of what is referred to in the literature as the "opium quitting movement" (jieyan yundong 戒煙運動). The movement spread quickly to other phoenix halls and new halls were founded to satisfy the growing demand for cures by opium addicts.

What was the method used to cure addicts? A good example of the process are the following six rules for curing opium addiction decreed on 14 July 1901 by the deity Lingying Hou Fang 瑞應侯方 for the Yixin She Leshan Tang in Penghu:

1. In front of the altar a large porcelain jar [filled with water] is to be set up. On the next day at the mao 卯 hour [5-7 a.m.] the wooden lid is to opened to harmonize the elixir. From the third day on, those with a [sincere] mind are allowed to request to drink from it.
2. All supplicants must in a loud voice make a vow in front of the
altar, saying that from now on they will with a steadfast mind and sincere intentions quit smoking opium. For the rest of their lives they shall not relapse. Should they change their minds and again smoke opium, they are willing to suffer Heaven’s and the gods’ punishment. A functionary of this hall shall supervise these proceedings, while another is to be solely responsible for recording the society affiliation and names [of the supplicants]. Only then are they allowed to take up the divining blocks.

3. Whenever people ask for charm sand and sweet dew water, a functionary of this hall specifically charged with this task shall distribute them in order of the supplicants’ arrival, so that there may be no confusion.

4. Whenever charms and water are to be harmonized, all disciples are to come, recite the Mind-Seal Scripture of the Honoured Buddha Puxian 普賢尊佛心印經 seven times, and then transform it by burning.

5. All who quit their opium [addiction] must at the same time bring along their smoking utensils and hand them over after having made their vow in front of the altar. After they have completely quit [their habit], they can thus avoid constant craving leading to a new renewed addiction. Two functionaries of the hall charged with the task record the complete receipt of the smoking utensils and publicly break them in front of the altar, so that they cannot be used any more. On another day [the instruments] are conveyed to the seashore where they are given over to the ocean, so as to bar any further suffering.

6. If any person who through this society has made a vow to quit smoking [opium] does not abide by it until the end of their lives, give up halfway, and smoke opium again, thus betraying the Sagely Thearch’s mind of compassion and the perfected ones’ earnest admonishments, Heaven will not forgive them. When the gods notice [this lapse], they will punish the person according to [the retribution stipulated in] the vow. Be careful! Follow the interdictions! Do not regard this as child’s play!33

On the same day, the deity Marshall Zhang (Zhang Yuanshuai 張元帥) also revealed a “marvellous prescription with ten components for quitting opium” (duanyan miaofang shiwei 斷煙妙方十味):

A large slice of steadfast mind;
A complete amount of patience;
Remove all worries from your mind;

Throw out all smoking instruments;
Keep reciting the Mind-Seal Scripture at any time;
Take the pill of sexual abstinence, one every day for forty-nine days;
Lock up the mind-monkey;
Fetter the thought-horse;
Eat vegetarian food (no restrictions on the amount);
Refrain from uttering even half a sentence of mischievous words.\textsuperscript{34}

This healing method was not of the "miracle cure" variety, but was a genuine therapy. It worked by bolstering the addict's will power through the performance of symbolic acts (vows, breaking of the opium pipe as symbol of addiction), the provision of a support group in the shape of the phoenix hall's gods and human disciples, mind-focussing activities such as scripture recitation, purifying practices such as the ingestion of efficacious charm-water and the abstention from meat and sexual intercourse, and, finally, the threat of supernatural retribution in the case of any backsliding. It is not quite clear what role spirit-writing played in the process, but possibly the charms used were produced by means of the planchette and the "sweet dew water" was transformed through being touched with the planchette.\textsuperscript{35} Also, where the Leshan Tang used divining blocks to ascertain the gods' acceptance of the supplicant's vow, other halls seem to have produced spirit-written messages.\textsuperscript{36}

It turned out to be a viable therapy for many addicts. The anti-opium movement had its heyday between 1899 and 1901. Wang Shiqing detected what he thinks is a clear reflection of the movement's success in Japanese records of the period. He quotes statistics that indicate for Tainan county (in

\textsuperscript{34} Quoted in Wang Shiqing 1986:126. Such metaphorical "prescriptions" for moral reform are a common form in the morality book literature. For another example see Eichler 1892:504.

\textsuperscript{35} In the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang, liquids are infused with numinous power by passing the planchette over the container.

\textsuperscript{36} Cf. Wang Shiqing 1986:126.
its Japanese period definition) a total of 64,929 opium addicts for July 1901. Of these, 14,754 quit the opium habit in the following two months. Even though 5,311 had suffered relapses by September of 1901, almost ten thousand addicts were successfully healed in a short time. It is not clear to me how trustworthy these figures are and whether they can be conclusively related to the therapeutical efforts by phoenix halls. What seems clear, however, is that around the turn of the century a noticeable effort was under way to free people from their addiction and that phoenix halls played an important part in this effort.

This did not endear them to a colonial government that saw its income from the opium monopoly drop by almost a third in the year 1901. The phoenix halls' role in the anti-opium movement added to the government's distrust of these religious organizations which it viewed as implicitly anti-Japanese in sentiment. This view was not mistaken: with the school system becoming increasingly Japanized, phoenix halls played a significant role in keeping alive the classical Chinese language (Hanwen 漢文) that was the key to traditional culture and thus helped preserve a Chinese identity in the face of colonial oppression. In many cases we find that the leading functionaries of Japanese period phoenix halls were Qing dynasty degree-holders and school teachers, men with a strong vested interest in the classical culture. The prominent involvement of local elite figures in phoenix halls caused the Japanese administration to be careful in dealing with them. In July of 1901, a secret order was issued to the local Japanese administrators to "dissuade" phoenix halls in their jurisdiction from further activities and to stop their spread to other places. Although it was acknowledged that under the present circumstances an all out and open prohibition of these religious bodies was
not advisable, the order expressed the hope that an approach of "earnest dissuasion" would lead to factual prohibition. The ground for these efforts had been laid earlier that year by the establishment of a systematic surveillance of phoenix hall functionaries. Wang Shiqing quotes the example of Yang Fulai 楊福來, a Taipei county school teacher (shufang jiaoshi 書房教師) who had travelled to Amoy on the Chinese mainland in July of 1899. There he purchased morality texts such as the Scripture for Illuminating Sageliness (Mingsheng jing 明聖經) and the Essentials of Public Lecturing (Xuanjiang jiyao 宣講集要). On his return to Taiwan, while still continuing to work as a teacher, he established a phoenix hall and healed people of their opium addiction. He was taken under close surveillance by the secret police; for example, a report survives detailing Yang’s every activity on a trip to Dongshi 東勢(near Taizhong), where he visited a kinsman.37

A few days after the secret ordinance had been issued, the administration of Taizhong county issued a public proclamation expressing its view that it was superstition to try to break the opium habit by drinking so-called "divine water" (shenshui 神水) and that a sudden, radical abstention from opium was detrimental to an addict’s health. The people should not be confused by superstitious talk. A similar proclamation was issued on the Penghu islands, combined with a formal prohibition. In Taipei county the Japanese police convened meetings of local leaders and achieved the closure of most phoenix halls in this jurisdiction by the end of 1901.38

Working largely from official Japanese sources, Wang conveys the

impression of a vigorous campaign of prohibition against phoenix halls. In actuality, however, the suppression of phoenix halls was not as effective and widespread as his account implies. For example, Wang recounts that the Hall for Practising Loyalty (Xingzhong Tang 行忠堂) in Danshui was closed by the authorities on 18 August 1901 and converted into a school (shufang).\textsuperscript{39} However, Wang Jianchuan’s list of Japanese period spirit-written shanshu includes three books written at the Xingzhong Tang in 1902,\textsuperscript{40} suggesting that the cult’s closure had been only temporary and that it was back in operation within a few months.

Another prohibition was decreed in 1908\textsuperscript{41} and a severe government crackdown on phoenix halls occurred in the aftermath of the 1915 “Xilai An incident.” The latter “incident” was an anti-Japanese uprising centred upon the Tainan phoenix hall Xilai An 西來庵. The rebel leader Yu Qingfang 余清芳 used the planchette to legitimize his actions and predict their inevitable success. The rebellion was put down amidst considerable bloodshed, but it served to remind the Japanese of both the anti-Japanese propensities of phoenix halls and the potential of spirit-writing to be used to legitimize anti-government action.\textsuperscript{42}

Despite these intermittent waves of persecution, however, phoenix halls were never completely suppressed during the Japanese period. It is true that the Japanese measures did show some effect. If we use the number of known spirit-written morality books produced by Taiwanese phoenix halls as a measurement, we can observe that the most active years of the anti-opium

\textsuperscript{39} Wang Shiqing 1986:115.
\textsuperscript{40} Wang Jianchuan 1995a:181-182.
\textsuperscript{41} Jordan & Overmyer 1986:33.
movement (1899-1901) registered great increases in the number of new spirit-written morality books. In 1899 nine books were produced, in 1900 eleven, and in 1901 twenty-one. These three years thus saw the emergence of more than a fifth of the total number of shanshu known to have been produced between 1890 and 1945.\(^{43}\) In 1902, i.e., in the year following the 1901 persecution, productivity began to diminish: while in that year fifteen books were still written, in 1903 there were only seven, in 1904 three, in 1905 three, and in 1906, 1907, and 1908 one each year. No new books are recorded for the next three years. From 1912 on we can witness a gradual revival of shanshu-writing activities, which was interrupted for two years after the Xilai An incident. The years 1918 to 1938 record a modest, but steady output of new shanshu. This largely came to a halt in the years 1939 to 1943, at the height of the government’s Japanization policy (kōminka 皇民化). In 1944 and 1945, near the end of World War II, with Japanese control gradually slipping, the number of morality books began to rise again.

The number of books written is not a perfect measurement: Wang Jianchuan’s list which I have used includes only those books that have survived until today (a total of 184 works). Also, many phoenix halls did not write any books, but focussed on providing oracular services; consequently their activities are not reflected in these figures. Still, they give a general impression of the ups and downs of the fate of phoenix halls under Japanese rule, which shows that periodic government campaigns against them caused phoenix halls to cease their activities or even disband temporarily, but that they tended to continue where they had left off as soon as government pressure eased.

Phoenix halls in the Japanese period had to negotiate a space on Taiwan’s religious landscape with a colonial government both suspicious of these cults’ affirmation of a Chinese cultural identity and eager to coopt the local elites patronizing them. This relationship probably took different forms in different localities, and periods of relative toleration alternated with phases of persecution. Persecution brought about a temporary scaling down of phoenix hall activities, but the tradition was never ruptured and phoenix halls remained active in different areas of Taiwan throughout the Japanese period.

An important internal development that began during the Japanese period was the formation of a denominational consciousness among phoenix halls. While each phoenix hall was an autonomous unit and there did not exist a hierarchy among halls, they did share many commonalities in organization, teachings, sacred texts, and liturgy. In 1917, a term entered circulation that was to become the general name for the common religious system shared by a large number of Taiwanese phoenix halls: “Divine Teachings of the Confucian Tradition” (Ruzong Shenjiao 儒宗神教). Apparently, the Hall of the Completion of Wisdom (Zhicheng Tang 智成堂) in Sanzhi 三芝 (Taipei county) was the first phoenix hall to use this term to describe its own system of beliefs and practices. This term was adopted by Yang Mingji 楊明機 (1899-1983), a highly influential phoenix hall leader and planchette medium of the Japanese era, in his efforts to standardize phoenix hall doctrine and liturgical practice.44

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44 The following according to Wang Jianchuan 1996b.
Born into a Christian family, Yang Mingji was an unlikely candidate for mediumship. According to Yang's own testimony, his first contact with mediumship came about when in 1914 an effort was under way in Sanzhi to revive the defunct phoenix hall Zhicheng Tang. Yang's father, Yang Yuanzhang, who is described as a "Christian missionary" (Yesujiao chuandaoshi), was approached for a donation for the new temple building. Yang senior, however,

did not believe in things to do with ghosts and deities. He said the descended poetry and prose was all the result of the fact that the mediums were learned men who could easily fake them. If his sixteen sui old son Mingji, who did not know [Classical] poetry or prose, could write poetry by ascending the phoenix, now this could be called authentic.\(^{45}\)

The gods revealed that Yang Mingji possessed the karmic affinity to be a medium. After training for four months, Mingji really was able to write poetry in various classical forms while holding the planchette. On witnessing this, his father gave up his Christian faith, believed in the teachings of the gods, and became the general manager (zongli 總理) of the Zhicheng Tang. The wunderkind Yang Mingji, for his part, was launched on a long career as a planchette-medium.

The term Ruzong Shenjiao, or rather its full version "Divine Teachings of the Confucian School, Dharma Gate for Transmitting the Truth Which Can Continue the Tradition of the Dao" (Ruzong Shenjiao, Daotong Keshao Chuanzhen Famen 儒宗神教道統克紹真傳法門), was first conferred on the Zhicheng Tang by a message from the "Celestial Thearch" (Tiandi 天帝), but was not further explained. Yang Mingji later moved to

\(^{45}\) Quoted in Wang Jianchuan 1996b:189.
Taipei where he helped found the phoenix hall Palace of Assistance in Cultivation (Zanxiu Gong 贊修宮). From this new base he cooperated with the Zhicheng Tang in Sanzhi on a project of compiling a liturgical manual for general use among halls belonging to the Ruzong Shenjiao. This book, called the *Regulations of the Confucian School* (*Rumen kefan 儒門科範*), was published in 1937 and constitutes the first formal attempt to define in an authoritative manner a set of liturgical procedures and a canon common to all phoenix halls. At first, neither the book nor the designation Ruzong Shenjiao found general acceptance. Wang Jianchuan argues that Ruzong Shenjiao in these early years was used only by a limited group of related phoenix halls and in effect only referred to this group, not to phoenix halls in general. It was only in 1978 that representatives of over five hundred phoenix halls decided to set up an association of phoenix halls called “Republic of China Assembly of the Divine Teachings of the Confucian School” (*Zhonghua Minguo Ruzong Shenjiao Hui* 中華民國儒宗神教會), thus formally establishing Ruzong Shenjiao as a general designation for the religious system represented by phoenix halls.

Yang Mingji acted as forerunner in another respect as well. As Wang Jianchuan has pointed out, the books spirit-written by Taiwanese phoenix halls in the 1890’s and early 1900’s were thoroughly Confucian in orientation and largely unaffected by popular sectarianism. The first such traces occur in the *Golden Rope Awakening to the [Correct] Road* (*Juelu jinsheng 覺路金縄*), a book written by Yang Mingji in 1934, where reference is made to the mainland Chinese sects Daoyuan 道院 and Daode Xueshe 道德學社. With the years, these influences became stronger. The liturgical manual *Rumen*

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Kefan included the *Esoteric Scripture of the Limitless* (*Wuji neijing* 無極內經), a text recorded between 1907 and 1921 by a spirit-writing cult in Xichang 西昌 (Sichuan province). The *Esoteric Scripture*, basically an extended commentary on the Confucian classic *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸), was printed and distributed by the Yunnan chapter of the sectarian society *Tongshan She* 同善社.

In sum, Yang Mingji played an important role in giving phoenix halls in particular in northern and central Taiwan a denominational identity, transforming them from spiritualist clubs of local literati principally concerned with public morality into more fully developed religious institutions, which began to experiment with traditions beyond the pale of their predecessors' Confucian conservatism.

### 2.3 Post-War Developments

This trend was to continue after the retrocession of Taiwan in 1945. Once the restrictive policies of the colonial government had gone, new phoenix halls sprang up all over the island.\(^{47}\) It is difficult to give concrete numbers, as there is no separate category for phoenix halls in the official statistics. However, we may again use the number of published morality books as a general indication of development trends. After the unproductive years of the *kōminka* movement, morality book production picked up

\(^{47}\) In the words of a *shanshu* published in 1951: “In the autumn of the *yiyou* year [= 1945] China shone forth again and joy extended over the whole nation. Everywhere in Taiwan shrines of goodness were opened.” (quoted in Wang Jianchuan 1996a:9)
gradually in the last two years of the war. In 1945 six new shanshu were written and in 1946 seven. In 1947, the year of the bloody repression of Taiwanese protests against mainlander domination, the figure dropped to four, but rebounded to thirteen in 1948. For the next six years (and for most years ever after) the output stayed in the two-digit range, a first high point marked by the twenty-one books written in 1952, matching the year 1901, the crest of the anti-opium movement, in productivity.

The post-war development of phoenix halls has not been studied comprehensively so far and it would go beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt such a study. I will content myself with describing some general trends before zeroing in on the micro-history of the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang.

One important development is that with the political reunification of Taiwan with the Chinese mainland and the following establishment of the exiled Nationalist government in Taipei, new religious influences came to the island that were to have profound consequences for many arenas of religious life there. There was the influx of Christian missionaries expelled by the Communists; there were learned Buddhist monks coming to de-Japanize Taiwanese Buddhism and raise its intellectual level; also fleeing from the Communists, there was the Celestial Master, leader of the Zhengyi 正 school of Daoism, who took up residence on the island. The most significant religious import for Taiwanese phoenix halls, however, were planchette-using sectarian societies, foremost among them the “Way of All-Pervading Unity” (Yiguan Dao 一贯道). The Yiguan Dao was one result of the fusion of the Xiantian Dao sectarian tradition with literati spirit-writing cults that was
described in the previous chapter. Thus it should come as no surprise that the arrival of the Yiguan Dao attracted the curiosity of some adherents of the Taiwanese representatives of these two root traditions, namely on the one hand the so-called “Vegetarian Religion” (Zhajiao 齋教), consisting of the three branches Longhua Pai 龍華派, Jintong Pai 金幢派, and Xiantian Dao, and on the other hand phoenix halls.

The early interaction of phoenix halls with the newly arriving Yiguan Dao can perhaps be illustrated by the post-war activities of the aforementioned planchette medium Yang Mingji. Ever eager to explore new lines of religious thought, he soon came into contact with the Yiguan Dao. Yang’s base of operations, the Zanxiu Gong in Taipei, had been closed down by the Japanese authorities. In 1947 Yang Mingji was part of a group of phoenix disciples who reestablished the Zanxiu Gong in the Ershui district 二水鄉 of Zhanghua county. Yang Mingji again served as the new Zanxiu Gong’s planchette medium and apparently he remained with this phoenix hall for his remaining active years. He still travelled much, cooperating as medium with a number of phoenix halls in central Taiwan. It was probably in 1952 or 1953 that through the introduction of Lin Shuzhao 林書昭, the converted chairman of the former phoenix hall Chongxiu Tang 憲修堂 in Douliu 斗六 (Yunlin county), he came to know Han Yulin 韓雨霖, the leader of the Yiguan Dao’s Fayi branch 發一组. These contacts allowed Yang to familiarize himself with Yiguan Dao doctrines and it is therefore no coincidence that in

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48 See “Caituan faren Ershui Zanxiu Gong yan’ge 財團法人二水贊修宮沿革,” in Taiwan simiao quanjì, p.27. Song Guangyu [1996:311] states that the Zanxiu Gong was founded as a branch temple of the Chongxiu Tang after the latter had been converted into a fotang in 1951. This version differs greatly from the Zanxiu Gong’s own official history, which I believe to be the more probable version. Song does not give any evidence for his account, but it is probably based on interview data with Yiguan Dao officials.
his 1956 book *Liuhe guiyuan* 六合歸元 Yiguan Dao terminology is present in the form of references to the "universal salvation of the three categories of beings" (*sancao pudu* 三曹普度) and to the Venerable Mother of the Limitless (Wuji Laomu 無極老中, with the "mother"-character written sideways, in Yiguan Dao fashion).49

Another channel for the transmission of Yiguan Dao doctrines to phoenix halls was the circulation of spirit-written texts produced in Yiguan Dao "Buddha halls" (*fotang* 佛堂). A relatively early and widespread spirit-writing book, which gives a quite complete exposition of Eternal Mother mythology and soteriology from an Yiguan Dao perspective is the *Daozhong jingming* 道鐘警明. This book was spirit-written in 1960 in the Daoyi Gong Zhishi Tang 道一宮至釋堂 in the Linbian District 林邊鄉 of Pingdong county, a temple belonging to the Andong branch 安東組 of the Yiguan Dao.50 The book has since then been reprinted in many places and is nowadays a common sight on morality book shelves in Taiwanese temples.

Relations between phoenix halls and the Yiguan Dao were not free of conflict, however, conflicts that arose from competition for members and different views on the status and legitimacy of phoenix halls. Phoenix halls were irritated in particular by the Yiguan Dao's claim of representing the Way of Prior Heaven (*xiantian dao* 先天道), while at the same time relegating phoenix halls to the (inferior) Way of Posterior Heaven (*houtian dao* 後天道).

49 There exists some disagreement as to whether Yang Mingji was initiated into the Yiguan Dao or not, with Wang Jianchuan affirming and Wang Zhiyu rejecting the suggestion [Wang Jianchuan 1996b:192; Wang Zhiyu 1996b:10]. The Mingzheng Tang's chairman Zhang Yunchang* alleges that it was an established missionary practice of the Yiguan Dao to try to proselytize leading phoenix disciples and then to convert their phoenix halls into Buddha halls (Wang Zhiyu 1996c:293).

50 Song Guangyu 1983:205.
Yiguan Dao doctrine conceives of the cosmos as tripartite, consisting of the phenomenal realm (xiangtian 象天, the world inhabited by human beings and ghosts), the ethereal realm (qitian 氣天, the heavens ruled over by the deities of the popular pantheon), and finally the principle realm (litian 理天, the primordial paradise governed by the Eternal Mother). In its own view, the Yiguan Dao alone has received the celestial mandate to grant access to the principle realm by means of transmitting the Dao of Prior Heaven to its initiates. Phoenix halls, through their spirit-writing, have access only to the deities of the ethereal realm; their method of cultivation, focussing on the accumulation of merit, is part of the Way of Posterior Heaven and allows the adept at best to attain divine status within the ethereal realm. This does not count as true salvation in the Yiguan Dao’s view, however, as the ethereal realm will perish along with the phenomenal realm in the coming apocalypse.

As can be imagined, many phoenix halls did not take kindly to the Yiguan Dao’s belittling of their mission’s validity. Yang Mingji himself, in spite of his close contacts with the Yiguan Dao, decried the slander heaped upon phoenix halls by some Yiguan Dao functionaries; he never quit the “Ruzong Shenjiao” he had helped found, but tried to get the Yiguan Dao and phoenix halls to cooperate.51 These frictions demonstrate that phoenix halls were not “swallowed” by the Yiguan Dao, but largely maintained their identity as a separate religious tradition. The relations between phoenix halls and the Yiguan Dao, however, varied greatly from case to case. Some halls actually were “swallowed,” including Yang Mingji’s Zanxiu Gong in Ershui, which by the time of Wang Jianchuan’s visit there in 1995 had become an

Yiguan Dao fotang. Most, however, maintained themselves as independent entities integrating Yiguan Dao influences to varying extents.

There were attempts to unify the island's phoenix halls under umbrella organizations. This may in part be seen as a continuation of Yang Mingji's and other phoenix disciples' efforts to institute a formalized system of practice and creed for all Taiwanese phoenix halls. However, though it is difficult to prove conclusively, I would hold that the attempts on the part of phoenix halls to better define their teachings and their specific characteristics were also motivated by the need to draw a line between themselves and planchette-using maternist sects. A clear corporate identity was important to phoenix halls both in order to compete with the Yiguan Dao on the religious market and also as a measure of protection against government intervention. In the public eye spirit-writing had acquired a heterodox aura by its association with the proscribed Yiguan Dao and even though phoenix hall and Yiguan Dao liturgies are structurally quite different, there were enough similarities (including the practice of spirit-writing as such and the ceremonial gowns worn by the participants) that a casual observer might confuse a phoenix hall for an Yiguan Dao fotang. These similarities sometimes created trouble for phoenix halls. Jordan & Overmyer cite the example of the Hall of the Wondrous Dharma that disbanded after being subjected to a police investigation acting on a denunciation of the Hall as an Yiguan Dao cell.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{52} 1986:91-92. This confusion in the public's mind persists until the present day. Phoenix halls have not been very successful in building a corporate identity. Among the general population the term luantang is not widely known. For most persons uninvolved with phoenix halls, "Yiguan Dao" is the first association that comes to mind when they see blue-gowned men and women attending a spirit-writing séance. As I was able to witness at the Mingzheng Tang, this applies even to friends of phoenix disciples. When brought along for the first time to some festivity of the Mingzheng Tang, it has to be patiently explained to them that no, this
One attempt to establish an umbrella organization was made in 1968, when an association of phoenix halls under the name “Taiwan Provincial Assembly of the Sagely Teachings” (Taiwan Sheng Shengjiao Hui 台灣省聖教會) was founded. In its charter the Assembly deplored the inability of the Sagely Teachings to compete effectively with Buddhism, Daoism, and imported religions, of whom Catholic and Protestant Christianity are specifically mentioned. The Assembly’s objective was to restore traditional moral norms, bring about peace and harmony, and contribute to the task set by president Chiang Kai-shek of preserving the national essence and reviving Chinese culture. This was to be achieved through the guidance of the gods, under the unifying banner of the worship of Guan Sheng Dijun. The Shengjiao Hui was formally registered with the provincial government in 1969. After a short period of hectic activity, it seems to have quickly scaled down and become practically defunct. A second attempt in 1978, the already mentioned establishment of the “Republic of China Assembly of the Divine Teachings of the Confucian Tradition” was not much more successful in the long run. It was probably the autonomy of each phoenix hall and its legitimation through its own oracle, which had already precluded the establishment of a hierarchical pilgrimage system, that now thwarted any attempts to establish an island-wide representative leadership for phoenix halls.

A kind of halfway position between phoenix halls and the Yiguan Dao is represented by the Compassion Society (Cihui Tang 慈惠堂). The principal deity of the Cihui Tang, the Golden Mother of the Jasper Pool (Yaochi Jinmu

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is not an Yiguan Dao temple, but a phoenix hall. This usually has to be followed up by a lengthy exposition on what a phoenix hall is and does.

53 Luanyou 1:19.
瑶池金母), first manifested herself in 1949 in Hualian through the mouth of a medium, who had fled to the area from Zhejiang province on the Chinese mainland. Though this man claims never to have heard of Yaochi Jinmu in Zhejiang, the mainland fusion of spirit-writing cults with maternist sectarianism exerted a strong influence by way of the already mentioned nineteenth century *Golden Basin of the Jade Dew*, which became the main source of mythology for the new cult. It was extremely successful, establishing by 1979 a network of close on 200 branch temples all over Taiwan (and two in Japan).\(^5^4\) This is the first Taiwanese instance of a spirit-writing cult wholly devoted to the propagation of the maternist gospel.\(^5^5\)

To sum up: The post-war period is characterized by the founding of many new phoenix halls and the arrival of new religious traditions from the mainland. Among the latter, of greatest significance for phoenix halls were planchette-using sectarian societies such as the Yiguan Dao, the Tongshan She, and the Daoyuan. The Yiguan Dao was the most successful mainland sect to be transplanted to Taiwan and was soon recognized by phoenix halls as a kindred organization. Relations between the Yiguan Dao and phoenix halls were shaped by the rival forces of competition and cooperation. Competition with the Yiguan Dao was an important driving force in attempts to define more clearly a distinctive set of beliefs and liturgical practices for phoenix halls and to unite them in national umbrella organizations. Cooperation took the shape of the adoption of Yiguan Dao deities, mythological themes, and terminology by some phoenix halls. An important point of contact between

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\(^5^4\) Jordan & Overmyer 1986:135.

\(^5^5\) I keep my references to the Cihui Tang fairly short as there already exists a detailed English language account of this movement by David K. Jordan and Daniel L. Overmyer [1986].
phoenix halls and the Yiguan Dao was also constituted by the emergence of a shared pool of members. Many phoenix disciples were initiated into the new sect, but remained active members of their phoenix halls. Some of the complexities of this relationship will come out much clearer when we turn to the history of the Mingzheng Tang, which went through several distinct phases in its relationship with the Yiguan Dao.
CHAPTER 3: HISTORY OF THE WUMIAO MINGZHENG TANG

3.1 Spirit-Writing in Nantou County and the Founding of the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society

The "Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy" (Wumiao Mingzheng Tang) was founded in 1976 by a group of phoenix disciples who had split off from another Taizhong phoenix hall, the "Hall of Sages and Worthies" (Shengxian Tang 聖賢堂). Adjoined to the Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy is a publishing house, the Luanyou ("Phoenix Friend") Magazine Society 鳳友雜誌社, which publishes a formerly fortnightly, but by now monthly magazine (Luanyou), as well as morality books produced by the Hall and from outside. The Phoenix Friend Magazine Society is older than the spirit-writing hall itself, and therefore we should begin our narrative of the cult's development with the founding of this publishing house.

The Phoenix Friend Magazine Society was originally founded in 1969 as an adjunct to the "Palace of Kindness and Virtue" (Huide Gong 惠德宮), a spirit-writing cult in the rural town of Caotun 草屯 in Nantou county. The spirit-writing tradition in Nantou county goes back to the year 1902 when in Zhushan the Kerning Gong was founded by a group of local gentry members,¹ and in Puli the Huaishan Tang 懷善堂 by a wealthy merchant. The Huaishan Tang ("Hall for Harbouring Goodness") was the first Nantou phoenix hall to produce a spirit-written shanshu, the Golden Book Longing to Admonish the World (Huaixin jingshi jinpian 懷心警世金篇), which was printed and

¹ "Keming Gong yan'ge", in Manghai zhigui, p.92; Liu Zhiwan 1961:105-106.
published by a book shop in Quanzhou (Fujian province) in 1903. Other pre-war halls were the Qihua Tang 敬化堂 (1910, Yuchi district 魚池鄉),
Tongtian Tang 通天堂 (1919, Puli), Yuhua Tang 育化堂 (1926, Puli), and the Xiuwu Tang 修悟堂 (Yuchi district). We also find in Nantou county a case of a former private school that metamorphosed during the Japanese period into a spirit-writing hall: the Mingxin Shuyuan 明心書院 (Jiji township 集集鎮).

Although called shuyuan ("academy"), in reality this was a less ambitious institution, more akin to a local "charitable school" (yixue 義 學). The Mingxin Shuyuan was established in the early Guangxu years by the "Relief Society" (Jiji She 濟 濟 社), a gentry led charitable society. Its building was completed in 1885 and included a shrine to Wenchang Dijun, Zhizi Xianshi 制字先師 (= Cangjie 倉頡, the mythical inventor of the Chinese script), and Ziyang Fuzi 紫陽夫子 (= Zhu Xi 朱熹). When in 1902 the Japanese converted the building to a public school and put an end to the religious observances tied to the former "academy," the religious cult reestablished itself in 1908 as the "Hall for Worshipping Virtue" (Chongde Tang 崇德堂) in a new building. The Chongde Tang practised spirit-writing until it was prohibited by the Japanese authorities.7


3 It is not clear whether the Qihua Tang was a phoenix hall from its inception. It produced its first published spirit-written text, the True Scripture of Zhenwu Saving the World from Calamity (Zhenwu jiujie zhenjing 真武救劫真經), only in the last months of the Japanese occupation in 1945.

4 Taiwan simiao quanji 1977:41.


6 Of the latter phoenix hall I have no more information than the fact that in 1936 it wrote a morality book, entitled Golden Book of the Seven Rulers (Qizheng jinpian 七政金篇) Cf. Wang Jianchuan 1995a:191.

7 Liu Zhiwan 1961:169-170. At the time of Liu Zhiwan's investigation, no spirit-writing seems to have been practised at the Chongde Tang. In the early 1970's, however, the Phoenix Friend
A spate of new cults was founded in Nantou county after the war, among them the Pearl Mountain Village cult described in great detail by Gary Seaman. In Seaman's "Pearl Mountain Village", a close intertwining of local politics with cult affairs had occurred, and the phoenix hall served as an organizational focus for one ultimately successful faction in village politics.

One of the numerous phoenix halls popping up all over Nantou county after 1945 was the "Hall of Kindness and Virtue" (Huide Tang 惠德堂). The Huide Tang was founded in the rural town of Caotun 草屯 in 1947 by a physician named Wang Tianci 王添赐, who bought the land that the temple was erected on and bore most of the construction costs. The Huide Tang was devoted to the worship of the "Martial Sage" Guan Sheng Dijun. In 1949 the worship of Confucius, the earth god, Fuyou Dijun, Xuantian Shangdi 玄天上帝, Siming Zhenjun, and Wenchang Dijun was added. The latter four deities together with Guan Sheng Dijun made up a divine quintity known as the "Five Benevolent Masters" (Wu Enzhu 五恩主). In the same year, as an extension next door the Shanxiu Tang 善修堂 was founded, which was devoted to the worship of the city god (Chenghuang Zunshen 城隍尊神). Much of this later extension work was funded by people other than Wang Tianci whose wealth had greatly diminished over the years. Although he lost his position as head (guanliren 管理人) of the Huide Tang, he remained

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regularly carried planchette texts by the “Mingxin Shuyuan Chongde Tang,” indicating a revival in its activities. Another Japanese period example for the conversion of an "academy" into a phoenix hall is the Zhenwen Shuyuan 彰文書院 in Xiluo (Yunlin county) to which in 1934 the phoenix hall Yide Tang 仰德堂 was attached (cf. Guan Huashan 1993:13). A post-war example of an academy turned phoenix hall is the Lantian Shuyuan 蓮田書院 in Nantou township which was taken over by the spirit-writing cult Jihua Tang 成化堂 in 1961 [Guan Huashan 1993:14].

8 See Seaman 1978.
9 Luanyou 1:23.
connected with the temple and in the 1960's donated another substantial tract of land to it which was leased to retail businesses and generated substantial income for the temple. Spirit-writing commenced only in 1961, following a rapid rise in the popularity and the financial means of the cult. This was brought about by the cult's patronage by a number of local merchants, factory owners, and farmers, many of whom had become wealthy in the economic boom of the Nantou county area following the establishment of the provincial government there. In 1964 the Huide Tang and the Shanxiu Tang were formally fused into a single entity, called the "Palace of Kindness and Virtue" (Huide Gong). Plans were drawn up for a new building and construction work began in 1965 with a budget of roughly NT$ 2 million.

It was in this period of the Huide Gong's rapid expansion that the later founder of the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang, Mr. Zhang Yunchang*, came to Caotun. Mr. Zhang* was born in 1916 in the old, traditional port town of Lugang in central Taiwan, where his father made a living as a teacher of Classical Chinese (Hanwen). Although from a quite traditional-minded and traditional-educated background, Yunchang* went through the Japanese public school system and eventually to Japan to study law at Kansai University. After the retrocession of Taiwan, Zhang* worked in Taipei in a series of different jobs, some of them in the judicial administration, others more entrepreneurial in nature. One of the latter ventures, a commercial newspaper, collapsed dramatically when his partner absconded to Hong Kong with most of the capital. Zhang*'s years in Taipei were thus not overly successful and when his wife died in 1962, he was left with a young son and

10 See the biographies of leading Huide Gong members in the first issues of Luanyou.
11 Luanyou 1:29.
no livelihood. At this point, his younger brother, who worked in the provincial government administration at Zhongxing Xincun 中興新村, in Nantou county, offered to help him find work there. So Zhang Yunchang* and his six year old son Zhang Haoce* moved from Taipei to the rural town of Caotun, which is situated conveniently close to Zhongxing Xincun on the one hand and to the city of Taizhong on the other hand. It seems that life in Caotun was not easy either; among other jobs, Zhang* tried to make a living out of publishing a weekly magazine, which however proved to be short-lived. His personal crisis came to a head when he developed a serious illness from which he recovered only, he believed, through the help of the Huide Gong’s gods. This marked the beginning of his involvement with the Huide Gong. He “entered the phoenix” in 1968 and as a highly educated man, who not only possessed a Japanese university degree, but was also an accomplished classical scholar, he was readily accepted by the cult’s merchant leaders. It is also possible that they needed his skills as a lawyer, since at that time the Huide Gong was about to be restructured as a “corporate juridical person” (caituan faren 財團法人), a form of organization at the time very much encouraged by the government.¹² Such incorporation, by imposing clear rules for the financial management of a temple, was intended to make the money side of its operations more transparent to the faithful, the public and, of course, the government, especially its revenue department. Within a temple cult, particularly a well-endowed one, such transparency could also aid in reducing much of the frequent friction about the use and misuse of temple funds. As we shall see, however, in the case of the Huide Gong incorporation did not solve this problem, and infighting reached serious proportions a few years later.

Zhang Yunchang* was soon given a place on the temple’s board of directors and played an important role in setting up the structures of the corporation. He was also the driving force behind the founding of the “Phoenix Friend Magazine Society” in 1969, whose salaried head he became. The Society was formally independent of the Huide Gong (though its offices were located on the premises of the Huide Gong) and was supposed to act as a common forum for all phoenix halls. It was one of the first magazines in Taiwan devoted to the publication and wider dissemination of spirit-written texts and became the prototype for many similar publications founded in subsequent years.\textsuperscript{13} The first issue of the fortnightly \textit{Luanyou} appeared on 1 May 1969, stating the magazine’s charter of Ten Great Aims (\textit{shi da zongzhi 十大宗旨}):

1. Proclaiming and Promoting the Moral Teachings of Confucius;
2. Expounding the Meaning of the Teachings of the Sages;
3. Restoring and Spreading Traditional Culture;
4. Supporting the National Spirit;
5. Encouraging Loyalty, Filiality, Frugality, and Righteousness;
6. Fostering Honesty and Righteousness in Social Customs;
7. Bringing About Social Harmony;
8. Admonishing Everybody to Turn to Goodness;
9. Promoting Charity;

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\textsuperscript{13} It is claimed by many phoenix disciples of the Mingzheng Tang and also by the Magazine Society’s founder Mr. Zhang* that \textit{Luanyou} was the first spirit-writing magazine in Taiwan. It was not completely without precedent, however. Two similar publications started to appear in 1964, i.e., a few years before \textit{Luanyou}. One of them, the \textit{Shanyan wenzhai 善言文摘}, published in Xinzhu, is briefly described by Jordan & Overmyer [1986:307]. The other, a monthly magazine named \textit{Way and Virtue (Daode 道德)} was published in Taizhong City. I am not sure how long this publication lasted, but it was probably already defunct by the time \textit{Luanyou} was founded. Judging from the contents of the issues in my possession, which appeared between 1964 and 1965, \textit{Daode} was an Yiguang Dao publication with a strong emphasis on maternist teachings, including among its articles transcriptions of planchette revelations by various deities. Its page layout shows some similarities to that of \textit{Luanyou}, so that it may have served as a blueprint for the first editions of \textit{Luanyou}; perhaps the example of \textit{Daode} even inspired the very idea of publishing a religious magazine devoted to the dissemination of messages received from the gods.
10. Providing a Communication Link Between Phoenix Friends.\textsuperscript{14}

The magazine was to be distributed free, its costs covered by voluntary donations (NT$2 per copy). Its politically conservative agenda helped the magazine obtain official support: for the first issue, laudatory calligraphies were contributed by such high central government personages as Huang Guoshu (president of the Legislative Yuan) and Xie Guansheng (president of the Judicial Yuan); the latter also supplied the magazine’s title calligraphy, which it still uses today. As further evidence of the magazine’s political orthodoxy, Luanyou editor and KMT-member Zhang Yunchang\textsuperscript{*} opened the first issue with the first instalment of a serialization of Chiang Ching-kuo’s memoirs.\textsuperscript{15}

The remainder of the founding issue was taken up with the first portions of a serialized hagiography of Guan Sheng Dijun, the first part of a commentary on the “Scripture Illuminating Sageliness” (Mingsheng jing), a spirit-written scripture used in the worship of Guan Sheng Dijun, biographies of various Huide Gong members, short articles on moral issues, announcements of activities of various temples in Caotun, two articles on the newly founded “Association of the Sagely Teachings” (Shengjiao Hui), and transcriptions of planchette texts received in the Huide Gong and in the Hall of the Sages and Worthies (Shengxian Tang) in Taizhong City.

Zhang Yunchang\textsuperscript{*} had found a niche for himself, where he could put

\textsuperscript{14} Jordan & Overmyer quote similar mission statements for two other spirit-writing magazines [1986:77-78].

\textsuperscript{15} Fengyu zhong de jingning 風雨中的靜寧 (“Tranquillity in the Midst of Wind of Rain”). Chiang Ching-kuo (jiang Jingguo) was the son and heir-apparent of then president Chiang Kai-shek (jiang Jieshi).
his literary talents and his experience in the publishing industry to good use, while at the same time bettering his economic situation and making valuable contacts. One of these valuable contacts was Zheng Xuanxiang*, the chairman of the Hall of the Sages and Worthies in Taizhong.

Zheng* was a well-to-do stationery merchant who in the 1960s conducted a lot of business with the provincial government administration in Zhongxing Xincun. The road from Taizhong to Zhongxing Xincun passes through Caotun, right in front of the Huide Gong. When one day in 1965 he stopped for the first time to take a look at the temple, he found a spirit-writing séance in progress, and was deeply impressed when the deity, Guan Sheng Dijun, revealed a poem addressed to himself, even though Zheng* did not know anybody in the temple. This divine intervention came at a time of crisis in Zheng*’s private life. Three years earlier, in 1962, Zheng* had set up a private shrine in his home in Taizhong, which he called the “Hall of Sages and Worthies” (Shengxian Tang).16 This was done out of gratitude for the deity Xue Wangye’s protection against a vicious attack by means of black magic. On the altar he installed images of Xue Wangye, Guanyin, Yuanshi Tianzun, and Guan Sheng Dijun. Convinced by personal experience of the power of the gods and supernatural forces, he started out on a path of spiritual cultivation. A number of devotees gradually attached themselves to the shrine, and the congregation soon counted about thirty members. In 1965, however, disaster struck: a fire destroyed his house and the shrine. Zheng* was very depressed by this setback, and it was in this

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16 This name was chosen by Zheng* himself and approved by the gods through the divining blocks. At that time, Zheng* was not aware of the existence of the “Palace of the Sages and Worthies” (Shengxian Gong) in Wufeng (Taizhong county), so the similarity in name is purely incidental [Zheng*’s personal communication].
despondent state of mind that he received in the Huide Gong messages from three deities, the longest among them from the Guanyin of his own Shengxian Tang, assuring him of the gods' commiseration, explaining the fire as an ordeal designed to test his perseverance, and encouraging him to carry on his spiritual calling.\textsuperscript{17} Having regained confidence, Zheng* set about rebuilding his home; on its fourth floor he reestablished the Shengxian Tang and had new deity images carved. Much impressed with the efficacy of spiritwriting, he requested the Huide Gong to send their medium Lin Huaiyi 林懷益 to regularly hold séances in the Shengxian Tang. This request was approved, and thereafter the Huide Gong fuluan team came to Taizhong to conduct séances on every third, thirteenth, and twenty-third of the lunar month.\textsuperscript{18} This marks the beginning of Shengxian Tang’s operation as a spirit-writing cult.

Zheng* kept in close touch with the Huide Gong in Caotun and was persuaded by Zhang Yunchang* to become the principal sponsor of the Luanyou Magazine Society. Zhang*, acting as publisher and director, supervised the day-to-day running of the magazine, while Zheng*, officially the vice-director of the Society, provided most of the funding.\textsuperscript{19} Meanwhile the Shengxian Tang kept attracting new members, and soon its quarters on the fourth floor of Zheng*’s home could not accommodate the crowd of participants any more. Together with Zhang Yunchang*, Zheng* went out to look for a new location for his temple, and eventually rented a house on Fuyin Street 福音街, where the Shengxian Tang moved in early 1970.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{17} The messages he received on that day are reprinted in \textit{Taizhong Shengxian Tang, Wuri Tiande Gong jianjie}:1-2.
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Taizhong Shengxian Tang, Wuri Tiande Gong jianjie}:3.
\textsuperscript{19} Personal communications. See also the impressum in \textit{Luanyou} 1:2.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Taizhong Shengxian Tang, Wuri Tiande Gong jianjie}:3-4.
Zhang Yunchang* was employed as adviser to the Shengxian Tang. Later that year, the Shengxian Tang was ordered through the planchette to start training its own mediums. Two phoenix disciples were chosen as apprentices, and trained by the Huide Gong's medium Lin Huaiyi. The training was completed successfully after 49 days, and the new mediums Wise Stylus (Zhibi 智筆) and Benevolent Stylus (Renbi 仁筆) started to wield the planchette in the Shengxian Tang on every third, sixth, ninth, thirteenth, sixteenth, nineteenth, twenty-third, twenty-sixth, and twenty-ninth days of the lunar month.21

Meanwhile, things in Caotun had started to take a turn for the worse. The Huide Gong had long been plagued by infighting and squabbling. The first issue of Luanyou included an article calling for harmony within phoenix halls. It does not refer to the Huide Gong, but rather vaguely to "some phoenix halls;" however, it is highly probable that the criticism's main target was the Huide Gong. The articles criticizes those phoenix disciples who view their donations to a phoenix hall as an investment from which they expect some return and which gives them a right to have a say in temple affairs.22 Three months later, Zhang Yunchang* wrote an editorial in Luanyou, criticizing those heads of phoenix halls who insisted on spending all donated money on the beautification of their temples without giving to charitable work, thus benefiting society at large.23 More direct criticism of the Huide Gong membership gradually became more frequent in the messages received from the gods, sometimes referring to slack attendance, sometimes to selfish motives of members, sometimes to offences against the ceremonial

22 Luanyou 1:30.
23 Luanyou 7:3.
regulations of the temple. It is difficult to sort out the contended issues; even today a lot of bitterness persists among those phoenix disciples involved in the conflict at the time. What is clear, however, is that central to the controversy was the use (or misuse) of funds. The official completion and opening of the new building of the Huide Gong in January 1970 was an opportunity to once more present unity of purpose and achievement, but the pride of this occasion does not seem to have succeeded in bridging the rifts within the congregation. The permanent friction came to a head in the autumn of 1970. Zhang Yunchang*, being one of the main figures in the dispute, realized that his projects, which centred on a further development of the Luanyou Magazine Society, would not be feasible in the disharmonious atmosphere of the Huide Gong, and decided to throw in his lot with Zheng Xuanxiang*, who until then anyway had provided most of the funding for the publishing house.

3.2 The Alliance with the Shengxian Tang

Zhang*, his son, and his magazine moved to Taichung, and from November 1970, Luanyou was attached to the Shengxian Tang in Taizhong. In 1971, about eight months after Luanyou's move to Taichung, Zhang Yunchang’s* fourteen year old son Zhang Haoce* was apprenticed as the Shengxian Tang's third medium and given the “pen-name” "Valiant Stylus" (Yongbi 勇筆). Yongbi soon turned out to be a natural talent and became the principal medium. The two earlier mediums, "Benevolent Stylus" (Renbi) and "Wise Stylus" (Zhibi), gradually took backstage and eventually ceased their mediumship. The time from 1971 to 1976 were golden years for the
Shengxian Tang whose reputation increased greatly through the inspired writings of Yongbi, publicized across the island by Luanyou.

The writings of Yongbi during this time introduced several significant innovations. For one thing, he pushed the development of the prose form further than it had been taken hitherto in Taiwanese phoenix halls. Traditional luantang have a strong emphasis on poetry as the medium of expression most appropriate to lofty beings such as deities. In Nantou county, the lyrical form of planchette text was very much prevalent in the 1960s, and this also very much was the style of spirit-writing in the Huide Gong. When we leaf through early numbers of the Phoenix Friend, we find that the great majority of revelations received in the Huide Gong and other Nantou phoenix halls was in verse (or at least the great majority of revelations deemed worthy of subsequent publication). Verse is elegant and difficult; instant poetry produced on the spot through the planchette serves to authenticate the message’s divine authorship, as supposedly only gods are able to produce large amounts of formally correct poetry ex tempore. However, though elegant and prestigious, poetry is not the ideal vehicle for the transmission of religious teachings. For one thing, poetical language is ambiguous and often not easily comprehensible; also, the conventions of Chinese poetry tend to introduce a lot of beautiful, but more or less irrelevant imagery into the poems--fanciful metaphors, landscape and setting descriptions, etc.--which sometimes drown out the religious message.

As long as the Huide Gong planchette team performed in the Shengxian Tang, this emphasis on poetry continued in the Shengxian Tang as well. A change occurred, however, after the Shengxian Tang acquired its own
mediums in 1970. Although they were trained by the Huide Gong’s medium Lin Huaiyi, Renbi’s and Zhibi’s writings departed from the traditional verse format, and adopted a more narrative approach. Of the two, Renbi was the more prolific medium; he emphasized two basic forms of revelatory narrative:
- the description of former existences of specific gods and humans, and their relationship to their present state;
- the interviewing of evil and good souls by officials of the netherworld.
Such narrations are very entertaining, easy to understand, and didactically effective. They point out the karmic consequences of good and bad deeds, and illustrate their point with realistic stories about common people, with whom most readers can identify. Poetry had not vanished completely: prose narratives were usually prefaced by short poems, and poetry was still used for conveying laudations and congratulations to humans and deities. But the bulk of the task of “expounding the teachings” (chanjiao 闡 敎) had clearly been taken over by prose narration.

When Yongbi became the third medium of the Shengxian Tang in 1971, he continued his colleagues’ emphasis on prose revelations, but developed this form further. He was intellectually very agile and not content to be a mere moralistic storyteller; while he continued the apparently highly popular karmic stories, he also started to write short essays on topics such as “vast material force” (haoran zhi qi 浩然之氣), “harmfulness of gambling”, “the nine heavens” etc.24 He also experimented with soul-travelling, participating in 1972 together with his divine teacher Nezha in the birthday

24 These were later collected in a series of books, entitled The True Principles of the Sages and Worthies (Shengxian zhenli 聖賢真理), which has been studied by Zheng Zhiming [1988a].
banquet for the Primordial Heavenly Worthy (Yuanshi Tianzun), which was held in Yuanshi Tianzun's celestial Palace of Jade Vacuity. His short Record of Birthday Congratulations in the Palace of Jade Vacuity (Yuxu Gong baishou ji 玉虛宮拜壽記) is an early forerunner of a genre of "spirit travelogues" (youji 遊記) that was to become highly popular in the second half of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s.

It must be pointed out that none of this was completely new. The life-stories of meritorious individuals who after their death were raised to divine status were a common genre in Taiwanese shanshu, known technically as xingshu 行述. The same applies to case-examples of sinful lifestyles and their punishment after death. Such stories were called anzheng 案證. Renbi's and Yongbi's innovation lies largely in the introduction of lively colloquial dialogue into these accounts that previously had mostly been written in the literary language.25 Dialogic structure and colloquial language, however, while novel in Taiwan, had already been features of pre-war spirit-written books on the Chinese mainland. Planchette books produced in the 1920's and 1930's such as the Dongming baoji and the Pantaoyan ji may have served as examples here. They certainly served as inspiration in Yongbi's experiments with spirit-travel and for the whole subsequent fashion of spirit-written youji literature.26

All phoenix halls have the declared function of "proclaiming and transforming on behalf of Heaven" (daitian xuanhua 代天宣化), but Yongbi's innovations certainly made the Shengxian Tang a lot more effective in this

25 For examples of such traditional xingshu and anzheng see Manghai zhigui.
respect than the average traditional-style luantang. Yongbi supplied revelations in different formats (karma story, essay, and poetry) which would appeal to people of different educational background; these were disseminated by the Shengxian Tang’s own publishing organ, the Phoenix Friend, reaching a readership all over Taiwan. In addition, the gods channelled organizational reforms through Yongbi, which were designed to impose a more strict religious regimen on the Shengxian Tang’s phoenix disciples. For example, Yongbi had been acting as medium for barely three months, when the Shengxian Tang’s presiding deity kicked off through him the “Ten Good Deeds Per Month Movement:” each luansheng should perform ten good deeds per month which were to be entered in a book and read out in the Hall on every first of the following month. On the same occasion, the presiding deity also decreed that in the future the Shengxian Tang should spend less time on divining medical prescriptions, but instead use the planchette mainly for its proper purpose, namely, “to expound the teachings and admonish to transformation” (chanjiao quanhua 阐教勸化).27

Yongbi was striving to mould the Shengxian Tang into an efficient and sophisticated religious body. These efforts were rewarded by the gods by conferring on the Hall tokens of their high esteem for it. In 1971, shortly before the cult moved into its new quarters, it was decreed that a number of deities (Confucius, the Primordial Heavenly Worthy, Guanshiyin, and the three mediums’ teachers and spirit-familiars Jinzha 金吒, Muzha 木吒, and Nezha 哪吒) worshipped in the new building should not be represented by appointed meritorious souls, but taken over by their own original spirits

27 Luanyou 64:40.
Furthermore, about nine weeks before the large-scale dharma assembly for the official opening of the new building, a decree was received from the Jade Thearch, conferring upon the Hall of Sages and Worthies the title of a “phoenix hall under direct administration of Southern Heaven” (Nantian zhixia luantang 南天直轄鶴堂). This means that the Shengxian Tang was now removed from the jurisdiction of the territorial deities of folk religion (such as the earth and city god of its location), and made directly subordinate to Southern Heaven. This status emphasized the Hall as the bearer of a celestial mandate to “proclaim transformation on behalf of Heaven” (daitian xuanhua).

A further measure to heighten the Shengxian Tang’s sense of mission was the revelation of a sacred scripture. The Jade Thearch’s Sacred Scripture for Universal Salvation (Yuhuang pudu shengjing 玉皇普度聖經) was revealed in February of 1972, barely two months after the official opening of the new temple building. In the decree authorizing the scripture’s revelation, the Jade Thearch expressed his solicitude for the fate of all living beings, regretted the decline of the Way and the corruption of human minds, both of which developments were responsible for the sorry state of the world. Not being able to endure the plight that living beings were suffering, he had asked the Primordial Heavenly Worthy to write the Jade Thearch’s Sacred Scripture for Universal Salvation in order to awaken and save the world, turn around the wind of depravity blowing through it at present, and resuscitate the moral principles of Confucius and Mencius. He admonished spirits and humans to fulfill their duties in this endeavour and promised rewards on the day of its

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28 Luanyou 64:40.
completion. In his preface to the scripture, the Primordial Heavenly Worthy explained why there was a need for a new scripture in addition to the large numbers already existing:

In the present world there are a thousand scriptures and ten thousand canons. However, their composition is difficult and their meaning profound, so that those of shallow learning often mispronounce characters when reciting and also are unable to completely comprehend the scripture's meaning. Sadly, these circumstances have caused the scriptures of the gods and sages to fall short of achieving their purpose, which is to reform humanity through exhortation. Furthermore, the modern world can compare in no way to the past; there are very few who can understand classical literature. Therefore, when writing a scripture nowadays, one must not disdain a simple and plain composition. Only if it is written in such a way that everyone can recite and read it, and grasp its meaning as well, can it fulfill its purpose.

So the Sacred Scripture was to reformulate the moral principles of Confucius and Mencius in a language comprehensible to modern Taiwanese. For Yongbi, it also was an opportunity to produce a summa of the teachings the gods wanted the Hall of Sages and Worthies to transmit to humanity. These teachings are founded on the four fundamental virtues (siduan 四端) of benevolence (ren 仁), righteousness (yi 義), propriety (li 禮), and wisdom (zhi 智), whose faultless observance would allow the faithful to recover the original perfection of their moral nature (fanpu guizhen 反樸歸真), ascend to Heaven, and escape from the cycle of rebirths; it also would restore the proper order to modern society. Translated into behavioural directives, these ethical qualities enjoin the individual to be pious, honest, filial, caring, frugal, vegetarian, compassionate, pure and forgiving. He or she must not listen to, look at, or utter improper things. He or she should strive to pursue the good and forego evil. This way the individual would build up a store of merit which will bring about blessings in this world, the avoidance or resolution of
calamities, ascension to immortalhood, the salvation of ancestors still in purgatory, and measureless benefits to descendants. The Sacred Scripture was given to the world in his mercy by the Jade Thearch so that humans may awake to these teachings, practise them, and thus attain salvation. It was thus part of the Jade Thearch’s project of the universal salvation (pudu) of humanity.

The Sacred Scripture is a short but concise account of the value and belief system traditionally propagated in phoenix halls. But it also includes one crucial innovation, whose dissemination may have been one of the chief objectives in revealing this scripture: it states that the Mysterious, Efficacious, Lofty Thearch-on-High (Xuanling Gao Shangdi 玄靈高上帝) “on the first day of the first month in the jiazi 甲子 year, assumed governing control of the great canopy of Heaven, succeeding to the imperial throne”. Now, the “Mysterious, Efficacious, Lofty Thearch-on-High” is none other than the Divine Lord, the Sage Guan (Guan Sheng Dijun), the main deity worshipped by Taiwanese phoenix halls, and what is claimed by the Sacred Scripture is nothing less than Guan Sheng Dijun’s ascension to the throne of the Jade Thearch. The “Jade Thearch” thus is not a unique personality, but the name of an office that, according to the Sacred Scripture, is currently held by Guan Sheng Dijun who in this function is referred to by the full title of the “Mysterious, Efficacious, Lofty Thearch-on-High, the Great Heavenly Worthy, the Jade Thearch” (Yuhuang Da Tianzun Xuanling Gao Shangdi 玉皇大天尊玄靈高上帝).

This conception of Guan Di as Jade Thearch is the first indirect

30 Yuhuang pudu shengjing.
reflection of maternist doctrines in the Shengxian Tang’s published writings. In Yongbi’s earliest writings, those produced during his training as a spirit-medium, he already used the title Xuanling Gao Shangdi when writing a birthday poem for Guan Sheng Dijun. This is a deviation from the Huide Gong’s practice where, in 1969, Guan Sheng Dijun was still celebrated in his traditional function as the ruler of Southern Heaven, Wenheng Shengdi 文衡聖帝, and not as Jade Thearch. Considering Yongbi’s creativeness and intellectual agility, it is very likely that the concept of Guan Di as Jade Thearch was first introduced to the Shengxian Tang by him.

Why do I call the appearance of this doctrine an indirect reflection of maternist teachings? Because we find the probably earliest mention of Guan’s promotion in chapter 37 of the Precious Record of Penetrating the Netherworld (Dongming baoji 洞冥寶記), a maternist spirit-written book produced between Winter 1920 and spring 1921 by a group of three planchette cults in Eryuan county 洱源縣 (Yunnan province). This chapter, written in early 1921, records that the incumbent Jade Thearch, after having served for more than 7,000 years, did not feel up to the burden of the Venerable Mother’s renewed drive to save the remaining ninety-two myriad of her children, and requested to be allowed to abdicate. The Venerable Mother granted the request and asked all the immortals to select a new Jade Thearch. Thereupon Guan Sheng Dijun was proposed by the Sages of the Three Religions (Sanjiao Shengren 三教聖人) and accepted by all immortals. It was decided that his ascension to the throne should take place on the New Year’s day of the coming jiazi 甲子 year (5 February 1924). This date was obviously

31 Luanyou 57:14.
32 Dongming baoji, juan 10, chapter 37, p.45.
chosen because the two characters *jiazi* mark the beginning of a new sixty-year cycle, and are thus an appropriate beginning for a new cosmic epoch. In 1924, a thirty-eighth chapter was added to the Precious Record, which describes the actual investiture ceremony, in the course of which Guan Sheng Dijun “by the compassionate command of the Venerable Mother, is promoted to [the position] of August-One-on-High (Shanghuang 上皇),” and given the title “Eighteenth Sacred Ruler of the Azure Canopy, Martial and Wise Heavenly-August Thearch-on-High” (Cangqiong Di Shiba Shengzhu, Wuzhe Tianhuang Shangdi 蓮穹第十八聖主，武哲天皇上帝). 33

Guan Sheng Dijun’s investiture as Jade Thearch, as described in the *Precious Record*, is thus firmly embedded in a maternist context: the Jade Thearch is subordinate to the Venerable Mother, who graciously accepts the incumbent office-holder’s abdication, and confirms the Sages of the Three Religions’ choice for the office, Guan Sheng Dijun, as the eighteenth Jade Thearch. The three spirit-writing cults involved in the production seem to have had close connections with two early Republican sectarian organizations, the “Society of Goodness” (Tongshan She) and the “Moral Assembly of All Nations” (Wanguo Daode Hui), which are mentioned in the book. 34 The Yunnan phoenix disciples commended the work of these two sects and considered their aims identical to theirs, but they did not acknowledge being part of either organization. Rather, they saw their “altars of goodness” (*shantan* 善壇) as separate, though like-minded groups. The strong maternist flavour of the *Precious Record*, however, created enough

33 Dongming baoji, juan 10, chapter 38, p.52.
34 On the Tongshan She see De Korne 1941, Lin Wanchuan 1985, and Wang Jianchuan 1995b. Some material concerning the Wanguo Daode Hui may be found in Yisheng yanxing lu and in Zheng Zhiming 1990:110-112.
common ground with the Society of Goodness, a branch of Great Way of Former Heaven cluster of maternist sects, for it to adopt and reprint the book.\textsuperscript{35}

The same group of spirit-writing altars produced in 1933 another influential book, the \textit{Record of the Immortality Peach Banquet} (\textit{Pantaoyan ji}), which it published in 1934.\textsuperscript{36} This book, a shamanic travelogue to the various realms of Heaven, and in particular the Venerable Mother of the Limitless' (\textit{Wuji Laomu 無極老母}) paradisiacal Jasper Pool, is said to continue the \textit{Dongming baoji} and relate the general salvation in the third cosmic era (\textit{sanqi pudu shouyuan 三期普度收圓}).\textsuperscript{37} It focusses even more on the Venerable Mother, who in her postface expresses her hope that the book may lead people to seek the Great Way of Former Heaven (\textit{Xiantian Dadao 先天大道}). The \textit{Pantaoyan ji} continues the \textit{Dongming baoji}'s story of Guan's investiture as Jade Thearch, and now gives him the title that we find later on appearing only slightly modified in the Shengxian Tang's \textit{Sacred Scripture: Xuanling Shangdi 玄靈上帝}.\textsuperscript{38}

The new myth was echoed in other spirit-written books of the early Republican period. Two of these may actually compete with the \textit{Dongming baoji} for the honour of having been the first to report Guan's promotion: the \textit{Zhongwai pudu huangjing 中外普度皇經} and the \textit{Yuhuang pudu zunjing 玉皇普度尊經}. Neither are precisely datable, but likely were produced in

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{35} The title calligraphy of my edition of the work is signed by the Tongshan She's founder Peng Huilong, alias Shugu Laoren 適古老人. Wang Jianchuan (1996a:215) sees these planchette shrines as closely linked to the Tongshan She.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Pantaoyan ji}, second postface.
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Pantaoyan ji}, first postface.
\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Pantaoyan ji}, prefaces:2.
\end{footnotes}
southwest China in the early 1920's by spirit-writing cults affiliated with the Wanquan Tang 萬全堂 branch of the Xiantian Dao.39 Having originated in the old centre of sectarian and spirit-writing activities, Sichuan and Yunnan, the myth quickly spread to other areas of China and we find references to Guan Di’s new status in many morality books of the 1920’s, 1930’s, and 1940’s. Especially Tongshan She affiliated spirit-writing cults seem to have played an important role in spreading the new revelation and in standardizing “Xuanling Gao Shangdi” as Guan Di’s new title.40 Another important sectarian society of the Republican period, the Sanctuary of the Dao (Daoyuan 道院), also adopted the theme in a scripture spirit-written in Ji’nan 濟南 in 1929, the Xuanling Yuhuang baojing 玄靈玉皇寶經.41

This new myth seems to have been introduced to Taiwan after retrocession. According to Zheng Zhiming’s research, in 1946, a phoenix hall in Nantou county published a True Scripture of the Mysterious and Efficacious Jade Thearch (Xuanling Yuhuang zhenjing 玄靈玉皇真經), which recounts the story, but pushes it back in time several hundred years. Also, the Sages of the Three Religions have become the Masters of the Five Religions (Wujiao Jiaozhu 五教教主).42 In the same year the Daitian Gong 代天宮 in Jilong also wrote a charter scripture for the worship of Guan Di as Jade Thearch, entitled Xuanling Yuhuang baojing.43 The preface to this scripture shows that the participants in this book project were familiar with the 1929 Daoyuan scripture of the same title. Further evidence points to close connections with the Tongshan She which had entered Taiwan after 1945.

Thus, the myth entered Taiwan right after retrocession and was soon incorporated by some phoenix halls.

Yongbi's revelations take this theme up at first only in its broad outlines. The *Yuhuang pudu shengjing* reports Guan Di's investiture on the New Year's Day of the *jiazi* year, and his full title: Yuhuang Da Tianzun Xuanling Gao Shangdi 玉皇大天尊玄灵高上帝. Conspicuously absent is any reference to the Venerable Mother, or to the election process. It seems that the *Yuhuang pudu shengjing's* main objective at this point was to confirm the existing rumour of Guan's promotion, and thus elevate the status of phoenix halls from Guan Gong to Jade Thearch cults. With Guan's ascension, a new scripture for his worship became necessary. The most widespread scripture then in use among luantang, devoted to the worship of Guan Gong, was the *Peach Orchard Scripture of Enlightened Sageliness* (*Taoyuan mingsheng jing* 桃園明聖經), a 19th century spirit-written text which of course does not yet contain any notion of Guan's new status. The *Sacred Scripture* was intended as the charter scripture for the worship of Guan Gong in his new rank.

However, for the time being, this attempt at reforming the belief system of phoenix halls caused some confusion, and in the following year (1973), a text was revealed in the Shengxian Tang which supplied more detail for the story. On 2 July 1973, Sakyamuni Buddha deigned to reveal through Yongbi that 110 years ago the seventeenth Jade Thearch (Xuanqiong Gao Shangdi 玄穹高上帝) retired after his merit was complete. The Founders of the Five Religions were ordered to elect a new Jade Thearch and decided upon Guan Sheng Dijun, who ascended the throne on the New Year's day of

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44 On the *Taoyuan mingsheng jing* see Diesinger 1984.
the jiazi year as the Yuhuang Da Tianzun Xuanling Gao Shangdi. This revelation was given specifically to clear up confusion among humans concerning this matter.45

What is still missing in this account, is any reference to the Venerable Mother. It is said that the Founders of the Five Religions were ordered to elect a new Jade Thearch, but it is not made explicit by whom. Considering the by that time fairly widespread circulation of maternist lore in Taiwan, this omission of any mention of the Venerable Mother’s central role in this myth is significant and may perhaps be tied to the conditions of religious competition in the Taiwan of the 1970s.

Above I had already pointed to the 1969 establishment of the Taiwan Shengjiao Hui as an attempt to unify all Taiwanese phoenix halls in the worship of Guan Sheng Dijun. The Shengxian Tang was involved in these efforts and although the Shengjiao Hui did not prove a success, the motivation behind its founding, uniting Taiwan’s phoenix halls under the banner of Guan Gong, so as to better withstand the onslaught of the religious competition, persisted and was carried on by the Shengxian Tang, which saw itself in the role of vanguard. Yongbi’s revelations concerning Guan Di’s promotion seem to be part of an effort to build a rational and competitive religious system out of the raw materials provided by the traditional phoenix halls. It was to have a clear doctrine (which Yongbi formulated in the Shengxian zhenli essays, in the Yuhuang pudu shengjing and in another scripture revealed in 1972, the Most High’s True Scripture of the Limitless and Primordial Beginning (Taishang wuji hunyuan zhenjing 太上無極混元

45 Luanyou 102:9.
its own sacred scriptures (the *Sacred* and the *True Scripture*), and its own liturgy.

As I described in the chapter on the development of phoenix halls in Taiwan, probably the most significant competitors of phoenix halls after 1945 were planchette-using maternist sects. In this context, the Shengxian Tang's elevation of Guan Sheng Dijun to the position of Jade Thearch is clearly an attempt to create for phoenix halls a high deity able to compete with the Venerable Mother. In order to achieve this aim, it was of course imperative not to recognize the Mother's superiority over the Jade Thearch, as indicated in the original myth. Therefore the Mother's role in Guan's ascension to the throne did not come to be represented in the Shengxian Tang's version of the myth. Also, the Shengxian Tang's account moves the date of Guan's investiture back by one sixty-year cycle, to 1864, instead of 1924, as reported in the *Dongming baoji*. This may be, as Zheng Zhiming interprets it, an attempt to give the event more weight by shifting it further back into the past; it can, however, also be seen as a move to dissociate the myth further from its original maternist version in the *Dongming baoji*.

In the Shengxian Tang further revelations followed, consolidating the new interpretation of Guan Sheng Dijun's status, and working out its consequences. In early 1973, Yongbi began to transmit a new work on Guan

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46 An English translation of this scripture has been prepared by Mr. John Johnson [1994].
47 The latter was a particular concern of the Shengxian Tang's chairman Zheng Xuanxiang*, who in early 1973 requested the presiding deity Guan for permission that a liturgical manual with the title *Rudian dacheng* 儒典大成 be written [Luanyou 92:12]. At the time, this project was postponed by Guan. Zheng* did not lose sight of it, however, and finally, in 1979, the Shengxian Tang published the *Luantang shengdian* 震堂聖典. This manual contained definitions of the purpose and ideal structure of phoenix halls, a set of hall rules, sample memorials for different purposes, a standard liturgy, mantras for chanting, scripture texts (*Taoyuan mingsheng jing, Yuhuang pudu shengjing, Taishang wuji hunyuan zhenjing*), a list of deities' birthday dates, and a collection of "precious appellations" (baogao 寶話) for deities.
Sheng Dijun, the *Wusheng shengji sanzi jing* (*Scripture in Three Character Verses on Sacred Manifestations of the Martial Sage* 武聖聖跡三字經). Here again he was trying out a new literary medium, the three-character didactic text, to produce a summa of Guan Gong lore. At around the same time, the *Phoenix Friend* began to print a commentated version of the Guan Sheng Dijun scripture most widespread among phoenix halls: the *Taoyuan mingsheng jing* (starting in vol. 89).

Yongbi’s Guan Di centred work in the Shengxian Tang culminated in 1975 in the planchette writing of the *True Description of the Heavenly Realms* (*Tianjie chuanzhen* 天界傳真), a systematic description of the structure of the heavenly bureaucracy. This served as a counterpart to an earlier book on the structure of purgatory, published by the Shengxian Tang in 1975, *The Ten Palaces Purgatory* (*Shidian diyu* 十殿地獄). Similar to the *Shidian diyu*—and different from later books such as the *Record of Travels to the Heavenly Halls* (*Tiantang youji* 天堂遊記)—the *Tianjie chuanzhen* is not a shamanic travelogue, but a collection of descriptions given by deities who descended onto the altar of the Shengxian Tang.\(^\text{49}\) This book on the one hand reinforces Guan’s position as the Ruler of Heaven by depicting him seated majestically in his Precious Palace of the Spiritual Empyrean (*Lingxiao Baodian* 經霄寶殿) in Central Heaven (*Zhongtian* 中天). On the other hand, we see here for the first time a systematic development of a “heaven outside the heavens” (*tian wai zhi tian* 天外之天), a supreme realm above and beyond the administrative heavens. It is called Limitless Heaven (*Wuji Tian* 無極天); in Yiguan Dao belief this is where the Venerable Mother resides, an

\(^{49}\) Therefore I do not agree with Song Guangyu’s classification of the *Tianjie chuanzhen* as a *youji* [1993:40].
alternative name for the “Principle Heaven” (litian), promised to all Yiguan Dao believers. In the Tianjie chuanzhen, a Golden Mother does reside in the Limitless Heaven, but she is the Daoist Golden Mother of the West, one of the Five Venerable Ones (Wulao 五老). She resides with the other four Venerable Ones in the Wulao Gong 五老宫, her section being called the “Jasper Pool” (Yaochi 瑤池). There are four other residents in the Wuji Tian: the Three Pure Ones (San Qing 三清), Confucius, and the retired seventeenth Jade Thearch Xuanqiong Gao Shangdi.

The Tianjie chuanzhen’s description of the Wuji Tian seeks to relocate the Venerable Mother in a Daoist context, denying the primordial status accorded to her by the maternist sects. In the section on the Wulao we find inserted an explanatory paragraph, which argues that the real primordial being was Yuanshi Tianzun, the Primordial Celestial Worthy. From him issued forth the Five Venerable Ones. From the subsequent union of two of the Wulao, the Golden Mother 金母 and Lord Wood 木公, eventually sprang forth the ninety-six myriad original spirits. By inserting the maternist theme of the ninety-six myriad original spirits, the Daoist Golden Mother is identified with the Venerable Mother who is thus effectively demoted to a subordinate position.

The True Description was the last book Yongbi wrote at the Shengxian Tang. Its concluding section was written on 31 December 1975. Not even three months later a long smoldering conflict between Yongbi’s father and the Shengxian Tang’s chairman Zheng Xuanxiang* concerning the running and finances of the Phoenix Friend Publishing Society came to a head leading to

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an irreversible split between the two men. Over the years both the Shengxian Tang’s membership and its income from donations had multiplied and eventually it was decided that a more accountable administrative structure was needed. The Shengxian Tang followed the example of the Huide Gong and was restructured in 1975 as a corporate juridical person.\(^5\) Zheng Xuanxiang* tried to use this opportunity to gain greater control over the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society. Although the Society had been associated with the Shengxian Tang since 1971, its director Zhang Yunchang* had taken care to retain effective control over it and had run it basically as an independent entity. Zheng* had long been dissatisfied with this state of affairs, thinking that as most of Magazine Society’s income came to it from and through the Shengxian Tang, he should be given some measure of control. When the Shengxian Tang was incorporated, Zheng* wanted to make the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society formally a part of the new juridical person; Zhang Yunchang* was to be hired as the Society’s director with an adequate salary. In this position he would have been accountable to the Shengxian Tang’s board of directors (and its chair Zheng Xuanxiang*) in all matters concerning the running of the *Phoenix Friend*, including of course its finances. Zhang*, however, was not willing to give up sole control of what he regarded as his brainchild and personal enterprise. He wanted to have nothing to do with the new arrangement and stipulated at a board meeting on 21 March 1976 that if the Shengxian Tang wanted to run the *Phoenix Friend* they would have to buy Zhang*’s rights over the publication for a stated sum of money.\(^52\) The board rejected the price as too high and determined that Zhang Yunchang* and the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society

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51 The temple was registered as a *caituan faren* on 9 December 1975 (*Taizhong Shengxian Tang, Wuri Tiande Gong jianjie*, p.8).

52 The amount given in the minutes of the meeting was NT$ 3 million.
should move out of the Shengxian Tang’s premises by 21 June 1976, i.e.,
within three months.\footnote{Minutes of the Shengxian Tang’s meeting of the board of directors, 21 March 1976.} In the event, Zhang* did not need that much time. With the help of a flock of faithful followers and the assets of the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society, Zhang* quickly founded the Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy (Wumiao Mingzheng Tang) in rented quarters not far from the Shengxian Tang’s location and the first issue of the Phoenix Friend to be published in the Society’s new quarters (vol.169) appeared on 15 April 1976.

3.3 The Founding of the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang and Its Subsequent Development

It is probably no coincidence that the break with the Shengxian Tang occurred shortly after Yongbi had been drafted for military service in early 1976. In the preceding years it had been the gods’ revelations through Yongbi that had kept an uneasy peace between Zhang* and Zheng*. With this mediating agency gone, conflict erupted and resulted in Zhang*’s departure from the Shengxian Tang. His position was precarious, however: Yongbi would be unavailable for the next three years, doing his stint of military service. Although the gods had given him permission to perform spirit-writing on his own in the barracks, the mailed-in revelations produced by Yongbi were not sufficient to keep a phoenix hall together. For one thing, as private revelations they lacked the mysterium of direct and observable communication with the gods which is an important attraction of phoenix halls. Also, these revelations were confined in content to general expositions.
of doctrine or moral exhortation. The second major function of the planchette, namely to provide healing and divinatory services to a faithful clientele could not be provided by an absentee medium. Zhang* tried to meet the demand for these services (in phoenix parlance summarized under the heading "relieving the world", jishi 濟世) by hiring a Daoist practitioner from Puli in Nantou county, who would offer various ritual services at the Mingzheng Tang on nine days in each lunar month.54

At the same time, Zhang* began to raise funds for a new temple building so as to be able to leave the cramped storefront quarters the Mingzheng Tang had to make do with as a sanctuary. A location in the hills to the east of Taizhong, near the village of Dakeng 大坑, was acquired and the ground was broken on 23 October 1976.55 A provisional shrine was opened at the construction site on 3 November, but this proved ineffective in providing any protection when the half-finished temple building was blown to pieces by a typhoon a few weeks later. The project was given up and the Mingzheng Tang continued to share its rented quarters with the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society for the next few years.

As the editor of the Phoenix Friend, Mr. Zhang* had for many years made numerous contacts on the Taiwanese religious scene. These stood him in good stead now that he had to fend for himself on the religious marketplace. Seeking allies for his struggling new phoenix hall, he cultivated relations with a number of phoenix halls that continued to publish their texts

54 Luanyou 171 (1 June 1976): 23. This Daoist was none other than the "Tio sin-se*" studied in the early seventies by anthropologist John L. McCreery. Cf. his Ph.D. thesis "The Symbolism of Popular Taoist Magic" (Cornell University, 1973).
55 Luanyou 182.

However, Zhang* did not limit his field of vision to phoenix halls. He also found an important new ally in the Yellow Thearch Religion (*Xuanyuan Jiao* 軒轅 教), a sect founded in 1952 by the Legislative Yuan delegate Wang Hansheng 王寒生. It was registered as a religion with the authorities in 1957. Wang Hansheng's aim was to rebuild the ancient religion of China, centring on the worship of the ancestor of the Chinese people, the Yellow Thearch. The Xuanyuan Jiao is thus a reconstruction of ancient religious practices in a modern context. However, Wang’s vision was not restricted to reconstruction only. He also aimed at reform, i.e. reform of the religious practices in Chinese, or rather Taiwanese, religion in general.56 For this purpose, a “Temple Committee” (*Shenmiao Weiyuanhui* 神廟 委員會) was founded in 1979, which was open to “god temples” (*shenmiao*) hitherto not affiliated with Yellow Thearch Religion. Once affiliated, it was hoped that educational programmes channelled through the Temple Committee would gradually succeed in ridding the member temples of “superstitious practices” and raise the general level of Chinese popular religion. Its eventual aim was “the unification of Taiwan’s various unaffiliated community temples under the Religion of the Yellow Thearch”.57

The *Phoenix Friend* records the first official contact between the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society and the Yellow Thearch Religion for 19

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August 1976, when a high functionary of the latter, Xiong Qihou, visited the editorial office. It took about a year for the budding relationship to mature, and from about the middle of 1977, Yellow Thearch Religion texts start to appear regularly in the Phoenix Friend, gradually taking up more and more space: essays and speeches by the Xuanyuan Jiao founder Wang Hansheng, a lengthy hagiography of the Yellow Thearch (serialized), the Xuanyuan Jiao’s central sacred text, the “Scripture of the Yellow Thearch” (Huangdi jing 黄帝经) (serialized, with a commentary by Wang Hansheng).

During that time, the Phoenix Friend Publishing Society did not decrease its contacts with other phoenix halls; its new Xuanyuan Jiao affiliation was rather added on to older relationships, which it continued. However, a change in focus is discernible, and when in 1978 a new attempt was launched to unify all phoenix halls in the Zhonghua Minguo Ruzong Shenjiao Hui 中华民国儒宗神教会, the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang did not participate, obviously valuing its involvement with the Yellow Thearch Religion higher than any intensified cooperation with other luantang.

Materially, this cooperation with the Yellow Thearch Religion paid off for the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang, when the long-delayed building project for a new temple got a boost after being redesignated as a Xuanyuan Jiao branch temple. The new temple building was finished in early 1979 and consecrated on 11 February. Its rather lengthy name was: Taizhong Divine Palace of the Yellow Thearch, Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy (Taizhong Huangdi Shengong Wumiao Mingzheng Tang 台中黄帝神宫武

58 Luanyou 177:27.
59 There is little doubt that the alliance with the Xuanyuan Jiao was advantageous for the Mingzheng Tang, though, to be sure, this worked both ways. In his reminiscences the Hall’s chairman Mr. Zhang stresses the great assistance rendered by him to the Yellow Emperor Religion. Cf. Wang Zhiyu 1996c:294.
Its name already hints at its character: it was two temples in one, one a Xuanyuan Jiao shrine dedicated to the worship of the Yellow Thearch, the other a phoenix hall devoted to Guan Sheng Dijun. When the new building was opened, two separate consecration ceremonies were held, one conducted for the Huangdi Shengong by the Xuanyuan Jiao leader Wang Hansheng, and one for the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang led by its chairman Zhang Yunchang. This separation was neatly represented in the temple’s architecture: it consisted of a three-storeyed building, the ground floor being taken up by the offices of the Phoenix Friend Publishing Society, the second floor by the Yellow Thearch Shrine, and the third floor by the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang.

The Yellow Thearch Religion did not approve of “superstitious practices” such as spirit-writing and so for a while fuluan took backstage in the Mingzheng Tang’s calendar of ritual events. However, it never ceased completely. Yongbi kept sending in his spirit-written texts and even wrote two slim collections of stories: the True Cases of Karmic Retribution (Shiren shishi yinguo baoying 資人實事因果報應), recounted by Dizang Wang Pusa 地藏王菩薩, and the True Transmission of Guanshiyin’s Saving from Suffering and Distress (Guanshiyin jiuku jiunan chuanzhen 觀世音救苦救難傳真), treating of Guanyin’s miraculous interventions in the lives of believers. The last instalment of this book in the Phoenix Friend in March 1978 was followed by a long break of more than a year in Yongbi’s revelations. I do not have any direct information on what happened at the time; there is however some indication that Yongbi had struck up some undesirable

60 Luanyou 236:14.
61 Cf. Luanyou 237:title page.
friendships in the army and tended to fill his free time with amusements other than spirit-writing. With his son gone incommunicado, Zhang Yunchang* himself took up the planchette and under the pen-name Moxianzi 墨仙子 ("Master Ink-Immortal") started to act as the Mingzheng Tang's medium. Moxianzi turned out a very prolific and successful medium and spirit-writing gradually became a higher-profile activity again in the Mingzheng Tang.

Moxianzi's first book, entitled The Great Way (Dadao kangzhuang 大道康莊), was spirit-written between April and November 1978. It was formally presented to Heaven on the opening day of the new temple building, after having previously been serialized in the Phoenix Friend. The Great Way resembled Yongbi's writings in its use of the vernacular, but otherwise clear differences in style are discernible. While Yongbi was able to handle prose and poetry, and within the prose genre both expository and narrative forms, his emphasis in his last two books had clearly shifted to the narration of entertaining, moralistic stories. In the writings of Moxianzi, by contrast, the gods preferred to reveal their thoughts in the form of philosophical essays, complete with quotations from the Confucian Classics. The Dadao kangzhuang is basically a collection of essays by different deities on the

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62 Yongbi's reprehensible life-style caused much conflict within the Mingzheng Tang after he started to act as its principal medium again in June of 1979. Ultimately it led to his being stripped of his medium's mandate in 1985.

63 Zhang* claims to have been taught the planchette in his youth by Hong Yueqiao 洪月樵, a friend of his father's. Hong was a well-known local scholar in the central Taiwanese town of Zhanghua in the late Qing and throughout the Japanese period. His bequeathed writings, Hong Qisheng xiansheng yishu 洪棄生先生遺書, do not contain any direct references to any interest on his part in spirit-writing [cf. Wang Jianchuan 1996d:213]. While I translate "Moxianzi" as "Master Ink-Immortal", Mr. Zhang* gives this sobriquet a private meaning: "Moxian" was the sobriquet of his father, and "Moxianzi" therefore means "Son of the Ink-Immortal" (Wang Zhiyu 1996c). I retain my translation as it represents the "public meaning" of this name, while Zhang*'s interpretation would only be known to a few insiders.
Confucian Eight Virtues (bade 八德), interspersed with poems and stories culled from Chinese history and classical literature. Although Moxianzi could write in a narrative mode as well, the scholarly, philosophical mode was to remain dominant in most of his subsequent writings.

Moxianzi was innovative in another important respect as well: it was in his writings that the Venerable Mother made her first appearance in the Mingzheng Tang. Moxianzi’s second book, the *Mind-Virtue of the Great Way* (Dadao xinde 大道心德), revealed from February to October of 1979, was the cult’s first morality book authored by the Venerable Mother, called here Most Worthy Celestial Mother, Venerable Mother of the Limitless (Tianmu Zhizun Wuji Laomu 天母至尊無極老母). The Mother’s preface contains in a nutshell the basic outlines of the maternist myth and the accompanying preface by the Jade Thearch implicitly recognizes the Mother’s higher rank. With the beginning of the *Dadao xinde*’s revelation, a new image of the Venerable Mother was apparently installed for worship in the Mingzheng Tang.

Quite suddenly, we thus come up against an aboutface in the Mingzheng Tang’s relations with maternism. While the Shengxian Tang had carefully constructed an alternative system designed to compete with the maternist soteriology offered by the Yiguan Dao, the Mingzheng Tang now, three years after its separation from the Shengxian Tang, suddenly embraced the Venerable Mother and her myth. Why this sudden change in policy? On

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64 See for example his *Boat of Return in the Vast Sea* (Manghai guizhou 莊海歸舟), written between August 1979 and May 1980. This is a collection of stories concerning Mazu’s rewarding or punishing interventions in the life of ordinary humans.

65 A photo of a Laomu image worshipped at the Mingzheng Tang appears for the first time on the title page of volume 236 of the *Phoenix Friend* (15 February 1979).
this point I can only speculate. The Mingzheng Tang was not exactly a flourishing phoenix hall at the time. Much of its income came to it as a representative of the Yellow Thearch Religion, but Zhang Yunchang* was not willing to integrate his phoenix hall completely with the Yellow Thearch Religion and give up spirit-writing. Thus he probably knew that his alliance with the Xuanyuan Jiao was not going to last and he kept his eyes open for alternative venues of development for the Mingzheng Tang. Throughout the 1970s, the Yiguan Dao had shown dramatic growth and thus its religious programme was definitely something worth taking a second look at, in particular when many phoenix disciples had previously been initiated to this sect. I would thus propose that the appearance of the Venerable Mother marked the beginning of a new marketing strategy on the part of the Mingzheng Tang, trying to attract new members by tapping into the vast pool of Yiguan Dao initiates.66

While the alliance with the Yellow Thearch Religion lasted, however, the maternist theme was developed only very slowly and gradually. In the early 1980’s, however, relations between the Mingzheng Tang and the Xuanyuan Jiao cooled off markedly.67 While there was no open break and the Mingzheng Tang maintained intermittent contacts with the Yellow Thearch

66 I must emphasize that this is informed speculation on my part. More mundane motives behind divine revelations are something that cannot be discussed with cult members to whom divine messages are exactly what they purport to be. Any linking of the gods’ revelations to human ambitions is firmly rejected. My present attempts to link certain revelations to objective conditions of inter-group competition is very much an etic approach that would be unacceptable to the believer.

In his reminiscences, Mr. Zhang* recounts that he was repeatedly sought out by a former phoenix disciple who had become an Yiguan Dao functionary; this person tried to persuade him to join the Yiguan Dao and convert his phoenix hall into a Buddha hall. Zhang*, however, steadfastly refused. Cf. Wang Zhiyu 1996c:293.

67 In his article on the Yellow Thearch Religion, Christian Jochim describes the conflict from the viewpoint of this sect’s leadership (Jochim 1990:18 seq.).
Religion throughout the Eighties, our phoenix hall now began to develop its maternist orientation forcefully and uninhibited by deference to the Xuanyuan Jiao. Around 1982 we notice a sudden burst of maternist revelations, producing a religio-philosophical treatise on cultivating the Way of Heaven (*The Esoteric Meaning of the Way of Heaven, Tiandao aoyi 天道奥義*), a new scripture devoted to the Venerable Mother (*The August Mother of Limitless [Heaven's] Celestial Scripture for Awakening [Her Children], Wuji Huangmu huanxing tianjing 無極皇母喚醒天經*), and a shamanic travelogue describing the Mother's paradise of the Jasper Pool (*Sacred Gazetteer of the Jasper Pool, Yaochi shengzhi 瑤池聖誌*).

While writing the *Tiandao aoyi*, the Venerable Mother had promised henceforth to visit the Mingzheng Tang twice every moon, on the first and fifteenth days. However, it was not until April 1983 that the Venerable Mother made good her promise and that these semi-monthly séances became a regular feature of the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang's liturgical calendar. They have remained so until the present day. The texts received on these occasions were first published in the *Phoenix Friend*; then, when a suitable number had come together, they were collected and published separately in a series of books with the overall title *Imperial Instructions of the Venerable Mother* (*Laomu yixun 老母懿訓*). Of these, six volumes have appeared to date.

A special method of *fuluan*, the "Marvellous Method of the Golden Indicator" (*jinzhi miaofa 金指妙法*), was introduced for séances of the Venerable Mother. Instead of the large planchette and the sand tray, the

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medium here wrote with a red felt pen directly on yellow paper. This is much faster, though less impressive, than the traditional method. Zhang Yunchang* was the first medium to use this divination technique, which requires much less bodily exertion, and thus seemed a more delicate, feminine technique, appropriate for the Venerable Mother.

In addition to her half-monthly appearances, the Venerable Mother also continued to write morality books. Moxianzi channelled two more books by the Venerable Mother before he retired as medium, both of them in the philosophical treatise style typical of his writings: the Secret Storehouse of the Mind of the Way (Daoxin mizang 道心秘藏, completed 1984) and the Book of the August Mother Pointing the Way out of Confusion (Huangmu zhimi pian 皇母指迷篇, completed 1986).

At the same time, mythic identities of leading cult members were redefined. It is not uncommon for leading phoenix hall functionaries to be identified as reincarnations of deities. At first sight this may resemble the sectarian practice of seeing in their patriarchs the incarnations of deities sent down to Earth to bring salvation to humanity. The Yiguan Dao, for example, assigns a divine identity to many of its patriarchs: e.g., the seventeenth patriarch Lu Zhongyi 路中一 is believed to have been the incarnation (huashen 化身) of the Buddha Maitreya and the eighteenth patriarch Zhang Tianran that of Jigong, the Living Buddha (Jigong Huofo 活佛). The phoenix hall practice differs in that incarnation is usually interpreted as the result of a fall from grace: the person in question is revealed to have achieved (usually subaltern) divine office in a previous existence, but then to have committed some offence against the celestial statutes (tianlü 天律).
Consequently, he or she is demoted to human existence, which is explained as a punishment, but also a chance to make good and regain their “reward position” (guowei 果位) in the heavens. The zeal of particularly outstanding phoenix disciples is thus sometimes attributed to a previous existence as a fallen immortal who now strives to reascend the spiritual heights he or she had been forced to leave. In 1972, the Shengxian Tang’s chairman Mr. Zheng Xuanxiang* had been revealed to be just such a fallen immortal: while attending a birthday banquet in the Primordial Heavenly Worthy’s Palace of Jade Vacuity (Yuxu Gong 玉虛宮), Yongbi is told that Mr. Zheng* had been banished to earth for breaching heavenly laws.69 A similar “pre-life history” was claimed for Zhang Yunchang*. This pattern of assigning mythic identities to leading phoenix disciples continued in the newly adopted maternist framework. Yongbi’s mythic identity was revealed in a book channeled through himself between 1980 and 1981. 1,526 years ago, Yongbi was a golden phoenix charged with guarding the Venerable Mother’s peaches of immortality. One day, however, he ate one of the peaches, a crime that was soon discovered: since the peach was not ripe yet, the phoenix could not hold on to himself and passed wind right in front of Taiyi Zhenren 太乙真人 (Perfected Man of the Great Monad), who had come on a visit to the Venerable Mother. The Mother wanted to imprison the phoenix, but Taiyi Zhenren persuaded her to be allowed to take him to his palace and to be charged with his education. 1,500 years later the Mother decided that the phoenix should be given a chance to redeem himself and was reincarnated in the body of Zhang Haoce*, Mr. Zhang Yunchang**’s first son. His former existence as a transcendent being explains his talent as a medium, his desire to save other people and to create the merit for himself that will allow him to

69 Luanyou 69: 9.
return to his “original position” (benwei 本位).\textsuperscript{70}

Several years later a similar story of banishment from the realm of the Limitless was revealed for Yongbi’s successor Mingbi and two other leading members of the Mingzheng Tang.\textsuperscript{71} Aside from serving to explain the religious fervour of leading cult personalities and to bolster their authority, such stories also create a special, personalized connection of the cult with the ultimate realm of the Limitless. They may be viewed as part of a strategy to establish the Mingzheng Tang as the Venerable Mother’s representative on earth.

This special relationship of the Mingzheng Tang with the Venerable Mother was further strengthened by an important innovation: In 1984, the Venerable Mother introduced a new institution to the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang: the “Academy of Limitless Heaven for Realizing the Way” (Wuji Zhengdao Yuan 無極證道院).\textsuperscript{72} This is an elaboration of the old spirit-writing cult practice of saving one’s ancestors by transferring merit to them. I had mentioned that deification is the result of cultivation; this cultivation can be started during one’s lifetime, but must be continued after death. In traditional phoenix writings concerning the underworld, we find that it includes a place called the “Institute for Gathering the Good” (Jushan Suo 聚善所). This is where a meritorious soul is dispatched to upon arrival in the world of the dead; in the Jushan Suo it will devote more time to studying the Way before being given a divine appointment. In traditional practice, remittances of merit to ancestors in purgatory usually did not immediately

\textsuperscript{70} Chudao xinsheng, p.71.
\textsuperscript{71} Penglai xiandao youji, p.194-198.
\textsuperscript{72} Cf. Luanyou 367:6; 368:8-9.
raise them to divine status, but first allowed them to enrol in the Jushan Suo for several years, to add their own efforts at cultivation to the merit given them by their descendants. Only then are they given a divine appointment, usually a low level one such as earth god. From there the soul had to cultivate its way up the ranks—a long journey with an unsure outcome, since not few deities suffer lapses in their process of cultivation and are punished by being demoted or even thrown back into human existence. Having become a deity does not mean one has safely and forever withdrawn from the cycle of rebirths. It is not yet paradise.

The “Academy of Limitless Heaven for Realizing the Way” was established by the Venerable Mother to help particularly meritorious souls skip a few rungs of the ladder, easing their way to the Mother’s paradise. By transferring merit to it, usually in the form of money donations and other meritorious acts, descendants can enrol an ancestor’s soul in the Wuji Zhengdao Yuan. There it will stay for a stipulated amount of time (varying according to the soul’s “roots of goodness”, shan’gen 善根, and merit store from eight to twelve years), devoting itself to listening to lectures on the Way given by deities, reciting scriptures, meditating and generally continuing its cultivation process in a highly conducive environment. In fact, the Wuji Zhengdao Yuan fulfills the same functions for the dead that a phoenix hall fulfills for the living. At the end of the time period, the soul will have to pass an exam before being declared as having “realized the Way” (zhengdao). It will then be appointed directly to celestial office. The ranks of Wuji Zhengdao Yuan graduates vary according to the grades they receive in the final exam, but they never include the lowest or the highest ranks. The low ranks of deities active in the human world, such as earth and city gods, are exactly those the soul is supposed to be able skip by attending the Academy. The
highest rank, that of Golden Immortal (jinxian 金仙), the most perfected being, who resides in the Mother's paradise and is permanently free from the cycle of rebirths, is something that the graduate souls have to keep striving for while filling their celestial offices. Other academies are established in the heavens to further guide them in their cultivation.

Why was the Wuji Zhengdao Yuan instituted in the Mingzheng Tang? From an emic viewpoint, of course, it is an instrument established by the Venerable Mother to facilitate her children's return and a tangible sign of the Mother's respect for and trust in the Mingzheng Tang. In terms of inter-religious competition, however, it can be interpreted as a ritual product designed to compete with similar products in rivalling groups. The Yiguan Dao, for example, offers its members a ritual mechanism for posthumously initiating their ancestors and thus transferring them to the Principle Heaven. The Wuji Zhengdao Yuan seems to be designed as a functional equivalent to this Yiguan Dao institution. Furthermore, it is surely no coincidence that the founding of the Academy was accompanied from the beginning by a drive to construct a new building for it and the Mingzheng Tang. For the first years most inductions into the Academy were paid for by donations towards the building project and the Wuji Zhengdao Yuan certainly appears to have played a major role in raising the necessary funds.

This new institution was established at a point of crisis in the Mingzheng Tang's history. Its membership had been growing for years and it maintained an extremely busy schedule of ritual events. In addition to Yongbi and Moxianzi two more mediums had been trained in 1982. Mingbi 明筆

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("Bright Stylus") and Zhengbi 正筆 ("Orthodox Stylus"); they turned out to be gifted mediums, who helped increase the Mingzheng Tang's morality book output considerably. In 1985, the Mingzheng Tang published seven morality books, the greatest number ever in its history. These had mostly been written between 1983 and 1984. In early 1984, however, Mingbi ceased his mediumship to look after family affairs. In the course of the year, Zhengbi married a fellow phoenix disciple and decided to leave the Mingzheng Tang and set up his own phoenix hall in Shalu 沙鹿 (Taizhong county). To make things worse, Yongbi turned from an asset into a liability for the Mingzheng Tang, when he relapsed into his old ways, spending his time in brothels and gambling dens.

The reader may remember that for more than a year between 1978 and 1979 Yongbi did not perform as a medium. This was the last year of his military service and there are indications that his early inclinations toward a rather dissolute lifestyle took a turn for the worse during his stint in the army. Yongbi's most serious problem seems to have been gambling, with whoring coming in a close second. After his discharge from the army and the resumption of his duties as planchette medium, these problems would not go away, throwing serious doubts on Yongbi's capacity to act as Heaven's mouthpiece and on the validity of the revelations received through him. Again and again the gods and in particular Yongbi's immortal teacher Nezha

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74 In late 1983 a female medium named "Phoenix Stylus" (Fengbi 凤筆) was trained. Her training, however, was not completely successful and she never acted as a regular medium for the Mingzheng Tang. Over the years the Mingzheng Tang also trained planchette-mediums for other phoenix halls. For example in 1982 "Righteous Stylus" 義筆 was apprenticed as medium for the Xietian Tang 協天堂 in Beitou 北投. Some time earlier "Trustworthy Stylus" 信筆 had been trained for the Yixin Fotang 一信佛堂 in Gaoxiong. Both of these phoenix halls subsequently maintained friendly relations with their "teacher hall" (shitang 師堂) Mingzheng Tang and published some of their shanshu with the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society.
scolded him for his immoral conduct. Interestingly, these reproaches were mostly relayed through Yongbi's own spirit-writing, indicating the struggle going on within Yongbi himself between two antagonistic sides of his personality. His immortal teacher Nezha at times seemed to act as Yongbi's moral alter ego, reproaching him and sometimes even punishing him. On one occasion he made Yongbi kneel outside the Mingzheng Tang for the length of time it takes for two incense sticks to burn down. 75 On another dramatic occasion that is still talked about in the Mingzheng Tang today, Yongbi, while in trance, turned the planchette around and with force struck it against his own head several times. Heaven threatened repeatedly to revoke Yongbi's mandate as a medium and to punish him by reincarnating him as an animal, but severe consequences were always averted when Nezha and the Five Benevolent Masters vouched for him and Yongbi himself made declarations of contrition and reform. Yongbi's good intentions, however, never translated into long-term changes of behaviour. During 1984 Yongbi's personal conduct took another turn for the worse; he tried to save the situation by voluntarily entering a forty-nine day period of reclusion to recharge his spiritual and moral energies. 76 This did not have any visible effect, however, and eventually Guan Sheng Dijun handed in a memorial formally requesting the Venerable Mother to close Yongbi's "numinous aperture" (lingqiao 端竅). His mandate to act as a planchette medium was to be revoked for ever, the reason given being that his behaviour recently had been without restraint and that he had lost his ability to act as emissary of the gods. The Mother did not accede to this request right away, but gave Yongbi a last chance by merely cancelling all his merit and requiring him to make a

75 Cf. Chudao xinsheng, p.72.
76 Luanyou 363:6-7.
serious effort at moral reform; otherwise she would permit the punishment proposed by Guan Sheng Dijun to be carried out.\footnote{In a message dated 5 January 1985, see Luanyou 379:6.} These measures, by the way, were not channelled through Yongbi, but through his father Moxianzi, who also transmitted a second message from the Mother two weeks later expressing her deep disappointment with Yongbi and assuring the inevitability of Heaven’s punishment for him.\footnote{Luanyou 380:6.} The general impression among phoenix disciples at the Mingzheng Tang is that with this second message the Venerable Mother effectively withdrew Yongbi’s mandate, barring him from ever again acting as a medium. A close reading of the decree’s text shows that it contained no such formal disenfranchisement, but it did mark Yongbi’s formal break with the Mingzheng Tang and with his father Moxianzi. He never again acted as a medium for this phoenix hall. Instead he seems to have tried to fulfill his long-time dream of a more profitable secular business career -- a dream that did not come true. In late 1987 Yongbi returned to doing the only job he had ever properly learned to do: he founded his own phoenix hall, named Gongheng Tang 拱衡堂, in Fengyuan 豐原 (Taizhong county) and resumed his career as a planchette-medium. There is evidence that he tried to get the Mingzheng Tang to endorse his reinstatement as a legitimate medium; this was, however, rejected.\footnote{Cf. Luanyou 446:4; 447:4-5. When he founded his own phoenix hall, the Gongheng Tang, shortly afterwards (cf. below), Yongbi tried to support its claims to legitimacy by garnering the support of persons connected with the Mingzheng Tang. Ding Qian, a regular and prolific contributor of essays to the Phoenix Friend, started to publish in the Gongheng Tang’s newsletter as well [Gongheng yuexun 拱衡月訊 9:24], and a number of Mingzheng Tang phoenix disciples were actively involved in the Gongheng Tang’s affairs. When a group of six Mingzheng Tang luansheng took part in a Gongheng Tang dharma assembly, it was implied that they were an official delegation from the “friend hall” (youtang 友堂) Wumiao Mingzheng Tang [Gongheng yuexun 13:2,7].} Yongbi went ahead with his new phoenix hall all the same,
modelling it closely on the Mingzheng Tang.  

To return to the year 1984: during this year, thus, the Mingzheng Tang lost two mediums (Mingbi and Zhengbi), a third (Yongbi) became highly unreliable, and the fourth, Moxianzi, was gradually becoming too old and frail to fulfill his duties effectively. At a time when Heaven seemed to be forsaking the Mingzheng Tang the establishment of the Wuji Zhengdao Yuan constituted a divine vote of confidence, a renewing of the cult’s celestial mandate. When in addition early in 1985 Mingbi was prevailed upon to resume his duties as planchette-medium, the crisis was over.

With Moxianzi performing only irregularly after 1986, it was now Mingbi who had practically exclusive control over the planchette. Although he was very versatile, he had just like Yongbi and Moxianzi his own preferences in style and subject matter. The very first book he wrote at the Mingzheng Tang was a collection of moral lessons for children, entitled *Awakening to Enlightened Orthodoxy* (*Mingzheng qimeng* 明正啟蒙, first published in 1983), its character text accompanied by National Phonetic Symbols for easier readability. Mingbi wrote a second book of the same nature in 1983/84, entitled *Guidance for Life* (*Shenghuo zhinan* 生活指南, first

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80 Yongbi’s Gongheng Tang is a sensitive topic at the Mingzheng Tang. Many of the Mingzheng Tang’s phoenix disciples are rather unhappy about its existence and view Yongbi as an impostor. A number of Mingzheng Tang disciples, however, especially younger ones, do not share this critical attitude, but maintain friendly relations with Yongbi. Crucial assistance was given to Yongbi in the early phase of the Gongheng Tang’s existence by the ex-Mingzheng Tang medium Zhengbi who became the Gongheng Tang’s vice-chairman (while continuing to operate his own phoenix hall, the Cishan Tang 慈善堂, in Shalu) [*Gongheng yuexun* 1:6]. The Gongheng Tang has been growing in size ever since its founding in early 1988, publishing first a monthly newsletter (*Gongheng yuexun*, first issue: April 1988), then from 1992 a full-fledged monthly magazine patterned after the *Phoenix Friend* (*Gongheng zazhi* 凤翔雜誌). By the time of my first visits to the Gongheng Tang in early 1994, it was still housed in rather cramped quarters in Fengyuan. A project was already underway, however, to build a new and much larger temple in Dongshi 東勢, a town in Taizhong county.

81 Moxianzi wrote his last morality book, the *Huangmu zhimi pian*, between 1985 and 1986.
published in 1985). His secular profession as a high-school teacher probably played a role in determining this choice of topic. While after that he did not channel any more children's books, a strong proclivity to moral exhortation and didacticism remains typical of his writings. Mingbi shares neither Moxianzi's interest in classical scholarship nor Yongbi's capacity for sprightly dialogue and lively plots. His main concern is everyday morality, a concern that comes to the forefront in all his writings, whatever genre they may be in. Such differences in emphasis become clear when we compare travelogues written by Yongbi with those written by Mingbi. Where Yongbi makes exhaustive use of the possibilities of this genre for dramatic action, frivolous conversation, and detailed depiction of other worlds, Mingbi's spirit-travels serve mainly as vehicles for moral instruction, with action, dialogue, and description of scenery distinctly taking second place. Mingbi's spirit-writings are as staid, solid, and unexceptionable as he is as a person.

After the damage done to the Mingzheng Tang by Yongbi's capriciousness Mingbi's respectability played a major role in calming the waters; with him as a medium the Mingzheng Tang entered a phase of consolidation that was still continuing at the time of my fieldwork. Physically this found expression in the construction of the Mingzheng Tang's new temple building for which a site was chosen in the foothills of Dakeng at the eastern boundary of Taizhong city, not far from the site of the first, ill-fated Mingzheng Tang building project of 1976. Although deemed geomantically favourable, the site was probably chosen mainly for economic reasons: on the one hand land was cheaper in the hills than in the city, on the other hand this part of the hill country was slated by the municipal government for development as a recreation area, supplying the burghers of Taizhong with
amusement parks and a system of hiking trails proximate enough for day excursions. This made the area attractive to temples intent on exploiting the potential of worship tourism. Several large-scale temples were built around Dakeng including the phoenix hall Shengshou Gong 聖壽宮 (“Palace of Sacred Longevity”), which relocated there from its city quarters in 1981. Constructed in traditional style on a grand scale and further embellished with gardens and fountains over the next years, the new Shengshou Gong has become a successful “tourist temple,” located strategically on the main road of the Dakeng “scenic area” (fengjingqu 風景區). The Shengshou Gong’s example may have played a role in the Mingzheng Tang’s choice of location: it is situated in a side valley, right on the road to “Encore Gardens” (Yage Huayuan), an amusement park of island-wide renown. The Mingzheng Tang, however, did not follow the Shengshou Gong’s example of imperial style temple architecture, but opted for an unpretentious three-storey white-washed concrete structure, with two side wings and only minimal embellishments. If there ever had been any plans to tap into the Dakeng tourist business, this building was not likely to achieve it and thus worship tourism never played a role in the Mingzheng Tang’s economy.

The new building was completed in 1988. While the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society stayed in its city quarters, all religious concerns were moved to the new building. Its official name “Wuji Zhengdao Yuan Wumiao

82 “Shengshou Gong yan’ge,” in Taizhong Shengshou Gong luocheng tekan, p.58.
83 At the time of my field research one of the cult’s deputy chairmen expressed his dissatisfaction with the lack of tourists visiting the temple, attributing it to the fact that due to its “Western” architectural style the Mingzheng Tang was hardly recognizable as a temple. From my time of residence in the temple I was able to confirm that very few casual visitors ever came to the temple. At the time plans were already underway to construct a traditional-style entrance gate (pailou 牌樓) at the bottom of the Mingzheng Tang’s driveway, which was completed in late 1994 (cf. photo on the title page of Luanyou 572). I do not know if this has succeeded in attracting more outside visitors.
Mingzheng Tang” indicates the increasing importance of the “Academy of Limitless Heaven” for the Mingzheng Tang. In 1987, about a year before the move to Dakeng, a new scripture, the *Mysterious and Marvellous Scripture of Limitless [Heaven] for Realizing the Way* (Wuji zhengdao xuanmiao jing 無極證道玄妙經), had been revealed by the Venerable Mother’s attendant Jiutian Xuannü 九天玄女 through Mingbi. It was designed for use by and for the Wuji Zhengdao Yuan. The new building provided in its side-wings ample space for the storage and worship of the soul tablets of the ever increasing number of Academy “students.” The Mingzheng Tang’s ritual focus shifted more and more to the Wuji Zhengdao Yuan and its soul-saving function. The spring and autumn dharma assemblies, the Mingzheng Tang’s two biggest ritual occasions in the year, focus on the graduation of Academy students and their appointment to divine office, an event usually attended by the graduates’ relatives. Also, now many of the deities who reveal at the Hall are graduates of the Academy, who come back to pass on some of what they have learned to the community to which they originally owe their opportunity for spiritual progress.

Other developments of the last ten years include the addition of a fourth floor to the temple building which contains a “Precious Palace of the Heaven-Penetrating Numinous Empyrean” (Tongtian Lingxiao Baodian 通天靈霄寶殿). This structure was completed in 1990; it is a terrestrial representation the Jade Thearch’s celestial palace and thus reaffirms the Mingzheng Tang’s commitment as a phoenix hall to the veneration of Guan Sheng Dijun (in his current position as Jade Thearch). This is just one indication that the Mingzheng Tang’s adoption of Venerable Mother worship and mythology has been not a substitution for, but an addition to its other
concerns. These concerns are in a state of constant flux, most recently extending to an interest in the worship of the Earth Mother (Dimu 地母) which has now been added as a new ritual focus to the cult’s liturgical calendar. This was already discernible at the time of my field research when funds were being raised for the carving of a new Dimu image which was set up in late 1994 (after I had already left). The significance of this addition is underlined by the writing of a new scripture devoted to the Earth Mother, the *True Scripture of the Earth Mother’s Universal Transformation (Dimu puhua zhenjing 地母普化真經)*.

A minor crisis occurred when in 1995 Mingbi suffered a stroke. For years the gods, through Mingbi, had refused to train any additional mediums. This had caused dissatisfaction among a number of Mingzheng Tang phoenix disciples aspiring to mediumship. A partial concession had been the training in 1994 of one deputy chairman as a medium exclusively for the application of “numinous healing.” As, however, he was not authorized to perform spirit-writing, he could not challenge Mingbi’s monopoly on the planchette. When the Mingzheng Tang’s spirit-writing was disrupted by Mingbi’s illness, proponents of the training of additional mediums became much more vociferous; even though Mingbi recovered quickly and was soon able to resume his duties, the gods now felt compelled to authorize the training of two new mediums. These, Zhenbi 貞筆 and Yingbi 英筆, also were deputy chairmen and thus drawn from the cult’s inner leadership circle. It remains to be seen how the presence of three mediums will affect the Mingzheng Tang’s future development.
PART II: THE WUMIAO MINGZHENG TANG

CHAPTER 1: ORGANIZATION OF THE MINGZHENG TANG

1.1 Physical and Administrative Structures

As indicated in the above outline of the Mingzheng Tang's history, the cult currently occupies two separate sites, indicating its formal bipartite division into the Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy and the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society. Both are registered with the government as separate entities.

The Phoenix Friend Magazine Society is located in the Beitun District of Taizhong City. It is a normal three-storeyed shopfront building in a row of similar houses in a quiet side street. The ground level contains the Magazine Society's main office; it is here that the Society's full time, part time, and volunteer staff (five to six women) are working, compiling the magazine's new issue, proofreading, answering letters, processing donations, and mailing out morality books and the Phoenix Friend magazine. The building further contains chairman Zhang Yunchang*'s office and storage space for the Society's print products. Mr. Zhang* is the chairman of both the Magazine Society (shezhang 社長) and the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang (tangzhu 堂主) and effectively has total control of both.

Attached to the Magazine Society is a "Committee Guarding the Way" (Weidao Weiyuanhui 衛道委員會). It was established in 1976, shortly after the split from the Shengxian Tang. The stated purpose of the Committee is to
support the work of the Magazine Society. This assistance is effected principally by the payment of an annual membership fee (currently NT$1,500 = approximately C$75). The enrolment of a new member is announced to Southern Heaven by means of a memorial proclaimed and then burned at the Mingzheng Tang. In return, the new member receives a personalized laudatory poem from the Mingzheng Tang’s presiding deity Guan.¹ A special section in the Phoenix Friend is reserved for such poems and messages for the Committee’s membership. Other activities of the Committee include occasional conferences to discuss ways to improve the Magazine Society’s performance, but it should be stressed that the function of the Committee is strictly advisory. It has no influence on the Magazine Society’s conduct of business. Such consultative meetings are rare and play no role in the Society’s policy making. The principal function of the Committee is to provide the Magazine Society with a reliable additional source of income and the temple with an organized body of believers that can be directly approached and mobilized for temple activities such as dharma assemblies and life-releasing assemblies.

There exists another formally autonomous organizational entity, affiliated neither with the Magazine Society nor with the temple. This is a charitable foundation called “Foundation for Welfare and Charity of the Academy of Limitless Heaven for Realizing the Way, Taizhong (Incorporated)” (“Caituan Faren Taizhong Shi Wuji Zhengdao Yuan Shehui Fuli Cishan Shiye Jijinhui 財團法人台中市無極證道院社會福利慈善事業基金會”). It was founded in 1987 and is a properly registered and incorporated

¹ “Personalized” means that the first characters of the poems’ first verses are made up of the addressee’s name.
charity that uses the interest from its endowment for charitable works such as donations of money, food, and clothing to seniors' homes, kindergardens, and schools. These activities took place already before the establishment of the Foundation; the latter merely serves as a specialized legal and organizational framework for them. The Phoenix Friend Magazine Society used to organize so-called “winter relief” (dongji jiuji 冬季救濟) campaigns in most years of the Mingzheng Tang’s existence. Similar yearly campaigns had previously been staged by the Huide Gong and the Shengxian Tang. Such a campaign usually involved an appeal for donations directed towards the readership of the Phoenix Friend. The collected funds were then distributed to needy individuals or charitable institutions. For example, during the campaign in the winter of 1985/86 altogether more than NT$170,000 were collected (about CDN$8,500 by today’s exchange rates). This money was distributed in the following way:

- NT$1,000 each were given to seventeen charitable organizations all over Taiwan, providing care for the handicapped (among them a Christian group);
- Sums between NT$1,000 and NT$3,000 were given to a large number of needy individuals and families all across Taiwan. Typical examples were persons who had lost their wage earning ability due to illness or accident.
- Sums between NT$500 and NT$600 each were given to 103 low income households in two districts of Taizhong City.²

The annual winter time charity drives held by many phoenix halls (and other religious bodies as well) complied with official government policy to “encourage” temples to engage in charitable works and gave them an opportunity to demonstrate their civic-mindedness. They usually took place

² Luanyou 405:26-29.
in the context of larger similar efforts on the part of the local authorities.\(^3\)

With the rising affluence of Taiwanese society, these annual winter charities have lost much of their significance and do not seem to be strongly promoted by the government any more. The Mingzheng Tang apparently has ceased holding such drives since 1991 and is now mainly engaged in non-seasonal charity through the Foundation. The Foundation’s activities are, however, very low key, if not practically dormant. It only engages in the minimum level of activity required to maintain its registration as a charitable organization. This relative inactivity suggests that charity was only one consideration in the Foundation’s establishment; others probably were the prestige tied to such a public-minded charitable institution and the tax-shelter provided by it.

In 1988 the Wuji Zhengdao Yuan Wumiao Mingzheng Tang, as we have seen, moved to new quarters in the foothills on the outskirts of Taizhong City. By car, it is a ten to fifteen minute ride from the offices of the Magazine Society to the temple building. In Part I chapter 3 I have already given a rough description of the building to which I would like to add some details here. It consists of a main building with two side wings built parallel to a hillside in its rear and facing west; originally three storeys high, a fourth storey was added in 1990. The central building contains the four main sanctuaries of the temple:

1. On the ground floor the Palace of the Martial Sage (Wusheng Dian 武聖殿) is located. In this sanctuary most of the cult’s spirit-writing takes place in a fenced off inner sanctum (neitang 内堂) in front of the central glass case

\(^3\) On this government policy see the documentation reproduced in Fan Guoguang 1978:185-187.
holding the images of the Five Benevolent Masters. The Benevolent Masters are flanked on the stage-left by a glass case containing a statue of the Ruler of Southern Heaven, Wenheng Shengdi, and on the stage-right by another case containing a "bushel" representing the reigning "year god" (Taisui 太歲).

2. The main building's second floor is really just a narrow balcony above the ground floor sanctuary. It contains an image of the Yellow Thearch, flanked by spirit tablets of graduates of the Wuji Zhengdao Yuan.

3. The third floor houses the "Palace of the Limitless", centring upon a gilded statue of the Venerable Mother in a glass case, flanked by numerous smaller god statues on open altar tables. Here the séances involving the Venerable Mother are held, as well as the "numinous healing" (lingliao 灑療) sessions.

4. Finally, the fourth floor contains the Precious Palace of the Heaven-Penetrating Numinous Empyrean. It centres upon a statue of Guan Sheng Dijun represented as the Jade Thearch. In front of his glass case stands an altar table with smaller images of the Three Official Great Thearchs (Sanguan Dadi); to his stage-left we find an altar with the statues of Sakyamuni, Confucius, and Yuanshi Tianzun, to his stage-right another altar with representations of the Three Pure Ones (San Qing). Along each side wall runs a large illuminated glass case holding approximately fifty smaller god images each. The Precious Palace is a representation of the heavenly realms ruled over by the Jade Thearch; it is not usually used for spirit-writing or other congregational purposes. Some phoenix disciples like to go there for private scripture recitations, for which purpose a considerable number of scriptures are kept at hand on the sanctuary's main altar.

The main building also contains a number of resting and changing rooms for the use of phoenix disciples, segregated by gender. The side wings
contain dormitory rooms for phoenix disciples from out of town who stay overnight on the weekends or during two-day dharma assemblies and altars holding the spirit tablets of students and graduates of the Wuji Zhengdao Yuan. At the time of my stay at the temple three young male phoenix disciples resided permanently in the dormitory rooms: two, one a postman, the other a plumber, shared one of the ground floor rooms, while the third, the son of one of the deputy chairmen of the Hall, an electrician by profession, occupied a second floor room. The right-hand ground floor side-wing also contains a kitchen and refectory used for the vegetarian meals shared by the disciples before séances. Outside the building stands a large gourd-shaped brick oven such as is used in popular religious temples for the burning of paper money. As the Benevolent Masters frown upon the burning of spirit-money, it is never used for this purpose by phoenix disciples, but was set up mainly for the convenience of non-affiliated believers who persisted in this custom. For such worshippers the Hall also provides pre-assembled packages of spirit-money and incense sticks. The architectural ensemble is rounded off by a small and rather decrepit playground and a row of outhouses beside the northern side wing.

The Wuji Zhengdao Yuan Wumiao Mingzheng Tang is still headed by its founder Mr. Zhang Yunchang*, now close on eighty years old. His failing health keeps him from attending most of the weekly séances and he appears mainly on special occasions, such as dharma assemblies, when he leads the congregation in the ritual proceedings. While Mr. Zhang* still has the final word in all affairs of the cult much of its day to day running is now left to the deputy chairpersons. Of these there are eight, seven men and one woman. They are chosen by the gods, the decision being made public through spirit-
writing. Chairperson (tangzhu 堂主) and deputy chairperson (futangzhu 副堂主) are titles that as visible signs of the gods' trust confer prestige and authority on their bearers. However, there are no specific functions directly attached to these titles. These are invested in a hierarchy of ritual offices (summarily called "hall duties", tangwu 堂務) whose cooperation is essential to the smooth running of the Hall. The most important group of such offices are those connected with the conduct of spirit-writing séances:

1. "Principal phoenix disciple" (zhengluansheng 正鸞生): this is the planchette-medium, a function filled at the time of my research by Mingbi who was also a deputy chairman and clearly the number two behind Mr. Zhang in the Hall's hierarchy.4

2. "Phoenix [disciple] supervising the interior" (neijianluan 色監鸞): oversees all affairs taking place within the inner sanctum, i.e., the spirit-writing area.

3. "Phoenix [disciple] supervising the exterior" (waijianluan 外監鸞): responsible for the orderly conduct of affairs outside the inner sanctum.

4. "Tea and fruit disciple" (chaguosheng 茶果生): arranges the sacrificial offerings on the altars.

5. "Chanting disciple" (changluansheng 唱鸞生): calls out the characters written by the medium. Usually there are two or three changluansheng working in unison during a séance.

6. "Recording disciple" (bilusheng 筆錄生): copies down the characters called

4 The planchette medium is the only paid officer of the Mingzheng Tang. All other offices are filled by volunteers. The fulfillment of such religious duties is deemed to produce its own rewards in the form of merit. Any remuneration would be incompatible with the basic nature of offices within the Hall and would effectively cancel out the merit accruing to the officeholder. In the case of the planchette medium the monthly payment he receives (currently about NT$25,000, approx. C$1,250) is not seen as a salary for services rendered; rather, the money is supposed to relieve him of the need for other sources of income whose pursuit would diminish the time and effort he can spend on his indispensable spiritual cultivation. As the payment is not a salary, it does not affect the meritoriousness of his work.
out by the changluansheng. Again, there are usually two or three bilusheng in a séance who compare their notes reduce the likelihood of errors creeping into the record.

7. “Bell and drum disciple” (zhonggusheng 鐘鼓 生): beats the “wooden fish” (木魚) and the bronze bowl bell at the beginning and end of a séance. There are a number of phoenix disciples who have acquired this skill and take turns in performing the duty.

8. “Greeting disciples” (jiejiasheng 接駕 生): two phoenix disciples standing throughout the séance at the entrance of the Hall with raised incense sticks to greet the descending deities and see them off. This function is filled by all disciples present in turn, the two jiejiasheng being relieved every five minutes.

In addition to these offices directly related to the performance of séances there exists as a separate organizational entity the “scripture recitation group” (songjingzu 誦經 組) with its own hierarchy of offices headed by the group leader (zuzhang 組長). Another office outside the core of eight offices described above is that of “lecturer” (jiangdaosheng 講道 生), a faint echo of the lecturing activities of traditional phoenix halls. This function is filled by one of the deputy chairmen who on some Sundays addresses the congregation for about fifteen or twenty minutes on some moral issue which he illustrates with an entertaining story. Such lecturing only occurs on an occasional basis (I witnessed it twice during my eight months with the Mingzheng Tang) and takes place in a fairly informal atmosphere.

For occasions requiring special organizational effort, such as dharma assemblies, the Hall’s membership is divided into temporary work groups.
For example, in preparation for the 1994 spring sacrifice eight work groups were established, each with two or three people in charge and between five to eight members:

1. “Phoenix duties group” (luanwuzu 鳳務組): responsible for everything to do with the spirit-writing séances conducted during the dharma assembly.
2. “General duties group” (zongwuzu 總務組): responsible for paperwork, memorials, accounting, sales, and the “service counter”.
3. “Scripture recitation group” (songjingzu 誦經組): this is a permanent group drafted into service for the dharma assembly.
4. “Installations group” (shebeizu 設備組): responsible for setting up the temporary structures, arranging the offerings etc.
6. “Transport group” (yunshuzu 運輸組): responsible for regulating traffic and organizing parking facilities.
7. “Greeting group” (zhaodaizu 招待組): responsible for liaison with guests.
8. “Supplies group” (gongyingzu 供應組): responsible for food and beverages.

All of these groups together were under the direction of the “dharma assembly preparatory group” (fahui choubeizu 法會籌備組) consisting of the Hall’s chairman and deputy chairpersons. As a rule, the more important ritual offices, both temporary and permanent ones, are filled by leading cult members, usually by the deputy chairpersons. Appointment to permanent offices is the exclusive prerogative of the gods, while temporary ones (such as the dharma assembly working groups) may be determined by the Hall’s human leadership.
1.2. The Cult’s Membership

1.2.1 Becoming And Being A Phoenix Disciple

The Mingzheng Tang is a voluntary religious organization with formal membership. There exists a firm line between formal members (luansheng 魚生) and unregistered believers (shanxin 善信). The act of joining the Hall is called “entering the phoenix” (ruluan 入鸞). It involves the reading and burning of a memorial stating the candidate’s vow to lead a moral life, obey the gods’ instructions, attend the Hall’s séances regularly, and diligently cultivate him or herself. The memorial is read out at the main altar by a functionary of the Hall, usually a deputy chairperson; the candidate then performs the ritual of “three kneelings and nine kowtows” (sangui jiukou 三跪九叩) and is given a cup of water from the altar to drink. Once the vow has been accepted by the gods, the candidate becomes a regular phoenix disciple, i.e., he or she becomes a student (sheng 生) of the Way, a personal disciple (dizi 弟子) of the gods whom from now he or she addresses as “benevolent teachers” (enshi 恩師). The outward sign of this discipleship is the long blue gown worn when attending the Hall. In accordance with the Hall’s ecumenical views, disciples are not barred from religious participation outside the Hall. Thus there are phoenix disciples that divide their religious activities between the Mingzheng Tang and participation in other phoenix

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5 See the translation of the sample memorial in Appendix 3.1. The ritual of entering the phoenix by making a vow is more or less standard among Taizhong phoenix halls and a memorial form similar to the one used by the Mingzheng Tang’s is included in the Shengxian Tang’s liturgical manual Luantang shengdian. The southern Taiwanese spirit-writing halls studied by Jordan and Overmyer apparently do not have a similar induction ritual [Jordan & Overmyer 1986:149].

6 Although the cups set in front of god images are conventionally referred to as “tea” offerings, they in fact contain plain boiled water, as this is considered purer than real tea.
halls, the Yiguan Dao, the Cihui Tang, Buddhist associations, Christian churches, or popular religious temples. Such participation is, however, not actively encouraged, as the Hall's phoenix disciples are expected to maintain their primary allegiance to the Mingzheng Tang. Ideally, a phoenix disciple should attend each and every organized activity of the Hall; this would require presence in the Mingzheng Tang on an average of ten days in every month: on all weekends and on the first and fifteenth of every moon. In addition, attendance is required for all extraordinary events scheduled by the Hall, such as dharma assemblies and life-releasing assemblies. If conscientiously observed, such a schedule leaves little time to be devoted to other religious activities. These requirements are reinforced by the gods' power to assign merits and demerits: having made a solemn vow to cultivate themselves, phoenix disciples are rewarded for every successful effort at cultivation by being assigned higher merit amounts for the same acts than a non-member; conversely, however, the same vow also requires of them greater and more consistent efforts than are expected from a non-member and, different from non-members, a phoenix disciple is assigned demerits for every absence from a séance. Thus, the phoenix should not be entered lightly. Although this is made quite clear to prospective members, it is a matter of concern to the cult leadership that many phoenix disciples do not take this requirement very seriously, turning up only rarely or never again after their induction. By way of ultimate sanction a negligent disciple can be

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7 About 54% of phoenix disciples among my questionnaire respondents indicated that they participated in other religious groups.
8 In some cases, candidates seem to misinterpret induction as simply a way of establishing closer rapport with a specific deity and thus gaining this deity's protection, i.e., as establishing a relationship similar that of a god's "adopted child" *(qizi 同子)*. Such a relationship is sought in particular by people faced with some sort of personal crisis. While the Mingzheng Tang does mediate such spiritual adoptions, they involve a completely separate ritual and confer a status quite different from that of the *ruìluàn* rite. Adoption establishes a parent-
excommunicated, that is, his or her name can be struck from the membership list. Such an action is the earthly consequence of a celestial administrative act: on being accepted as a disciple, an individual's personal data are entered into the phoenix register (luanji 鶴籍) maintained by the Court for Phoenix Affairs in Southern Heaven; this registration is cancelled (kaichu 開除) should the disciple turn out to be unworthy. For this reason more serious-minded candidates wait for a considerable time before taking the step of formally becoming phoenix disciples in order to make sure that they are capable of fulfilling the requirements of discipleship.

While participation in other voluntary religious groups is approved only insofar as it has no negative impact on the disciple's attendance at the

9 Such drastic action is rare, however. It is adopted only as a punishment for serious misdemeanor on the part of the disciple or for long term (more than ten years) neglect of his or her duties [cf. Luanyou 545:20; 564:20]. It should be stressed that it is a disciple's registration in the celestial phoenix register that establishes his or her status as a phoenix disciple. The listing in the Mingzheng Tang's membership list is only a reflection of his or her celestial registration. Thus it is theoretically not necessary for persons who had originally entered the phoenix at another phoenix hall to perform the ruluan rite again when they shift their allegiance to the Mingzheng Tang since the original induction had already effected their celestial registration. Usually, however, such a candidate will still be required to perform the ruluan to confirm his or her allegiance to the Mingzheng Tang. This practice indicates the ambivalent nature of phoenix halls: on the one hand they share a complex of doctrines and liturgical procedures summed up under the name Ruzong Shenjiao, on the other hand each phoenix hall is an autonomous entity. In the case of a double ruluan the earlier induction is taken as vow of adherence to the greater Ruzong Shenjiao, while the second induction establishes the disciples allegiance to his or her new phoenix hall.

10 Among the valid answers to the question "How long after your initial contact with the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang did you wait before you formally entered the phoenix?", 56.1% indicated a waiting period of more than two years, 12.2% between one and two years, and 31.7% less than a year. The obligations of discipleship were the reason why it was rarely suggested to me that I should enter the phoenix. As it was clear that I would leave Taiwan at the end of my field research period, I would never have been able to fulfill my duty of attendance at the Mingzheng Tang's séances. On the few occasions when I was advised to enter the phoenix, it was coupled with the suggestion that I could fulfill my discipleship by establishing a phoenix hall in my home country.
Mingzheng Tang, the same does not apply to the worship of the kitchen god (zao jun 灶君) in one's home and the earth (fude zhengshen 福德正神) and city gods (chenghuang ye 城隍爷) in one's area of residence. While the phoenix disciple is free to worship at any popular religious temple, as long it is devoted to a righteous and orthodox deity,\(^{11}\) the veneration of the local kitchen, earth, and city gods is not optional, but a duty of good citizenship. These three classes of deities are directly appointed territorial administrators within the celestial bureaucracy and their worship is a sign of respect towards the complex apparatus of celestial government from which ultimately the Mingzheng Tang also derives its authority. Their role is a supervisory one.

Assisted by other divine functionaries such as the three corpse spirits (sanshishen 三尸神)\(^{12}\) and the "day and night patrolling deities" (riye youshen 日夜遊神) they keep a record of every human being's conduct. All relevant data are eventually reported to the city god and entered by him (or

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11 A phoenix disciple visiting at a popular religious temple will worship the deities there after the fashion practised at the Mingzheng Tang, i.e., with three kneelings and nine kowtows for the main deity and hierarchically reduced numbers of kneelings and kowtows at the side altars, thus differentiating his or her ritual behaviour clearly from that of the other worshippers present. He or she will also shun the use of the spirit money sold in most popular religious temples.

12 Alchemical schools of Daoism see the Three Corpse Spirits (also known as the Three Worms) as body parasites intent on shortening the individual's lifespan by causing diseases and by reporting any moral transgressions of their host to Heaven. They may be neutralized by good moral conduct, thus depriving them of opportunities for denunciation, or they may be expelled by the ingestion of alchemical drugs. In this tradition, the expulsion of the Three Corpse Spirits (also called the Three Worms) was a necessary precondition for the attainment of immortality (on the beliefs and practices surrounding these body spirits see Homann 1971:42-46 and Yamada 1989:110-112). The Mingzheng Tang, by contrast, views the Three Corpse Spirits as legitimate members of the divine bureaucracy, continuing in this respect the interpretation they received in the Taishang ganying pian's visualization of the omnipresent divine supervision of human affairs. The Three Corpse Spirits are fully interpreted as spiritual functionaries that do not merely supervise a person's conduct, but also give their protection to the good [Shiyi chandao lu VII:9]. The two conflicting interpretations once clashed, when a petitioner inquired of the planchette "how to expell the Three Corpse Spirits so as to 'open his wisdom'". The Benevolent Master replied: "How to expell the Three Corpse Spirits? They cannot be expelled! The Three Corpse spirits are an indispensible part of the human body, and they do not obstruct a person's wisdom. How can there be talk of 'expelling the Three Corpse Spirits to open wisdom'?" [Shiyi chandao lu VIII:61]
his assistants) into the individual’s file. As one’s destiny is to a certain extent determined by one’s conduct, the Mingzheng Tang’s gods often recommend that requests for the avoidance of predestined calamities be directed to the local city god who will make a decision on the basis of the person’s merit account as recorded in his or her file.

1.2.2 Degrees of Affiliation with the Cult

In addition to the member/non-member dichotomy, we can distinguish three categories of cult adherents by the closeness of their relationship with the Mingzheng Tang. They can be visualized as forming concentric circles around the cult, the relationship with the centre getting ever more tenuous the further one gets to the periphery. The innermost circle is made up of the “core adherents”; these are people who attend the Hall on a regular basis, many of them being present at every activity scheduled by the Hall, others not quite that assiduous, but still showing up at least once or twice a month. Most of these core adherents are formal members of the Hall, i.e., “phoenix disciples”. The next circle is made up of people who attend the Hall on an occasional basis; they may have ancestral tablets stored in the “Academy of Limitless Heaven” and come to attend the spring and autumn sacrifices which centre upon the ancestors in the Academy, or they may come on some Sunday to lay their personal problems before the gods during a jishi séance. The outermost circle are the readers of the Phoenix Friend, people who read the magazine regularly or occasionally and who may or may not donate some money to it from time to time. This is their only contact with the cult; they never attend any of its séances in person. If we use
Stark and Bainbridge’s typology of cults, we might say that for the core adherents the Mingzheng Tang is a “cult movement”, i.e., a full-fledged religious organizations that aims to satisfy all the religious needs of its adherents. For the second circle of adherents the Mingzheng Tang is a “client cult”, i.e., principally a provider of ritual services (oracles, salvation of ancestors etc.) demanding relatively little personal engagement of the adherent. For the Phoenix Friend readership the Hall is an “audience cult”, a system of ideas and beliefs that is mediated to them through the printed word with no personal involvement save the occasional donation of money.¹³

How does this concentric circle model fit together with the member/non-member division? In theory, while a core adherent need not be a formal member, all formal members should be core adherents by virtue of the obligations they acquire by their discipleship. Thus, ideally every phoenix disciple should be located in the core of our concentric model, while the two outer circles would be made up of non-members. In practice, this is not so, however. There exist a large number of phoenix disciples whose ties with the Hall have attenuated over the years and who have drifted out into one of the surrounding circles or even ceased all contact with the Hall. These lapsed disciples are a constant source of embarrassment to the Hall’s leadership and as we have seen it is possible to excommunicate them once they have drifted out of the core. Cancelling the celestial registration of these persons is thus a means of narrowing the gap between the ideal and reality of phoenix discipleship.

1.2.3 Composition of the Membership

I possess reliable data only for the core adherents, which together come to about sixty or seventy persons. The male/female proportion of this core is about 2:1. This is a significant difference from many other voluntary religious organizations, such as Buddhist groups or sects such as the Yiguan Dao or the traditional "vegetarian sects" (Zhaijiao 齋教) where women dominate the membership. Perhaps it is a reflection of the Mingzheng Tang's roots in the male elite dominated spirit-writing cult tradition of the late Qing and the Japanese period. It could also be a function of the Mingzheng Tang's strong focus on the worship of Guan Sheng Dijun, a deity that represents a male-centred value system.

The questionnaire respondents do not show a significantly skewed age structure. All age groups are represented with the median age of all respondents to my questionnaire coming to 41.9 sui (the youngest being 18 sui, the oldest 80 sui).¹⁴ In terms of educational background, 10.5% possess a primary education, 74% a secondary education, and 15.5% a post-secondary education.¹⁵ The general social background of the Mingzheng Tang's core adherents includes the urban lower to middle class, with the most common occupations represented being (usually small) business-owners, company employees, civil servants, workers, housewives, farmers, soldiers, and

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¹⁴ Even though all age groups are represented in the Mingzheng Tang, older people are clearly seen to predominate when the age distribution is compared to that of the general population in 1994, whose median age was 29.12 years [Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of China 1995:13].

¹⁵ Thus, the educational level of the questionnaire respondents is somewhat higher than the national average in Taiwan whose figures for 1993 were: 32.64% with primary, 44.51% with secondary, and 14.23% with a post-secondary education (the missing 8.62% consist of illiterates) [Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of China 1995:94-95].
teachers. In terms of ethnic background, Hokkien speakers dominate, making up roughly 75% of the core adherents; Hakkas account for about 15% and mainlanders for about 10%.\(^{16}\) Geographically the adherents are scattered widely across the island; while there exists a strong concentration in the Taizhong area (city and county), many disciples also come from more distant parts of the island, principally from northern Taiwan (Taipei, Taoyuan, Miaoli, Xinzhu), but a few also from the south (for example from Gaoxiong). The above overview gives us a general idea of the composition of the Mingzheng Tang’s adherents. I would like to conclude by supplementing these bare numbers with some individuality by giving short portraits of seven members of the Hall coming from widely differing backgrounds.

- Chen Xuecai*

One of the Hall’s deputy chairpersons, Mr. Chen* is fifty-three sui old, married, with three adult children. He is employed as a worker in a fertilizer factory in the northern city of Miaoli. His interest in phoenix halls was aroused when he came across a Guan Sheng Dijun shanshu in his father-in-law’s bookstore. He came to the Mingzheng Tang in 1981 after first trying out a number of other temples, including the Shengde Baogong 聖德寶宮, a

\(^{16}\) The Mingzheng Tang uses mainly Mandarin and Taiwanese in its ritual proceedings. Spirit-writing séances are usually conducted in Mandarin, while scripture recitation and more elaborate rites such as birthday congratulations employ the Taiwanese dialect. These linguistic differences seem to be related to the language preferences of the cult leaders in charge of the respective areas of ritual. The spirit-writing séances are controlled by the leading deputy chairmen, including the medium, Mingbi, who although native Hokkien and Hakka speakers themselves prefer the official language of the Republic of China in a formal setting. The deputy chairman in charge of the scripture recitation group apparently feels more comfortable with the Taiwanese dialect and it is in this dialect that the group has received instruction from Buddhist recitation specialists. The elaborate rites involving the public reading of written memorials are so far still the domain of the Hall’s chairman Mr. Zhang*, whose Mandarin is rather limited, but who is able to recite the poetry of these memorials in the correct literary idiom of Hokkien. On the one occasion I witnessed when Mr. Zhang* could not attend such a ritual, he was replaced by Mingbi who read the memorial in Mandarin.
Taizhong phoenix hall that had just been founded.\textsuperscript{17} Having finally decided upon the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang, his zeal admitted him quickly into the Mingzheng Tang’s leadership and he was appointed deputy chairman of the Weidao Weiyuanhui in 1982 and deputy chairman of the Hall in 1983. To this day he is one of the most active members of the Mingzheng Tang’s leadership circle, acting as \textit{neijianluan} and scribe during séances, correcting and proofreading the revealed texts for publication, and is in general charge of most proceedings in the hall. He is a pious man whose sincere devotion to the gods is very obvious and has recently (after my departure from Taiwan) been rewarded by his selection as one the Hall’s two new mediums. His “pen-name” Zhenbi (“Virtuous Stylus”) is a good expression of his character and disposition, which centres almost exclusively on the spiritual aspects of life. He is present at every event of the Mingzheng Tang, seemingly forever shuttling back and forth between his secular life in Miaoli and his spiritual life at the Mingzheng Tang.

- Zhao Guangwu*

A Hakka from the town of Dongshi in Taizhong County, Mr. Zhao* now resides in Taizhong City where he works as export manager for a fruit growers’ cooperative. According to his own testimony he had led a rather

\textsuperscript{17} It was founded by Yang Zanru 尤 欣儒 who in 1976 had become Yongbi’s successor as the Shengxian Tang’s planchette medium. According to the Shengxian Tang’s chairman and to Yongbi [interview data] Yang Zanru was not considered an “orthodox” phoenix hall planchette medium as he had supposedly received his training within the Yiguan Dao rather than in a \textit{luantang}. Still, this did not bar him from becoming the Shengxian Tang’s \textit{zhengluansheng}, and during his years with the Shengxian Tang Yang produced two of the best-known modern spirit-travelogues, the \textit{Record of a Journey to Purgatory} (Diyu youji) and the \textit{Record of a Journey to the Heavenly Halls} (Tiantang youji). He left the Shengxian Tang during the lunar New Year festival in early 1981 to establish his own phoenix hall [interview with the Shengxian Tang’s chairman; cf. also \textit{Taizhong Shengxian Tang Wuri Tiande Gong jianjie}, p.12; Yang Zanru’s viewpoint is given in his short autobiography contained in \textit{Shengde xiudao ji}, pp.12-13].
dissolute life in the company of numerous "bad friends". Reading some of
the Mingzheng Tang's *shanshu* triggered his determination for moral reform
and in 1984 he first visited the Mingzheng Tang. Even though supposedly
nobody there knew him personally, the gods noticed his presence and
honoured him with a poem. This strengthened his belief in spirit-writing and
he soon entered the phoenix and was appointed a deputy chairman of the
Hall and the Weidao Weiyuanhui. About the same age as Chen*, Mr. Zhao*
is of a very different temperament: while certainly no less sincere in his
devotion to the gods, his life is less centred on this devotion than that of Mr.
Chen*. He maintains an active social life and still loves to drink, eat, dance,
and generally enjoy himself in the company of friends. The evening eatery
run by his wife in the front courtyard of their house is a buzzing social centre
where his many and varied circles of friends converge. In addition to his rank
as deputy chairman, Mr. Zhao* acts as a scribe, lecturer, and organizer of life-
releasing assemblies. Like Mr. Chen* he has recently become a medium and
his pen-name ("Heroic Stylus", Yingbi), too, is a good expression of his
character.

- Su Xiaohe*

Su Xiaohe*, 53 sui old, is the Mingzheng Tang's medium to whom I
have so far referred by his pen-name Mingbi ("Bright Stylus"). Mr. Su* is a
pharmacist by training and a high school teacher by profession. He came to
the Mingzheng Tang in 1976, i.e., shortly after its founding, through an issue
of the Phoenix Friend that he had found by the wayside when taking a walk
with his three-year old son. Within two months after his first contact, he
entered the phoenix and began his long career in the Hall. During his first
years he acted as a drum and bell disciple until in 1980 the gods chose him to
be trained as a planchette medium. His further development as the Mingzheng Tang’s medium is described in chapter 4 and I will not repeat it here. I would like to add, however, the close relationship that arose between Su*, Chen Xuecai*, and Zhao Guangwu*. These three men now form the inner circle of the Mingzheng Tang’s leadership and effectively run the cult. Between 1990 and 1991 their relationship was explained in a revelation as due to the connectedness of their previous existences. In a reiteration of the by now familiar topos of the banished immortal, it was revealed that more than 400 years ago Chen*, Zhao*, and Su* originally had been “immortal youths” from Limitless Heaven (Wuji xiantong 無極仙童). In obvious allusion to their present personality traits and interests Su* is said to have been in charge of the elixir fire in the Pavilion for Refining the Elixir (Liandan Ge 煎丹閣), Chen* employed in the Pavilion for Storing Scriptures (Cangjing Ge 藏經閣), and Zhao* responsible for the storage of immortals’ wine in the Jade Liquid Pavilion (Qiongye Ge 琺璃閣). The three were close friends and when on one occasion they were sitting together they decided to taste the wine entrusted to Zhao*’s care. Overwhelmed by the beverage’s potency they fell to the ground in a drunken stupor. When the theft was discovered, the three youths were ashamed and decided to leave the Limitless Heaven to make amends for their lapse. They first spent fifty years in the Bureau of Documents of Southern Heaven which was at the time headed by Moxianzi, the later founder and chairman of the Mingzheng Tang. When at the end of their tour of service in the Bureau they were about to be reborn into human existences, the three friends made a common pledge to devote themselves to the salvation of all living beings and the alleviation of their suffering. In their first human existence all three were born into wealthy families in different parts of China and had official careers. On the strength of the merit earned by their work as
officials, all three were appointed city gods after their death. When their
tenure was over, they were reborn into well-to-do, though non-official
families in Fujian where a severe drought brought them together in a
successful effort to persuade Heaven to send down rain. After another stint as
city gods in different areas of China, our friends were reborn into their third
human existence in Taiwan where their shared ambition of saving all living
beings eventually led them to their reunion in the Mingzheng Tang. Their
work of "proclaiming transformation on behalf of Heaven" as deputy
chairmen of the Mingzheng Tang, if carried through without fail, will afford
them the opportunity to return to Limitless Heaven. In view of this story it
is certainly no coincidence that the gods (through Mingbi) chose Chen* and
Zhao* as the two new mediums; this new triad reaffirms the close
relationship of the three men and their position of authority in the Hall. It is
a logical continuation of their heavenly mission.

- Zeng Qingyao*

Mrs. Zeng* is a woman in her mid-forties who lives in Taizhong City.
There existed a phoenix hall in her hometown in Zhanghua County which
her family attended from time to time; this hall provided only jishi services
and did not publish any books. Her father had managed against enormous
personal and economic odds to attend a teacher college during the Japanese
period and eventually to become an elementary school teacher. Mrs. Lai* was
very close to him and thus it marked a major turning point in her life when
four years ago, at the age of sixty-four sui, he was killed by a speeding motor-

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18 This story was originally revealed in piecemeal fashion in the Penglai xiandao youji. It was
deeded significant enough for the relevant passages to be extracted from this work and
gathered into a little booklet with the title The Descent of the Immortal Youths of Limitless
Heaven into the Secular World (Wuji xiantong jiangfan lai 無極仙童降凡來).
cyclist. She went to the morgue daily to recite sutras over his corpse until the hospital staff refused her admission. Not quite knowing what to do, she discovered a Mingzheng Tang morality book on a rack outside a clinic and went to visit the temple. At that point she had already made enquiries at various temples concerning possibilities to save (chaoba 超拔) her father's soul; the Mingzheng Tang to her seemed to be the most trustworthy of these institutions and so within three months she entered the phoenix and had her father enrolled in the Wuji Zhengdao Yuan. She is now a fairly regular attendant of the Hall’s séances, though she maintains a lively interest in a wide variety of religious possibilities.

- Li Zhiyu*

Mr. Li*, a resident of Taizhong Harbour, was born in 1930. During the war he was sent to Japan where he attended a vocational school and was drafted into the Japanese military labour-service. At the end of the war he was a maintenance worker at a military airfield in Japan in which position he continued for a further two years after the American takeover. The Taiwan he eventually returned to in late 1947 had undergone dramatic changes. The Japanese overlords had been replaced by the representatives of the Chinese Nationalist government -- not a change for the better in the view of many Taiwanese at the time, including Mr. Li*. While eager to reaffirm their Chinese identity, native Taiwanese were incensed by their treatment as second-class citizens at the hands of the Nationalist administration. To political oppression was added economic hardship; in the resulting depressed social climate of the late Forties and early Fifties, Mr. Li*, like many other Taiwanese, found spiritual support in the teachings of the Way of All-Pervading Unity (Yiguan Dao) whose missionaries had been arriving in a
steady stream from the mainland ever since 1946. He became a member of the Baoguang branch in 1954 when the Yiguan Dao was still subject to government persecution and keeps up his contacts with the sect to the present day. Besides spiritual support, the Yiguan Dao apparently also provided him with economic opportunities and a number of the positions he has held have been with companies run by sect members. Although his formal educational background includes only junior high-school and the Japanese vocational school, Mr. Li* is a very well-read man with broad interests who speaks Mandarin, Hokkien, Hakka, and Japanese fluently. His active mind soon ceased to be satisfied with the Yiguan Dao's salvationist teachings and he came to question what he sees as his sect's over-reliance on the redemptory efficacy of its initiation ritual at the expense of concrete cultivational practice. These concerns led him in 1991 to the Mingzheng Tang, after reading some of its morality book publications. Here he found the emphasis on personal cultivation and merit accumulation that he missed in the Yiguan Dao and after three years of regular attendance at the Hall's séances he entered the phoenix. He has not severed his ties with the Yiguan Dao, but his primary allegiance has now shifted to the Mingzheng Tang.

- Wang Libei*

Ms. Wang* is a special case among the Mingzheng Tang's disciples as she came there not completely voluntarily. A young student at Taiwan's most prestigious university, Taiwan University in Taipei, she started to display abnormal behaviour soon after commencing her studies. Her parents, well-to-do residents of Taizhong City where her father runs a law practice, took her to several psychiatrists and neurologists, but none of them could get her mental disorder under control. As a last resort, her parents decided to send
her to the Mingzheng Tang and made her enter the phoenix. It was hoped that the numinous energy radiating from the high-ranking gods that visit the Mingzheng Tang would have an exorcizing effect on the evil forces supposedly acting upon her mind; simultaneously, the merit created by her attendance was to counterbalance her heavy karmic burden which was supposed to be the ultimate cause of her condition. In spite of the frequent disruption caused by Ms. Wang*'s verbal outbreaks during activities of the Mingzheng Tang, the Hall's disciples as a whole remained supportive of her. Whether it was the gods' influence, or her merit, or the "group therapy" provided by her integration into the community of the Mingzheng Tang's disciples, her condition improved gradually during my time at the Hall and by the time of my departure she had calmed down considerably. This stabilization seems to have continued afterwards, as later in 1994 she sought and received permission from the Hall's gods to return occasionally to the Christian church she had previously been attending regularly.

- Hao Fushi*

Mr. Hao* is a sixty-eight year old retired soldier, a native of Anhui province. As a child, his father once took him to a phoenix hall in their home town, which he says probably belonged to the Daoyuan. He came to Taiwan with the Nationalist troops after their defeat at the hands of the communists. An extremely conservative man, he thinks that all of China's suffering started with the overthrow of the Qing dynasty; in the Mingzheng Tang he sees a community that honours all that is good in China's cultural tradition but gets shoved aside by the fast pace of modern life. However, it seems that what is at least as important for him is the possibility of serving his ancestors whose tablets and graves he had to leave behind on the mainland. His
inability to do his filial duty to his parents and ancestors back on the mainland places a heavy emotional burden on him which the Mingzheng Tang helps to lighten by its ancestor-saving services.
CHAPTER 2: THE MINGZHENG TANG'S GODS

2.1 The Principal Deities and Their Functions

The main objects of worship, marked by their central position in the ground floor sanctuary, are the “Five Benevolent Masters” (Wu Enzhu 五恩主). The term “benevolent master” (enzhu) is unique to Taiwanese phoenix halls. In a narrow sense it refers to the main deities worshipped in phoenix halls in groups of five (wu enzhu), four (si enzhu 四恩主), or three (san enzhu 三恩主).¹ It was these deities that persuaded the Jade Thearch to postpone the punishment of humanity and that shouldered the responsibility of guiding humans to moral reform by means of their spirit-written messages. More generally, the term is used as an honorific for any “orthodox” deity. Among central Taiwanese phoenix halls the worship of these groups of benevolent masters is very widespread and is seen almost as constitutive of a phoenix hall. A cursory overview of various temple lists reveals, however, that while many phoenix halls do worship groups of benevolent masters, there are also many that do not. There exists, for example, a cluster of spirit-writing cults, apparently centred in northern Taiwan, focussing on the cult of the Patriarch Lü / Fuyou Dijun; the most famous of these is the Zhinan Gong.

¹ In an even narrower sense, the term enzhugong 恩主公 is sometimes used outside phoenix halls proper for Guan Sheng Dijun. This seems to be a result of the missionary efforts of the former phoenix hall Xingtian Gong 行天宮 in Taipei. This temple was established in 1943 under the guidance of the Taipei phoenix hall Juexiu Gong 覺修宮; it worships the five benevolent masters Guan Sheng Dijun, Fuyou Dijun, Siming Zhenjun, Xiantian Huoluo Lingguan Wang Tianjun, and Yue Wumu Wang, with particular emphasis on the cult of Guan Sheng Dijun. The Xingtian Gong ceased its spirit-writing some time after the war and instead developed itself as a highly successful temple offering ritual services and religious education. It sees it as its mission to improve the moral quality of religion in Taiwan, promoting the worship of the enzhugong, in particular Guan Sheng Dijun, and frugal, vegetarian worship customs. A number of popular Guan Di temples across Taiwan have reorganized their worship according to guidelines given out by the Xingtian Gong and use enzhugong as an appellation for Guan Sheng Dijun. On the Xingtian Gong see Dong Fangyuan 1983 and Chen Rengui 1986.
指南宮 in Muzha 木柵 (Taipei). Other spirit-writing cults single out other members of the enzhu groups for worship, or venerate completely different deities, such as the Earth Mother (Dimu 地母), the Primordial Heavenly Worthy (Yuanshi Tianzun 元始天尊), the Thearch Shun (Shun Di 舜帝), or even the Earth God (Tudi Gong 土地公). The situation is by no means clear, but it seems to me that the term enzhu and the worship of more or less standardized groups of deities under that name is a characteristic of those luantang that see themselves as belonging to the so-called “Divine Teachings of the Confucian School” (Ruzong Shenjiao) tradition. Enzhu as an appellation for deities figures prominently in that tradition’s liturgical manual, the Rumen kefan, which clearly delineates a group of five benevolent masters (Guan Sheng Dijun 關聖帝君, Fuyou Dijun 孚佑帝君, Siming Zhenjun 司命真君, Xiantian Huoluo Lingguan 先天豁落靈官, and Yue Wumu Wang 岳武穆王) as the main deities for phoenix halls. That some researchers (e.g., Zheng Zhiming and Li Yiyuan) have taken the cult of the benevolent masters as characteristic for phoenix halls in general, may thus be a reflection of the selective sources they had at their disposal rather than of actual conditions pertaining among phoenix halls in Taiwan.

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2 On the Zhinan Gong see Katz 1995 and 1996.
3 Zheng Zhiming 1984b; Li Yiyuan 1991. A vexing problem that I have not been able to solve so far is the historical provenance of the term enzhu. While the term enzhu itself remains a mystery, similarly composed groupings of deities under different designations are known from other areas of China. The Dongming baoji 洞冥寶記 reports that the Five Sages (Wusheng 五聖) implored the Jade Thearch in the gengzi 干支 year to postpone humanity’s punishment until they had a chance to instruct them by means of spirit-writing. These Fives Sages are: (1) Guan Di 關帝, (2) Wen Di 文帝, (3) Guanyin Dashi 觀音大士, (4) Lü Di 呂帝, and (5) Yan Di 晏帝. Another group of obscure origin with possible connections to the Benevolent Masters are the Five Wenchang Divine Lords 五文昌君, consisting of (in order of seniority): (1) Laozi, (2) Confucius, (3) Zhang Jun, (4) Lü Yan, and (5) Guan Yu. Their (perhaps Guangdong-based) cult involves a scripture called Wu Wenchang Dijun jing 五文昌帝君經, supposedly written in the 1660s, but more probably a late Qing or early Republican period production. The composition of the Wu Wenchang, however, varies; for a different group cf. above p.59, footnote #3.
The Five Benevolent Masters worshipped as a group by the Mingzheng Tang are (in the order of seniority expressed by their position on the main altar): (1) Guan Sheng Dijun, (2) Fuyou Dijun, (3) Siming Zhenjun, (4) Xuantian Shangdi 玄天上帝, and (5) Yue Wumu Wang. Benevolent masters come in groups of varying composition, but almost always include Guan Sheng Dijun as the central figure. Seaman’s Pearl Mountain Village spirit-writing cult worshipped three benevolent masters (san enzhu), namely, Guan Sheng Dijun, Fuyou Dijun, and Siming Zhenjun. A comparison of a number of Taiwanese phoenix halls shows that these three constitute a kind of hard core to which individual halls may or may not add additional deities. Some halls add just one deity (e.g., Xuantian Shangdi or Kongming Xianshi 孔明先生) to create a group of “four benevolent masters.” More commonly, two are added to arrive at “five benevolent masters.” As we have seen, in the Mingzheng Tang’s case these are Xuantian Shangdi and Yue Wumu Wang. Other halls add for example Yue Wumu Wang and Xiantian Huoluo Lingguan Wang Tianjun 先天豁落靈官王天君, or Wenchang Dijun and Ciji Zhenjun 慈濟真君.

The Mingzheng Tang’s particular combination of five benevolent masters is identical neither to that of the Shengxian Tang (which worships three benevolent masters) nor to that of the Huide Gong (where the five benevolent masters include Wenchang Dijun instead of Yue Wumu Wang). In fact, at first the new hall, in keeping with its appellation “Temple of the Martial Sage,” did not worship a group of benevolent masters at all, but

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focussed upon Guan Sheng Dijun as an individual deity. The Guan Sheng Dijun image was supplemented by one image each of the the Third Prince Nezha (Yongbi’s “immortal teacher”) and of the Yellow Thearch. Over the years, the worship roster expanded gradually. The period of cooperation with the Xuanyuan Jiao saw the Mingzheng Tang develop a strong emphasis on the cult of the Yellow Thearch; by the end of the 1970s the Venerable Mother entered the picture; and by the middle of the 1980s the above described group of five benevolent masters had finally been formalized (the first mention of these deities as the Mingzheng Tang’s five benevolent masters can be found in 1986)⁶.

The composition of the deities worshipped by the Mingzheng Tang thus was in a state of continuous flux. Mostly the development went in the direction of a gradual increase of the number of gods worshipped, so as to accommodate as much as possible of the religious variety among the hall’s membership and clientele. Many of the host of smaller god images present in the Mingzheng Tang were donated by individuals with a special affinity to the deity in question (shenyuan 神緣);⁷ they are like a sediment record of the most popular deities among the Mingzheng Tang’s membership and

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⁶ In a published interview, Mr. Zhang Yunchang affirmed that the Five Benevolent Masters were worshipped in the Mingzheng Tang starting in 1981. This is, of course, quite possible, but is not reflected in the documentary evidence. Cf. Wang Zhiyu 1996c:293.

⁷ In my questionnaire I asked the respondents to list the three principal deities with whom they felt they had a special affinity. As a result I obtained a list of nineteen deities and categories of deities, ranked as follows according to frequency of mention: 1. Guan Sheng Dijun (33 mentions), 2. Guanyin 觀音 (24 mentions), 3. Wuji Huangmu 無極皇母 (8 mentions), 4. Jigong Huofo 淨公活佛 (6 mentions), 5. Third Prince Nezha 傳吒三太子 (5 mentions), 6. Benevolent Masters 慈主 (4 mentions), 7. Fuyou Dijun 扶佑帝君, Maitreya 彌勒佛 (3 mentions each), 8. Xuantian Shangdi 玄天上帝, Siming Zhenjun 司命真君, Amitabha 阿彌陀佛, “Buddhist deities” (2 mentions each), 9. Eight Immortals 八仙, “Daoist deities”, Prince Guan Ping 謙平太子, “Buddha” 僧, Dizang Wang Pusa 地藏王菩薩, Mazu 姥祖, Yellow Thearch 黃帝 (1 mention each).
The choice of the cult's main deities, however, usually comes about in a less haphazard manner. As we have seen, the development of the cult of the Yellow Thearch and the Venerable Mother were conscious policies followed by the Minzheng Tang's leadership at different times. Unfortunately, I have not been able to ascertain conclusively why a decision was made in the mid-1980s to introduce the Five Benevolent Masters to the Mingzheng Tang. Bringing its worship practice more in line with that of other spirit-writing cults may have been part of the Hall's efforts at consolidation after the crisis of 1984/1985 (see chapter 4.3). After several years of shifting alliances with and doctrinal borrowings from the Xuanyuan Jiao and the Yiguan Dao had ended in the near collapse of the Mingzheng Tang's spirit-writing in 1984, a need may have been felt to reaffirm its identity as a part of the "orthodox" phoenix hall tradition. An important step in this direction would have been the creation of a group of benevolent masters as its focus of worship. A slightly unusual element in the Mingzheng Tang's constellation of five masters is the inclusion of Xuantian Shangdi. While some phoenix halls do worship him as one of the five benevolent masters, his place in the quintity is more usually taken by Xiantian Huoluo Lingguan.

8 There are also other ways for god figures to make it onto the Mingzheng Tang's altars. One morning during my stay in Taizhong, the temple keeper discovered on his arrival at the Mingzheng Tang that a large number of old, grimy god images had been deposited outside the temple. He was quite annoyed and surmised that they probably belonged to some shentan that was closed down and whose owners wanted to get rid of the god images. They dumped them at the Mingzheng Tang when nobody was around, because they knew that the torn and sooty carvings would not be accepted voluntarily. The figures were placed temporarily on an altar in one of the Mingzheng Tang's side-wings pending a decision on what to do about them. They were still there when I left Taiwan several months later.

In Taiwanese popular religion, there are many taboos attached to god images once their "light has been opened" (kaiguang), i.e., once they are charged with numinous energy. The general opinion is that they should be interfered with as little possible and the disposal of unwanted images thus poses a major problem for believers. The Mingzheng Tang's official attitude is that images sullied and damaged beyond repair can be burnt in a temple's incense and spirit money oven, provided the temple's principal deity's consent has been obtained (see for example Shiyi chandao lu III:28).
Wang Tianjun. This relative importance of Xuantian Shangdi among the Mingzheng Tang's roster of deities is due to regional and filialional factors: Xuantian Shangdi plays a significant role in Nantou county, with the Shoutian Gong in Mingjian district as a significant cult centre that has spawned branch temples all over the county. This regional importance of Xuantian Shangdi is reflected by his inclusion among the Huide Gong's Five Benevolent Masters and by his position as one of the Three Benevolent Masters of the Shengxian Tang. The Mingzheng Tang merely continued this emphasis on Xuantian Shangdi; conveniently, his birthday is the same as that of the Yellow Thearch, the third day of the third moon, so that one dharma assembly can be held for both at the same time. The choice of Xuantian Shangdi as one of the benevolent masters is, however, not unproblematic, as he is not widely recognized as a valid member of this group. The Mingzheng Tang's writings through the 1980s reflect shifts in interpretation concerning the correct group of benevolent masters. In 1986, the first explicit statement by the Mingzheng Tang's gods in this matter affirmed the combination of Guan Sheng Dijun, Fuyou Dijun, Siming Zhenjun, Yue Wumu Wang, and Wang Tianjun as the correct one. However, this interpretation had barely appeared in print in the Phoenix Friend, when the following issue of the magazine featured a photo of a Xuantian Shangdi figure on its cover page, with a caption claiming him as "one of the Five Benevolent Masters of the Phoenix School." It seems that the cult's leadership and its gods still had to reach an agreement on a shared interpretation. When the new building of the Mingzheng Tang was

9 See Shiyi chandao lu 1:75-76 (= Luanyou 407), where Mingbi reiterates the benevolent masters' origin myth previously told by Yongbi. Mingbi, however, replaces the three masters mentioned by Yongbi with the five benevolent masters.

10 Luanyou 408.
completed in 1988, there were installed in its main sanctuary the images of the Five Benevolent Masters including Xuantian Shangdi, but excluding Wang Tianjun. This arrangement was now also sanctioned by the gods who had come to accept the leadership's interpretation. They confirmed that the Mingzheng Tang's combination of Five Masters was the "correct" or "orthodox" (zheng 正) one. However, apparently to avert conflict with other phoenix halls, they also affirmed that diverging combinations of benevolent masters were equally valid, as it had been not just a small group of five, but a great host of deities that implored the Jade Thearch to cancel his plans for world destruction. Thus it is unobjectionable if other phoenix halls include other deities present at this event in their respective groups of masters, such as Wenchang Dijun or Wang Tianjun.11

The Five Benevolent Masters are represented in the Mingzheng Tang by large, gilded statues; they are stern, bearded figures, seated on thrones in the central glass case against the rear wall of the main sanctuary. Guan Sheng Dijun's importance is underlined both by his position at the centre of the group and the larger size of his image.12 The Mingzheng Tang's inner sanctum is located in front of the Masters' glass case so that most spirit-writing proceeds under their watchful eyes.

Although they are worshipped as a group their functions and relative importance differ. As already mentioned, Guan Sheng Dijun is the central

11 Shiyi chandao lu IV:64-65; Fusheng xingdao ji:50-51.
12 Guan Sheng Dijun is actually worshipped twice in the Mingzheng Tang. On the ground floor he is present as one of Five Masters, while on the top floor he presides over the Tongtian Lingxiao Baodian in his function as Jade Thearch. His double function is differentiated iconographically: as a Benevolent Master he wears the usual military attire associated with Guan Sheng Dijun, while as Jade Thearch he is clad in the imperial robes and head-dress marking that office.
figure and is the “presiding deity” (zhuxi 主席, literally: chairperson) of the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang. The other benevolent masters are his deputies (fuzhuxi 副主席). They take care of all affairs of the hall, for example, taking turns at spirit-writing for the purpose of “relieving the world” (jishi). The only fuzhuxi with a clearly defined function is Xuantian Shangdi who serves as the Hall’s “merit and demerit recording deity” (gongguo shen 功過神). He records all the merit and demerit produced at the Hall, rewarding, for example, the pious séance attendants and noting down demerits for any lack of reverence shown by disciples. A specialized merit recording deity is the “Immortal Youth of the Jasper Pool” (Yaochi Xiantong 瑶池仙童) who is responsible solely for recording the merit of the Phoenix Friend’s printing sponsors; as an emissary of the Venerable Mother, his image is worshipped in the third floor “Palace of Limitless Heaven”.

The benevolent masters are aided in their administration of the Hall by a number of subordinate deities, including the Hall’s earth god and city god, and a number of “deities in charge of the rituals” (silishen 司禮神). These lower functions are offices filled by various good souls, usually relatives of phoenix disciples. All of the Mingzheng Tang’s resident deities share in the huge amounts of merit produced there and are therefore regularly promoted upwards in the celestial hierarchy. For this reason the identities of the Hall’s earth god, city god, and silishen change every few years, as the incumbent is promoted to higher rank and replaced by a new office-holder. Except for these lowly functionaries, practically all other resident deities are said to be not represented by an office-holding good soul, but by the respective deity itself.13

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13 An exception is the Hall’s Wenchang Dijun who is represented by the soul of Mingbi’s maternal grandfather.
It is a matter of pride for the Mingzheng Tang that its benevolent masters are subnumina (fenling 分靈) of the deities' original numina (yuanling 元靈) in Heaven. In most ordinary temples, the divine offices are filled by meritorious souls who have nothing per se to do with the deity after whom the office is named. Thus the Mazu of temple X may be surnamed Chen after the soul occupying this office, while the Mazu of temple Y may be surnamed Zhang after its present incumbent. The fact that the Mingzheng Tang’s gods are subnumina rather than office-holders is another sign of the great importance attached to Hall’s mission by Heaven.

Only a small minority of the deities represented by images in the Hall are, however, resident all the time. These are mainly those responsible for the day to day running of the Hall, including the Five Benevolent Masters and their underlings, and the Yellow Thearch who presides over the Academy of Limitless Heaven. The Venerable Mother is not permanently present, but merely visits the Hall on the first and fifteenth of every moon. In a similar, but less formalized manner, other non-resident deities are believed to visit the Hall frequently on their journeys. The residency status of a deity is made clear in the announcement of its arrival during a spirit-writing séance. When resident deities arrive, they are announced as “ascending the platform” (dengtai 登台), because they are already in the temple. If it is a celestial deity that reveals through the planchette, it is said to “descend” (jiang 降) from the heavens.14

A special arrangement has been instituted for the Precious Palace on

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14 A third terminological variation occurs when a resident deity of another temple comes to write in the Mingzheng Tang. In this case the deity is said to “arrive” (dao 到).
the fourth floor of the temple. The high celestial government officials there are, of course, not permanently present; instead the sanctuary is administered by a succession of high deities posted there for short periods of time, usually just a few days. These “temporarily posted deities” (zhujiaoshen 驻驾神) are announced in advance through the planchette and individual sacrifices are directed towards them. For a while, these temporary residents of the Precious Palace were regularly invited to pass on their wisdom to the Hall’s congregation by writing short essays through the planchette. From these a book with the title Book of Phoenix-Teachings of the Immortals and Perfected Ones Stationed [in the Precious Palace of the Spiritual Empyrean] (Zhujia xianzhen xunluan pian 驻驾仙真訓鸞篇) was compiled and published in 1995.

2.2 The Divine Meritocracy

The Mingzheng Tang’s gods are representatives of a larger pantheon that is organized as a bureaucracy. Much has been written about the Chinese conception of the gods as “divine bureaucrats”,15 and although it has been pointed out that this metaphor is not applicable to all aspects of the popular pantheon,16 it is this theme that is most prominent in the Mingzheng Tang’s conception of the gods’ realm. Indeed, it is in phoenix halls that we find the “imperial metaphor” developed to its highest degree. The gods are organized into a complex bureaucracy, headed by the Jade Thearch and extending through all three spheres of existences -- the heavens, the human world, and

15 See the classic description of the model by Arthur P. Wolf [Wolf 1974].
16 In particular, the “anomalous” position of female deities has been pointed out. See, for example, Sangren 1983 and Paper 1995: chapter 8.
the underworld. The principal duties of this divine bureaucracy are the supervision and instruction of humanity. There are numerous deities posted in the human world that are charged with keeping track of every individual’s moral conduct. These divine officials include the "three corpse spirits" (sanshishen), the stove gods, the earth gods, the city gods, the "day and night patrolling spirits" (ri-ye youshen), each of them reporting their findings to their superiors. The reports are recorded in the celestial files kept for each living being; on the basis of these files, decisions on the blessings or punishments of an individual are made. This divine supervision of human conduct is believed by phoenix disciples to be complete; there is nothing that escapes the divine record-keepers’ attention. Thus a pious phoenix disciple spends his or her life under the watchful eyes of a constant and many-layered divine presence. To the morally upright disciple this is not oppressive, as the same gods that supervise and observe are also always at hand to protect him or her as agents of the cosmic moral resonance that bestows blessings upon the good, while punishing the wicked. There exists a firm belief in the justice and fairness of the gods which is derived from a belief in the moral nature of the divine bureaucracy.17

We have seen that humans become gods by means of moral cultivation; conversely, the existing gods are former humans that have risen to their exalted status through their successful cultivation. Promotion to and within the divine bureaucracy is based strictly on merit and is awarded in an equitable manner. This conception is at variance with Taiwanese popular

17 Thus, divine government is not so much modelled after the actual administration of imperial China, but after its ideal state which in actuality it never realized. While popular religious views of the pantheon take into account the people’s real-life experience with the human government administration and accordingly attribute some of its unsavoury traits (such as venality) to the divine bureaucrats, phoenix halls believe in and propagate through their morality books a thoroughly moral, equitable, and just divine meritocracy, supervising humans and determining their fates impartially on the basis of their moral conduct.
religion where the idea of divinity as a reward for and expression of morality competes with a utilitarian emphasis on a spirit’s efficacy (ling 靈) as the main factor prompting its worship as a deity. There exists a broad category of rather ambiguous spirits that have become objects of worship solely because of their perceived efficacy, not because they embody any high moral quality. In Imperial China such cults were regarded by the state as “licentious” and were supposed to be rigorously suppressed. It often happened, however, that the influence of local elites succeeded in procuring an Imperial decree for the appointment of an important local deity of shady background into the recognized meritocratic pantheon, but usually only after it had acquired a new hagiography portraying it as a paragon of public morality. In modern Taiwan the state does not confirm divine appointments anymore, but the dividing line between orthodox divine bureaucrats and unofficial spirits remains in place. In most phoenix halls, this line is strictly observed. Seaman reports that the Pearl Mountain Village cult

... divides ‘gods’ (Shen) into two classes. One of these classes is called ‘the true gods’ (Chen-Shen). These are the gods who have been given title by the Jade Emperor through the regular channels of enfeoffment for merit. The other class is the so-called ‘God Kings’ (Wang-Ye), also sometimes referred to as ‘Dark Gods’ (Yin-Shen). These are spirits that are worshipped as gods although they are not thought to have been appointed by the Jade Emperor. [...] The ‘god-king’ is emphatically the personality or soul of a particular historical person who, for one reason or another, was thought by the living to have such potency after death that they worship him. This is just as emphatically not the case for the gods of the spirit writing cult. In the celestial bureaucracy of the Jade Emperor, all gods are meritorious souls who hold an office granted by the Jade Emperor.”

19 Seaman 1978:55. The spirit-writing cult in Madou included as a case-example in Jordan and Overmyer’s study of spirit-writing in Taiwan is therefore somewhat unusual in its worship of the “Five Kings” (Wufu Qiansui 五府千歲). Actually, when the “Hall of the Wondrous Dharma” was first founded in 1946, the cult had focussed upon the worship of Guan Sheng
The Mingzheng Tang does not explicitly reject the *wangye* 王爺; indeed, its gods acknowledge that some "god-kings" are properly appointed by the Jade Thearch, but in practice the worship of such ambiguous spirits is rare. The strict line between properly appointed and unofficial spirits is maintained, with the Mingzheng Tang (and other phoenix halls) restricting itself to the worship of "orthodox" (*zhengtong* 正統) deities, -- even if the definition of what counts as an orthodox deity may differ from hall to hall. One could say that phoenix halls carry on the ethos of the defunct state-cult by acknowledging and promoting an idealized meritocratic pantheon; and they even seem to have taken on a key function of the state-cult -- the enfeoffment of spirits and the regulation of the spirit-world. Indeed, it is one of the Mingzheng Tang's functions to report on divine appointments and to mediate the deification of human spirits. It derives its authority to do so from its status as part of the divine bureaucracy. The Hall claims to be "under the direct administration of Southern Heaven," i.e., it is a terrestrial subunit of the celestial administration similar to, but ranking higher than a city god temple. As such it is authorized to take part in the official proceedings going on between the various levels of celestial government, including the

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Dijun, having had as its planchette-medium a man who had been a prominent member of an unnamed Taizhong phoenix hall. Most likely this Taizhong hall had been part of the Ruzong Shenjiao tradition which is dominant among central Taiwanese phoenix halls and the medium had brought the practices and beliefs of this tradition with him to Madou. The principal local deities in the Madou area, however, were the Five Kings and when the Hall of the Wondrous Dharma was revived later without the participation of the Taizhong medium, it was these *wangye* deities that moved into the foreground. The example of this hall with its strong local flavour (including even the use of speaking *wangye* mediums) may serve to remind us of the great regional variations among phoenix halls. [Jordan & Overmyer 1986: chapter 4]

20 *Shiyi chandao lu* IV:78.

21 Among the hundreds of god images on different altars in the Mingzheng Tang, I have found exactly one *wangye*, Bao Fu Qiansui 包府千歲, hidden away among a mass of other deities on the top storey sanctuary of the Hall. *Wangye* rarely reveal through the planchette at the Mingzheng Tang.
submission of recommendations for the promotion of meritorious souls. As we have seen the Hall has developed as a specialized instrument for the purpose the “Academy of Limitless Heaven for Realizing the Way,” enrollment in which guarantees eventual deification. The entrance level ranks that the graduates of the Academy are usually first appointed to are differentiated into Buddhist and Daoist titles. Souls appointed to the (Buddhist) Western Heaven start out as bodhisattvas and have to work their way up the nine levels of bodhisattvahood (jiupin liantai) to final salvation in the Limitless Heaven. The souls that are appointed to one of the other four heavens are differentiated by their gender, women becoming “maidens of the Way” (daogu) and men “perfected ones” (zhenren). These entrance-level ranks count as “middle-level” (zhongjie) positions; it is a sign of the Mingzheng Tang’s high standing in the celestial bureaucracy that its “graduates” attain such positions right away, when traditional phoenix halls usually assign lower level (xiajie) positions, for example as earth and city gods.

Only male souls are given functional divine offices, such as clerk in the Thunder Department or secretary in the Bureau of Phoenix Affairs. Women are given a rank and are assigned to a certain heaven, but do not fill any official functions. For daogu and for zhenren there exist twelve degrees; having been promoted to the highest level of this rank, the soul has to take an examination before moving on to the next-highest rank which is

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22 Incidentally, by appointing its protegés to vaguely defined middle-level positions in the heavens rather than to positions as deities in the human world the Mingzheng Tang manages to avoid the confusion often created by the later kind of deification. In the early 1970’s, the Shengxian Tang still followed the traditional phoenix hall custom of reporting the appointment of deceased phoenix disciples or their relatives to earth gods, city gods, or deities in local temples. Not infrequently it came as an unpleasant surprise for the new god’s descendants when they went to worship it at the indicated temple, only to find that no one there was aware of or willing to accept the new identity of their deity.
“immortal maiden” (xiangu 仙姑) for women and “celestial lord” (tianjun 天君) for men. Having gone through the twelve degrees of this rank, it then reaches the rank of “golden immortal” (jinxian 金仙) which signifies final escape from samsara and return to the Venerable Mother’s paradise. At this level apparently no more gender differences are made and the deities are given a wide variety of titles, the most common ones being “celestial worthy” (tianzun 天尊) and “divine lord” (dijun 帝君).

The Mingzheng Tang currently produces dozens of such new deities every year and a number of its shanshu are written by freshmen gods who return to the Hall from time to time to express their gratitude by writing an uplifting essay and to meet with their descendants. Although these new gods are recognized as deities by all phoenix disciples and addressed as “benevolent teachers,” they are actively worshipped only by their descendants. In spite of their official appointment, they are still ancestors and are therefore perceived to be too closely connected to their families for non-relatives to worship them. This is an interesting difference of the Mingzheng Tang’s deification practice to that of traditional phoenix halls. A soul that is appointed to the office of earth god of a traditional phoenix hall is worshipped as such by all members of the hall; that he is also perhaps an ancestor of one family among the hall’s membership does not matter since he fulfills an official function that pertains to the hall in general. By contrast, an ancestral spirit appointed a “perfected man” in a subordinate position of some administrative department of Southern Heaven does not take on a generalized relevance beyond his ancestral status. He is thus unlikely to ever attract worship from anyone but his descendants, to whom he is after all especially indebted as it was they who by their merit transfers made him a god in the first place.
The large numbers of deified ancestors processed by the Mingzheng Tang therefore produce no noticeable changes in the overall pantheon. They blend into the existing structures and do not assume an active significance for anyone except their descendants. However, the pantheon is not immutable; shifts in the Mingzheng Tang's focus of worship influence the understanding of the relative positions of individual deities. These changes are reflected in the Hall's shanshu literature and give us some indication of the flexibility of cosmological conceptions in a cult that controls in its planchette oracle a powerful legitimizing instrument. An important shift in the Mingzheng Tang's pantheon was occasioned by the elevation of the Venerable Mother to the highest position in the cult. In the following I will examine how this shift is reflected in the Mingzheng Tang's conception of the structures of the heavens.

2.3 An Evolving Pantheon

The basic outline of the Mingzheng Tang's view of the heavenly realm was provided by the True Description of the Celestial Sphere (Tianjie chuanzhen), spirit-written by Yongbi at the Shengxian Tang in 1975;\textsuperscript{23} this was the until then most ambitious and systematic attempt at an overview of the structures of the heavenly realm. Among cults devoted to ongoing revelation, no one revelation is ever final, and so the celestial realm described by the Tianjie chuanzhen has not remained unchanged. It does, however, provide an important overview of phoenix halls' conceptions of

\textsuperscript{23} Cf. above Part I, Chapter 3.
the heavenly realm, and I shall therefore summarize its description.24

The heavenly realm can be divided into two great spheres: the sphere of the limitless (wuji 無極), also called “heaven outside the heavens” (tian wai zhi tian 天外之天), and the sphere of the “great ultimate” (taiji 太極), also called “heaven within the heavens” (tian nei zhi tian 天內之天). The Limitless Heaven (Wuji Tian), also known as “Great Canopy Heaven” (Daluo Tian 大羅天), is a sphere of blissful existence, removed from all worldly affairs. It is inhabited by “the Three Pure Ones (San Qing), the Five Venerables (Wu Lao), the golden immortals of high antiquity (shanggu jinxian 上古金仙), and the celestial immortals of the Great Canopy (daluo tianxian 大羅天仙). It contains ten “palaces” (gong 宫).

1. The Palace of Jade Vacuity (Yuxu Gong 玉虛宮) is the residence of the Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Beginning (Yuanshi Tianzun), who at this point of the cult’s development was honoured as the highest ranking cosmic deity. His palace, also known as “Palace of Jade Clarity” (Yuqing Gong 玉清宮) is the “place of origin of the Way of Heaven” (tiandao zhi fayuandi 天道之發源地).

2. The Palace of Supreme Clarity (Taiqing Gong 太清宮) is Laozi’s (Li Laojun’s) residence. From here he controls the (Daoist) teachings (zhangjiao 掌教). The palace contains a large elixir cauldron which is the one the monkey king Sun Wukong had been confined to in the narrative of the Journey to the West. There also is a single-horned blue ox that serves as Li Laojun’s conveyance.

3. The Palace of Superior Clarity (Shangqing Gong 上清宮) is where the Heaven-Penetrating Master of the Teachings (Tongtian Jiaozhu 通天教主)

24 In this I follow in part the summary already given by Zheng Zhiming [1988c].
controls the "techniques of the Way" (*daofa* 道法).

4. - 8. The Palaces of the Five Venerables (*Wu Lao Gong* 五老宮): these are the residences of the personifications of the five phases, located in the five directions of the Limitless Heaven. The Palace of Eastern Florescence (*Donghua Gong* 東華宮) is inhabited by Lord Wood (*Mu Gong* 木公), the Palace of Southern Florescence (*Nanhua Gong* 南華宮) by Red Essence (*Chijing H*), the Palace of Western Florescence (*Yaochi jfe *also called "Jasper Pool", Yaochi 瑤池) by Mother Metal (*Jin Mu* 金母), the Palace of Northern Florescence 北華宮 by Water Essence (*Shuijing H*), and the Palace of Central Florescence 中華宮 by the Yellow Venerable (*Huang Lao* 黃老). These Five Venerables sprang forth from Yuanshi Tianzun, the "ancestor of the Celestial Way" (*tiandaо zhì zu* 天道之祖). Lord Wood and Mother Metal cooperated in refining an elixir from which originated the ancestors of all living beings, i.e., of the ninety-six myriad original spirits (*jiuliu yí yuánlíng* 九六億原靈).

9. The Palace of the Supreme Sage (*Zhisheng Gong* 至聖宮): Its courtyards are planted with peach and plum trees, alluding to the "peaches and plums of the Sages' School" (*shèngmén tào lí* 聖門桃李), i.e., the students of Confucianism. Confucius resides within this palace in the Hall of Literary Florescence (*Wenhua Dian* 文華殿).


The structure of this ultimate realm gives expression to the Shengxian Tang's Daoist orientation at the time. The "Limitless Heaven" is first and foremost the residence of the Three Pure Ones and the Five Venerables, with one of the San Qing, Yuanshi Tianzun, singled out as the ultimate primordial deity. By referring to the Jasper Pool and the ninety-six myriad original numina,
“Mother Metal” (Jin Mu) is identified with the sectarian Venerable Mother and at the same time relegated to a minor cosmological position below the Three Pure Ones. The last two palaces mentioned do not fit into the so far fairly standard Daoist framework. The insertion of the Zhisheng Gong underlines the Confucian self-definition of phoenix halls, while the retirement palace of the seventeenth Jade Thearch serves to bolster the Shengxian Tang’s promotion of Guan Sheng Dijun’s ascension as the eighteenth Jade Thearch. With the Mingzheng Tang’s later shift in focus towards the Venerable Mother, the structure of this Limitless Heaven was to undergo major changes.

By contrast, the structure of the lower heavens has remained fairly constant. They are divided into five heavens according to the five directions. Central Heaven (Zhongtian 中天) is the seat of the Jade Thearch who rules over the other four heavens: Eastern Heaven (Dongtian 東天), Southern Heaven (Nantian 南天), Western Heaven (Xitian 西天), and Northern Heaven (Beitian 北天). The Jade Thearch resides in the Precious Hall of the Numinous Empyrean (Lingxiao Baodian 灵霄寶殿), surrounded by his ministers and imperial guard. Of the lower heavens under his rule, the most significant from a human point of view is Southern Heaven, as the Gate of Southern Heaven (Nantian Men 南天門) is the only point of direct contact between the celestial and the human realms. All traffic between these realms must pass through this gate. Southern Heaven is governed by the Sagely Thearch Wenheng (Wenheng Shengdi 文衡聖帝). He is the executive head of the celestial bureaucracy, responsible for all administrative affairs concerning the heavens and the human world. For this reason, if they are to follow proper bureaucratic procedure, memorials (shuwen 疏文) presented at the Mingzheng Tang have to be first presented by the Mingzheng Tang’s
presiding deity Guan to Wenheng Shengdi who will then forward them to
the proper higher authorities. Before his promotion to the office of Jade
Thearch, Guan Sheng Dijun had served as Wenheng Shengdi and is to this
day worshipped under this title by temples that do not accept the myth of his
ascension. The *Tianjie chuanzhen* is not explicit about the current Wenheng
Shengdi's identity, but the Mingzheng Tang later claimed that Guan Yu's son
Prince Guan Ping (Guan Ping Taizi 閔平太子) had succeeded his father to
this office after the latter's promotion. For this reason, the Mingzheng Tang at
present has a statue of Guan Ping in the regalia of Wenheng Shengdi
installed at the stage-left of the Five Benevolent Masters. As "Wenheng
Shengdi" is merely the designation of an office, the date of his birthday
depends on the birthday date of the present office-holder. At the Mingzheng
Tang, the birthday of "Wenheng Shengdi Guan Ping Taizi" is being celebrated
on Guan Ping's birthday on the thirteenth day of the fifth moon; temples that
persist in identifying Guan Yu as the ruler of Southern Heaven celebrate it on
Guan Yu's birthday on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth moon. To return
to our summary of the *Tianjie chuanzhen*: the administrative centre of
Southern Heaven and the residence of Wenheng Shengdi is the Jade Palace
(Yuque 玉闕). Below it are the various ministries with their specialized
portfolios. They include the

1. Ministry of the Three Talents (Sancai Bu 三才), a kind of office of statistics
for Heaven, Earth, and the human world.

2. Ministry of the Seven Celestial Bodies (Qizheng Bu 七政部), responsible
for the movements of the sun, moon, and the five planets (Venus, Jupiter,
Mercury, Mars, and Saturn).

25 By the same token, the Mingzheng Tang celebrates the Jade Thearch's birthday date of Guan
Yu's birthday, ignoring the popular birthday celebration for the Jade Thearch on the ninth
day of the first moon.
3. Various ministries for the regulation of climatic and other natural phenomena. These include the Ministries of Thunder and Lightning (Leidian Bu 雷電部), of Wind and Rain (Fengyu Bu 風雨部), of Frost and Snow (Shuangxue Bu 霜雪部), and of Water and Fire (Shuihuo Bu 水火部). Each of these is staffed with a director (buzun 部尊) and three thousand “immortal officials” (xianli 仙吏).

4. The Ministry of Generals (Jiangshuai Bu 將帥部): the “high command” of all celestial troops, this department is in charge of all military matters in the heavens. It is headed by Wenheng Shengdi himself with the Pagoda-Holding Celestial King Li Jing (Tuota Tianwang Li Jing 托塔天王李靖) as second-in-command. There are 360 armies, each counting 100,000 soldiers, all of them the souls of human soldiers who have given their lives for their countries.

5. Ministry of Investigations (Jiancha Bu 監察部): Charged with recording any misdemeanours in the Heavens, among humans, and in the underworld. These files are then forwarded to Wenheng Shengdi for his decision.

6. The Administrative Bureau (Xingzheng Fu 行政府): An intermediary agency relaying bureaucratic communication between the Jade Thearch’s and Wenheng Shengdi’s palaces on the one hand and the various ministries of Southern Heaven on the other hand. It maintains the files for all original numina, keeping a record of their present incarnations or reward positions. Other than the ministries described above this Bureau (and all other bureaus, fui) is staffed with five thousand officials.

7. The Bureau of the Immortal Registers (Xianji Fu 仙籍府): Charged with the administration of divine ranks in the heavens. Memorializes to the Jade Thearch on the deification of meritorious mortals, the posting of immortals to the human world, and the promotion of deities to higher ranks.

8. Bureau of Divine Employment (Shenzhi Fu 神職府): Responsible for
appointments to divine office. Memorializes to Wenheng Shengdi on appointments of meritorious souls, new postings of divine office-holders, and the reincarnation in human form of deities who during their term of office have not accumulated sufficient virtue.

9. Bureau of General Salvation (Pudu Fu 普度府): Responsible for the salvation of those who cultivate the Great Way. The conduct of all humans who cultivate the Great Way is constantly supervised by the “day and night patrolling spirits” (ri-ye youshen) or by the “investigator deities or buddhas” of their respective religions. These report to the Bureau of Universal Salvation in Southern Heaven which keeps a continuous record of the cultivator’s progress. The names of those who abandon their quest halfway are struck from the Bureau’s files. Those who are successful are recommended by this Bureau (in concurrence with certification issue by the Three Official Great Thearchs, Sanguan Dadi) for a reward position, which is then formally granted by Wenheng Shengdi.

The Bureau of Universal Salvation has two subunits:

* The Court for Promoting Literature (Zhenwen Yuan 振文院) is headed by a director and staffed with three thousand immortal officials, all of whom had been virtuous writers and poets during their lifetime. The Court’s main task is the protection and promotion of the written word. Of every book in the world, but in particular of the “sagely scriptures, Buddhist scriptures, [...] and the morality books spirit-written by the Phoenix School,” a copy is filed and preserved in this Court.

* The Court of Phoenix Duties (Luanwu Yuan 鷺務院) was established “more than 170 years ago” (i.e., before 1805) at the Jade Thearch’s command in response to the Five Benevolent Masters’ plea to save humanity by means of spirit-writing. It is responsible for the spirit-writing of all religions. Its head is
Huoluo Lingguan Wang Tianjun and its three thousand immortal officials are all deified former planchette mediums.

11. Bureau for Transformation and Nourishment (Huayu Fu 化育府): Responsible for the “transformational nourishment” given to all beings by Heaven and Earth.

12. Bureau of Documents (Wenshu Fu 文疏府): Responsible for all written communication within the heavens and between the heavens and the human world. Thus, all memorials (shuwen) sent from Earth to the heavens are first received by this Bureau where they are registered, examined, and if necessary emended before being forwarded to the addressee. Emendations are made mainly of improper language contained in the memorial; for example, if out of ignorance the petitioner addresses the memorial to the (now already retired) seventeenth Jade Thearch, the Xuanqiong Gao Shangdi, the Bureau of Documents will replace this with the proper title of the eighteenth Jade Thearch, i.e., Xuanling Gao Shangdi.

These twelve ministries and bureaus constitute the backbone of Southern Heaven’s bureaucracy. In addition to these, the *Tianjie chuanzhen* mentions three more subdivisions of this heaven:

1. The Southern Palace, Palace of Reliable Succour (Nan Gong Fuyou Gong 南宫孚佑宫), the residence of Fuyou Dijun, who fills the office of Grand Councillor in the Golden Palace (*Jinque neixiang* 金闕內相).

2. The Palace of the Golden Star Taibai (Taibai Jinxing Gong 太白金星宮), the divine persona of the Tang dynasty poet Li Bai 李白, who serves as Supreme Councillor in the Golden Palace.

3. The Gate of Southern Heaven (Nantian Men 南天門), the only passway between the celestial and the human realms. It is guarded by a detachment of celestial troops commanded by Sun Wukong, the “Great Sage Equal to
Heaven” (Qitian Dasheng Sun Wukong 齊天大聖孫悟空); only persons with the proper documentation (tongxing zheng 通行證) are allowed to pass through it.

As already mentioned, from a human viewpoint Southern Heaven is the most immediately relevant of the four heavens under the rule of the Jade Thearch, as its officialdom mediates all communication between the celestial and the human realms. It is especially important for phoenix halls as it includes a bureaucratic subunit specifically for the administration of spirit-writing. When many phoenix halls claim to be under the “direct administration of Southern Heaven” (Nantian zhixia 南天直轄), they mean that they are directly subordinate to this Court of Phoenix Affairs.

Of the remaining three heavens, Eastern Heaven is the only one with a bureaucratic structure similarly well-developed as that of Southern Heaven. It is ruled over by the Three Official Great Thearchs (Sanguan Dadi 三官大帝). They reside in three palaces: the Palace of Purple Tenuity (Ziwei Gong 紫微宮) is the seat of Thearch Yao, the Heavenly Official Great Thearch (Tianguan Dadi 天官大帝); the Palace of Clear Vacuity (Qingxu Gong 清虛宮) that of Thearch Shun, the Earthly Official Great Thearch (Diguan Dadi 地官大帝); and the Palace of Green Florescence (Qinghua Gong 青華宮) that of Thearch Yu, the Water Official Great Thearch (Shuiguan Dadi 水官大帝). The Sanguan Dadi have control over the recording of good and bad deeds in the human world, over calamities and blessings, life and death, auspicious and inauspicious things, and of people’s life-spans. All requests by humans for “the granting of blessings, forgiveness of sins, longevity, extension of one’s life-span, cancellation of calamities, and resolution of misfortune must be examined and approved by the Three Thearchs. The administration of these functions is performed by twelve bureaus, four for each of the palaces.
bureau is staffed with a director (fuzun 府 尊) and about two thousand immortal officials. Each set of four bureaus is headed by a “Bureau of General Affairs and Documents” (Zongwu Wenshu Fu 總務文書府) that plays the role of a general secretariat for its Palace and the other three bureaus. Under the jurisdiction of the Palace of Purple Tenuity, these specialized bureaus are:

* The Bureau for Realizing the Way and Returning to Perfection (Zhengdao Guizhen Fu 證道歸真府), a registration office for newly bestowed holders of reward positions. These go on to reside in “Pavilions for Cultivators of Perfection” (Xiuzhen Ge 修真閣), “Kiosks for Filial Sons” (Xiaozi Ting 孝子亭), and “Halls for Loyal Ministers” (Zhongchen Ting 忠臣廳), of which fifteen thousand are scattered all through Eastern Heaven.

* The Bureau for the Promotion and Demotion of the Perfected Ones (Zhuzhen Shengjiang Fu 諸真升降府), which supervises and assesses the job performance of the gods.

* The Bureau for Granting Blessings and Extending Life-Spans (Cifu Yannian Fu 錫福延年府), which handles requests for blessings and longevity. For each request a file is compiled on the basis of the reports of those deities stationed in the human world (day and night patrolling spirits, the three corpse spirits, and the investigative spirits) concerning the petitioner’s conduct and merit, which is then submitted for decision to Tianguan Dadi.

The following are the specialized bureaus under the Palace of Clear Vacuity:

* The Bureau for Praising Loyalty and Rewarding Filiality (Baozhong Jiangxiao Fu 賞忠獎孝府), like the Bureau for Granting Blessings and Extending Life-Spans, gathers the reports of the terrestrial control spirits, but with a particular focus on reports of filial and loyal behaviour.
* The Bureau for Forgiving Sins and Resolving Karma (Shezui Jieye Fu 救罪解業府) keeps a comprehensive “merit register of good and bad deeds” (shan‘e gongguo bu 善惡功過簿) and is charged with counting the merits and demerits up against each other.

* The Bureau for Cancelling Disasters and Resolving Calamities (Xiaozai Jie‘e Fu 消災解厄府) keeps a tally of humans’ progress in Way cultivation. For each “demonic trial” (mokao 魔考) successfully withstood by the student of the Way, he/she can obtain the cancellation of one originally destined calamity.

The Palace of Green Florescence’s Bureau of General Affairs and Documents serves as a kind of holding tank where perfected souls await their assignments by the Jade Thearch. The other three bureaus under this palace are

* The Bureau of River Floods (Jianghe Hongshui Fu 江河洪水府) which decides where and when floods should occur.

* The Bureau for Decisions on Life or Death According to Merit and Demerit (Sisheng Gongguo Fu 死生功過府) which records all merits and demerits of an individual and uses them as a basis to determine the appropriate time of birth and death. In the case of death, it is this bureau that notifies the underworld authorities that they should arrest the person in question.

* The Bureau of the Human Way and of the Tenebrous Prisons (Rendao Youjiong Fu 人道幽扃府) which watches of humans’ fulfillment of the human way (rendao), i.e., the four bonds, the eight virtues, the three principles, the five constant virtues. It also memorializes on the granting of “ghost immortal” ranks to cultivating souls in the underworld.
Eastern Heaven also contains a number of palaces serving as residences of deities outside this administrative core structure:

1. Palace of the Eastern Kitchen (Dongchu Gong 東厨宫), the residence of the True Lord Overseer of Destiny (Siming Zhenjun). The stove gods in the human worlds report on women’s conduct in their kitchens on the first and fifteenth days of each moon to this palace. Siming Zhenjun reports to the celestial court.

2. The Bureau of the Celestial Lord Ma of the Nine Heavens (Jiutian Ma Tianjun Fu 九天馬天君府) is located to the right of the Dongchu Gong; it is a garrison building housing Siming Zhenjun’s bodyguard commanded by the Celestial Lord Ma, also known as True Lord Marshall Ma.

3. Hall of the Divine Farmer (Shennong Dian 神农殿), the seat of Shennong Dadi 神農大帝.

4. Bureau of the Astral Lord of the Eastern Dipper (Dongdou Xingjun Fu 東斗星君府), the overlord of all Eastern star constellations.


The bureaucratic structure of Northern Heaven is not as well defined as that of Southern and Eastern Heaven. It is ruled by the Thearch-on-High of the North Pole and of Purple Tenuity (Beiji Ziwei Xuantian Shangdi 北極紫微玄天上帝) who resides in his Palace of Purple Tenuity of the North Pole (Beiji Ziwei Gong 北極紫微宮). In addition, Northern Heaven contains the following five palaces:

1. Palace of the Northern Dipper (Beidou Gong 北斗宮): The residence of the Astral Lord of the Northern Dipper (Beidou Xingjun 北斗星君) who is in charge of humanity’s death registers. When an individual’s life reaches the
end of its predestined span, the Astral Lord crosses that person’s name with red ink from his register. His feared “red brush” (zhubi 朱筆) can, however, also be used more beneficially to record extensions of a person’s life-span in the register.

2. The Palace of the Eastern Marchmount (Dongyue Gong 東嶽宮): Here resides the Great Thearch of the Eastern Marchmount (Dongyue Dadi 東嶽大帝). His main function is that of a record keeper of human conduct. After a person’s death, Dongyue Dadi submits his file to the authorities of the underworld.

3. Bureau of Clear Vacuity in the Palace of Wide Cold (Guanghan Gong Qingxu Fu 廣寒宮清虛府): the residence of the moon deity Astral Lord of Supreme Yin (Taiyin Xingjun 太陰星君).

4. Palace of the Southern Dipper (Nandou Gong 南斗宮): as a counterpart to the Astral Lord of the Northern Dipper, the Astral Lord of the Southern Dipper keeps a record of births in the human world, determining birth dates and places, as well as life-spans. Just as the Lord of the Northern Dipper, his southern colleague can extend a person’s life-span, but he can also diminish it, should the reports from the supervisory deities on earth warrant such a course of action.

5. The Palace of the Northern Pole Star (Beichen Gong 北辰宮): the seat of five astral deities (Beichen 北辰, Zhonggong 中宮, Tianshu 天樞, Tianji 天極, and Jixing 極星).

Besides these palaces, Northern Heaven is said to contain numerous areas for the leisurely and blissful habitation of the immortals.

Finally, there is Western Heaven. This is the paradisiacal place reached by those who have successfully followed the Buddhist path of cultivation by
"keeping a vegetarian diet and reciting the names of Buddhas" (chizhai nianfo 持齋唸佛). The Office for Those Having Taken Refuge (Guiyi Suo 奉依所) keeps a double set of files on all Buddhist practitioners, one set of which is forwarded to the Office for Supervising Cultivation (Jianxiu Suo 監修所). The latter gathers the semimonthly reports from the "main deities" of Buddhist temples everywhere on the conduct of monks and lay-believers under their jurisdiction. Each one of these offices is staffed by a head (zhuchi 主持) and the perfected souls of three thousand former monks. Pious Buddhists can after their death enrol in the Court for Cultivating the Way (Xiudao Yuan 修道院), where they will study for a number years depending on their cultivational achievements in their lifetime. This Court is headed by a "court honoured one" (yuanzun 院尊) and three thousand Buddha officials (foli 佛吏). There are also one thousand "enlightened teachers" (ningshi 明師) who lecture on the "methods of cultivating perfection" (xiuzhen zhi fa 修真之法) and the teachings of the Mahayana and the Hinayana (da, xiaosheng zhi fofa 大、小乘之佛法). The reward positions of those who have successfully completed their time in the Xiudao Yuan are determined by the Court for Realizing the Way (Zhengdao Yuan 證道院). They may become bodhisattvas, arhats, pratyeka-buddhas, or they may receive reward positions in Buddhist temples in the human world. The latter appointments have to be submitted to the Bureau of Divine Employment in Southern Heaven and have to approved by the Sagely Thearch Wenheng. Above the Xiudao Yuan and the Zhengdao Yuan is situated the Court of the Celestial Way (Tiandao Yuan 天道院), an institution of advanced learning for those of exceptional achievements. The above described institutions are the bureaucratic backbone of Western Heaven. As in Eastern and Southern Heaven, this administrative structure is complemented by a number of palaces serving as residences of
individual deities: Guanyin resides in the Purple Bamboo Forest of the Southern Ocean (Nanhai Zizhu Lin 南海紫竹林), Sakyamuni Buddha in Thunder Sound Monastery (Leiyin Si 雷音寺), and King Wen (the father of the founder of the Zhou dynasty, King Wu) in the Hall of King Wen (Wen Wang Dian 文王殿).

The *Tianjie chuanzhen* was probably the first of what became a whole series of descriptions of the celestial realms spirit-written in phoenix halls all over Taiwan. It is a matter of confusion to believers that their accounts differ in many respects: why do different mediums tend to see different things when they visit the same heavens? The usual response given by the gods is that each medium is shown different areas of the heavens so as to avoid a reduplication of efforts and to broaden humanity's knowledge of the celestial realms.\(^\text{26}\) Thus, each single account is incomplete and can always be added to. And indeed, the *Tianjie chuanzhen* inserts at the end of each chapter a statement that there are many more sights in that particular heaven, but that they cannot all be described. Such a provision theoretically leaves room only for later additions to the account, but can be stretched to cover revisions as well. And of these there have been many, both in the spirit-written literature of the Shengxian Tang/ Mingzheng Tang and in that of other phoenix halls. I will here concentrate only on the changes in the Mingzheng Tang's later conceptions of the heavens as these are tied closely to the overall development of the cult's belief system.

The changes mainly affected the Limitless Heaven (Wuji Tian), i.e., the ultimate realm beyond the lower heavens. The latter, the "heavens within

\(^{26}\) Cf., for example, *Yaochi shengzhi*, p.60-61.
heaven” (*tian nei zhi tian*), have traditionally been the principal focus of attention for Taiwanese phoenix halls; they are the home of the Benevolent Masters and the vast majority of deities revealing their teachings through spirit-writing. Within the Ruzong Shenjiao tradition there did exist a conception of an ultimate realm beyond the regions under the Jade Thearch’s rule. Following the Daoist model, this region, called the “Great Canopy Heaven” (*Daluo Tian*), was reigned over by the Three Pure Ones (San Qing).27 It did not, however, play a significant role in the ritual life of traditional phoenix halls. It was to the heavens closer to the human world that phoenix disciples looked for instruction and guidance, and it was this realm that they hoped to be reborn into.

In the first half of the 1970’s, the Shengxian Tang made a conscious effort to formalize phoenix halls’ worship of the Three Pure Ones and to better define the ultimate realm beyond the lower heavens. The first clear result of this endeavour was the writing of the *Most High’s True Scripture of the Limitless and Primordial Beginning* (*Taishang wuji hunyuan zhenjing*), adding a secondary focus on Yuanshi Tianzun to the Shengxian Tang’s cult of Guan Sheng Dijun as the Jade Thearch (which had been affirmed by the revelation of the *Jade Thearch’s Sacred Scripture for Universal Salvation*, *Yuhuang pdu shengjing*). The *Tianjie chuanzhen’s* description of the Limitless Heaven reinforced this new awareness of an ultimate transcendent realm; the structures of this realm were an elaboration of the Ruzong Shenjiao phoenix hall tradition’s Daoist influenced, but vague idea of the Great Canopy Heaven ruled over by the Three Pure Ones. The *Tianjie chuanzhen’s* addition of the Five Venerables also followed Daoist cosmology, but had the probably not

27 Cf. the precious appellation of the Three Pure Ones in *Rumen kefan*, p.176. The following individual appellations for each of the Three Pure Ones (pp.176-177) are identical to those used in the Daoist liturgical manual *Taishang xuanmen risong*. 

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unintended side-effect of subordinating the maternist sectarians’ Venerable Mother in her Daoist identity of “Mother Metal” to the sovereignty of Yuanshi Tianzun. The remaining two denizens of the Limitless Heaven represent clear departures from the Daoist model: Confucius is there to affirm phoenix halls’ claim of adhering to the Confucian tradition (Ruzong), and the presence of the retired seventeenth Jade Thearch supports the Shengxian Tang’s claim that Guan Sheng Dijun is the reigning eighteenth incumbent of this office.

The Mingzheng Tang’s first systematic effort to elaborate on the basic outline of the heavens provided by the Tianjie chuanzhen were the Historical Records of Short-Cuts to Completing the Way Among the Three Realms of Existence (Sancao chengdao jiejing shizhuan 三曹成道捷徑史傳). It describes a series of spirit-visits paid by Yongbi and his spirit-familiar Nezha to perfected beings in the heavens, in the underworld, and among humans. The emphasis here is on the collection of models for successful cultivation and on the theoretical discussion of the process of cultivation and the problems and difficulties encountered therein. At the same time, however, these visits afforded an opportunity to add some details to the rough outline of the heavens given by the Tianjie chuanzhen. Their major contribution is perhaps the development of a theodicy, an explanation of the role of evil in the cosmos.

A major obstacle encountered by anyone engaged in virtuous cultivation are the so-called “demonic trials” (mokao 魔考). These appear mainly in the form of temptations appealing to the disciple’s greed, lust, and other character flaws that are targeted for eradication in the process of
cultivation. How one fares when faced with such a trial indicates how far one has progressed in one’s efforts at cultivation. As the Historical Records are devoted to the elucidation of the process of cultivation, these demonic trials figure prominently in the book. They are attributed to a separate realm of demons, the “Demonic Way” (modao 魔道). This Demonic Way is part of the natural evolution of the cosmos in each cycle of existence (huiyuan 會元). It starts out as a diffuse and unstructured force called “demonic power” (moli 魔力), which grows in the interstices of each cosmic cycle. Over time it develops into an ordered structure, called the Demonic Way. The Demonic Way is completely divorced from the Correct Way (zhengdao 正道), “becoming a kind of heterodox and evil world of its own” (zi cheng yi zhong xie‘e de tiandi 自成一種邪惡的天地). The demons inhabiting this world think that they represent the true way (renwei tamen ziji cai shi zhengtong 認為它們自己才是正統); they want humans to believe in them and strive to dominate the universe. However, as creatures of darkness, they cannot outshine the brilliance of the Correct Way and thus have to be content with trying to harm, destroy, and obstruct it wherever they can. The Historical Records locate this demonic world mainly in the atmosphere which constitutes a liminal space between the heavens and the human world. However, besides the “demonic region of death” (siwang moyu 死亡魔域), the atmosphere also contains pure areas of “grotto-heavens and blessed places” (dongtian fudi 洞天福地). Though it is a sphere shared by the pure and the impure, they do not intermingle there, but remain strictly separated and even antagonistic. The atmosphere is a battleground for the forces of good and evil; one of the beings visited by Yongbi and Nezha was the Demon-Quelling Marshall (Zhenmo

28 Luanyou 257:10.
29 Luanyou 256:13.
Yuanshuai 燕魔王, a golden immortal posted with his army in the atmosphere, there to battle the ubiquitous demons.\(^{30}\) The great attention paid in the *Historical Records* to the evil, demonic elements of the cosmos adds an important element to our phoenix hall's worldview. However, it was probably inspired less by a concern for completeness, but by personal circumstances in the life of Yongbi. At the time, Yongbi had just returned to his duties as planchette medium after about a year's absence, caused by serious problems in his personal life and especially his personal conduct. Yongbi apparently was seriously troubled by his own unstable moral constitution; the constant fight within him between the profligate sinner and the earnest seeker after the Dao is reflected in his writings, the two sides of his personality being represented by “Yongbi” and “Nezha” respectively.

The next evolutionary step in the development of the Mingzheng Tang's conception of the heavens was caused when the Hall switched its allegiance from Yuanshi Tianzun to the Venerable Mother as the primordial deity reigning over the Limitless Heaven. This necessitated the writing of a new celestial travelogue to adapt the structure of the Limitless Heaven to the new cultic emphasis. Between 1981 and 1982, Yongbi wrote the *Sacred Gazetteer of the Jasper Pool* (*Yaochi shengzhi* 瑤池聖誌), a detailed description of the Venerable Mother's paradise. It does not explicitly contradict the *Tianjie chuanzhen*’s account, but still manages to change the whole image of the ultimate realm by focussing and elaborating on just one section, namely the Jasper Pool. While before the Jasper Pool had merely been the residence of the Golden Mother as one of the Five Venerable Ones, it now became the centre of the Limitless Heaven by means of the lovingly detailed

\(^{30}\) *Luanyou* 248:6-11.
description given of it by Yongbi. It is made clear that this is the paradise that the original spirits will be able to return to if they persevere in their cultivation. A secondary objective pursued in the *Yaochi shengzhi* is to further affirm Guan Sheng Dijun’s status as Jade Thearch. The Venerable Mother has an edict proclaimed in which she deplores the confusion of her children, in particular in respect to Guan’s status; to resolve this confusion, she gives formal permission to Yongbi to visit and interview the retired Jade Thearchs, seven or eight of which reside in the Jasper Pool. On this occasion it turns out that the Yellow Thearch had been the first Jade Thearch; after he had served his term of office, he spent several eons at ease in Limitless Heaven, before the cyclical movement of the cosmos reached the point where he was destined to descend to earth and become the founder of the Chinese nation.31 In the final chapter Yongbi is led to attend an assembly of all eighteen Jade Thearchs, during which the official title and original identity of each is revealed.

The *Yaochi shengzhi* was the Mingzheng Tang’s last great cosmographic oeuvre; in one stroke it put the Venerable Mother’s paradise which had been sadly neglected in the *Tianjie chuanzhen* into the centre of the Hall’s image of the ultimate realm, Limitless Heaven, reaffirmed Guan Sheng Dijun’s exalted position as Jade Thearch, and gave a heightened profile to the Yellow Thearch who had assumed an important position in the Mingzheng Tang during the preceding years of close cooperation with the Xuanyuan Jiao. Yongbi continued to write spirit-travelogues to other parts of the cosmos, such as the ocean kingdoms of the Dragon Kings (*Shuijing Gong youji* 水晶宮遊記) and to purgatory (*Wangsicheng youji* 杜死城遊記), but

31 *Yaochi shengzhi*, pp.81-82.
the Mingzheng Tang’s conception of the celestial realm found its final
definition in the *Yaochi shengzhi*.* But perhaps “final” is not the right word;
the future may bring new gods and new myths that will have to be given
their rightful place in the great cosmic scheme. The planchette may then pick
up where it had left off after the completion of the *Yaochi shengzhi*,
reconstructing and recreating the myths of a cosmos that never stands still.

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32 Subsequently, only one more celestial travelogue was written at the Mingzheng Tang,
Mingbi’s *Record of a Journey to the Penglai Isles of the Immortals* (*Penglai xiandao youji* 蓬萊仙島遊記). Even though this work was called a *youji*, its focus lay on matters of cultivation
and it added relatively little to the Hall’s celestial geography.
CHAPTER 3: RITUALS

3.1 The Basic Structure of Rituals

Most rituals of the Mingzheng Tang are based on a simple liturgical pattern. Its basic steps are:
1. greeting the deity;
2. presenting an offering;
3. interacting with the deity;
4. taking leave from the deity.

This basic pattern manifests itself in two liturgical types: (1) the spirit-writing séance which entails communication from the gods to humans, and (2) festive rituals that communicate a message from the humans to the gods. In the following I shall describe first a typical spirit-writing séance as an example for the first type, and then give the outline of a divine birthday celebration as an example for the second type.

3.1.1 The Spirit-Writing Séance

On a call from one of the Hall's vice-chairmen over the temple's PA-system, all phoenix disciples, wearing their "ceremonial clothes" (lifu 禮服), i.e., long, high-buttoned blue gowns and black cloth shoes, enter the ground-floor temple hall, the women arranging themselves in a row to the stage-right of the altar, the men to the stage-left, the two rows facing each other. Then the vice-chairman, Mr. Chen*, calls out: "The bell-and-drum disciple shall proceed to his place!" (zhonggusheng jiuwei 鐘鼓生就位!). The bell-
and-drum disciple steps in front of the offering table, performs the ritual of “three kneelings and nine kowtows” (*sangu jìukòu 三跪九叩*) towards the images of the Five Benevolent Masters, kneels down again, and opens the séance by beating forty-six times on the bronze bell and ninety-two times on the “wooden fish” placed on the offering table. While he is doing this, the medium Mingbi carries out his “three kneelings and nine kowtows”, then kneels down again and three time raises up three thick sticks of incense. After handing them to an attendant, who places them in the incense burner in the middle of the room, and performing one more kneeling and three more kowtows, Mingbi proceeds to the fenced off inner sanctuary. He places himself in front of the table with the sandtray, straightens out his gown, places his palms together, and speaks an inaudible prayer.

Meanwhile five more functionaries have knelt three times and kowtowed nine times. As the drumming and bell-striking draws to an end, they enter the inner sanctuary and take up positions to both sides of the seated medium, three of them to his right where as “readers” (*changluansheng* 唱鷄生) they are going to call out the written characters, and two to his left at standing desk, where as “scribes” (*bilusheng* 筆錄生) they will copy down the characters on paper. Mingbi takes up the planchette, raises it with outstretched arms high over his head, and awaits the onset of trance. His assistants stand waiting with folded hands, while the rest of the phoenix disciples outside the sanctum kneel down. This includes two “disciples for receiving the deity” (*jiejiasheng* 接鷄生), who have taken up position between the main entrance and the offering table, clasping three sticks of incense in their folded hands. To the accompaniment of the wooden fish, all except the medium start to intone the “Mantra for Purifying the
Three Karmas" (淨三業神咒) whose purpose it is to invite the gods to descend:

Within the many realms of the body,  
There are 36,000 deities.  
Every movement and action stores up  
karma past and present.  
I desire that my body be free and independent,  
Constantly dwelling in the midst of the Three Treasures,  
So that in times of disaster and destruction,  
My body will not be destroyed.  
When I recite this true text,  
May the karma of my body, mind and mouth all be purified,  
Quickly, quickly as in response to a command.¹

Usually a deity arrives before the mantra is recited in full; if not, the recitation is repeated as often as necessary. On arrival of the deity, marked by the planchette crashing down upon the sandtray, all disciples outside the sanctum kowtow, while those inside the sanctum bow their heads. The medium rapidly writes out the name of the descending deity: “Deity XY

¹ My translation follows with only slight modifications that found in Jordan & Overmyer 1986:120-121. Jordan & Overmyer understand the Three Treasures mentioned in the mantra as “the Way, scriptures, and masters” [1986:121]. In the Mingzheng Tang, however, sanbao 三寶 usually refers to “spirit, matter-energy, and essence” (shen 神, qi 氣, jing 精), i.e., the objects of cultivation within the human body (see for example Tiandao aoyi, chapter 10). As is clear from the text of the mantra, it is not a direct invitation for a deity to descend; rather it affirms (and perhaps, as a performative speech act, produces) the ritual purity of the congregation and thus its worthiness of the deity’s presence. Purity is an important concern in a phoenix hall, both in a metaphysical and a physical sense. In fact, one feature that distinguishes phoenix halls from folk religious temples is their cleanliness. Just as the temple itself has to be clean, so the phoenix disciple is expected to attend séances in a reasonably clean state. The communal vegetarian dinner or lunch before séances is not only a way of infusing a sense of communitas among the disciples, but also makes sure that they do not ingest unclean food (i.e., meat products) shortly before a séance.

I do not know how widespread the use of this mantra in spirit-writing séances is. While Jordan & Overmyer list it among the writings of the “Hall of Wondrous Dharma”, it appears there as part of a scripture. A Daoist manual, the Michuan wanfa guizong 秘傳萬法歸宗, lists a “Mantra for Inviting the Gods” (Qingxian zhou 青仙咒), which is a more direct invitation to the gods to descend. This mantra, however, is not known in the Mingzheng Tang, though it may have been used by Cantonese spirit-writing cults in the past (cf. Shiga 1995: 13; for a description of the rituals surrounding a spirit-writing séance according to the Wanfa guizong see von der Goltz 1893:27). Another invitation mantra has been translated by Henri Maspero (quoted in Thompson 1982:97-98).
descends!” After calling out the name character by character, the changluansheng call upon the congregation to “reverently receive the benevolent master” (gong jie enzhu shengjia 恭接恩主聖駕). The disciples stay in their kowtow position, while the bell-and-drum disciple beats his bell nine times and the wooden fish eighteen times. Then they rise and remain standing while the deity writes out the message.

When a paragraph has been written, the medium pauses, and one of the scribes reads out his notations. If a mistake has crept into the record, the medium shortly raps the sandtray with the planchette, whereupon the readers or the other scribe offer corrections. If the deity deems none of the opinions offered correct, it will rap the sand-tray again and write out the intended character. When the text has been concluded, the deity announces that “it will do. I withdraw!” (ke, wu tui! 可，吾退！) and the readers call out for everybody to “reverently see off the Benevolent Master!” (gong song enzhu shengjia 恭送恩主聖駕). Everybody drops down into kowtow position (including the jiejiasheng who now face out of the temple) and remains thus until the bell-and drum-disciple has finished striking the bell nine times and the wooden fish eighteen times. The medium comes out of his trance. First the bell-and-drum disciple, then the medium, and then the scribes and readers take their leave from the benevolent masters by performing three kneelings and nine kowtows each in front of the offering table. Finally all other disciples turn towards the images of the gods and take their leave with three bows (san jugong 三鞠躬). The séance is concluded.

Typically, a séance such as described above would last at least about twenty to twenty-five minutes. In most cases, however, it is lengthened to
forty or fifty minutes by the advent of several deities in succession. During
this time all disciples are expected to stand still and not make any sound. The
jiejiasheng are relieved on a rotating basis by fresh disciples every five
minutes. In any given séance, the positions of jiejiasheng are filled from the
men’s side or the women’s, but the genders never mix within one séance.

The four basic liturgical steps in this ritual are (1) the greeting of the
deity by the functionaries’ “three kneelings and nine kowtows”, (2) the
offering of incense by the medium before he enters his trance, (3) the
interaction with the deity in the shape of the actual spirit-writing, and (4) the
leave-taking of the functionaries with three kneelings and nine kowtows.

A séance using the “marvellous method” follows the same basic
pattern, with the following differences: it takes place in the third floor
sanctuary of the Venerable Mother; all disciples outside the sanctum are fitted
out with a single stick of incense as a special sign of respect; these are collected
after the arrival of the Venerable Mother and stuck as a bunch into the central
incense burner; only two assistants accompany the medium into the sanctum
and their tasks are merely to hold down and periodically exchange the yellow
sheets of paper which the medium is writing on. No calling out of characters
takes place; instead, the complete text is read out by Mingbi at the central
offering table after the conclusion of the séance. During the reading, one of
his assistants marks every mention of the name of a deity with a sound of the
bell. When he has finished reading, the whole congregation claps applause.

The two séance patterns described so far are both fairly solemn
occasions requiring the attendance of all disciples present at the time. A third
and much less formal occasion for spirit-writing is the so-called “relieving of
the world” (jishi 濟世). These séances are held Sunday mornings and are devoted to the answering of written questions handed in by people in person or mailed in. Jishi spirit-writing is performed by means of the marvellous method even though it has nothing to do with the Venerable Mother: the responding deity here is usually one of the Mingzheng Tang’s Five Benevolent Masters. In fact, up until 1982 jishi was performed with the wooden brush. Then the gods authorized the use of the “marvellous method” for the sake of speed and convenience in handling an ever increasing number of requests by believers. The liturgy is basically identical to that of the formal séances, except that only one assistant accompanies the medium into the sanctum and that no congregation stands to attention. Indeed, after spirit-writing has commenced people are allowed to talk and move about in the hall. The assistant in the sanctum reads the questions in a low voice to the medium who forthwith writes out the answer. The yellow sheet with the scribbled answer is then laid aside together with the question. Another phoenix disciple picks them up and carries to them to a group of tables set up in the hall where a number of disciples process the questions by believers and copy out the god’s answers into legible hand-writing, handing them either to the questioners if they are personally present or stuffing them into envelopes for mailing. If necessary the medium will also write out a charm to be given to the questioner. Of these the Mingzheng Tang keeps a preprinted supply which only have to be validated by the “golden brush” to become effective.

The relatively informal character of jishi says something about its secondary position in the Mingzheng Tang. In fact, most phoenix disciples’ attitude toward jishi is rather ambivalent. On the one hand it is seen as valuable in that it provides practical assistance to people in need, be they
phoenix disciples or outside believers. Also, it clearly is a part of the Mingzheng Tang’s activities which is of great attractiveness to non-members and an important source of income for the Hall, as many people who use this service feel duty-bound to show their appreciation with some donation of money. On the other hand, this kind of oracular service locates the Hall uncomfortably close to providers of homologous services, such as tang-ki, fortune-tellers, geomancers and other often somewhat shady religious practitioners. Therefore the Mingzheng Tang’s disciples tend to downplay the importance of jishi in favour of the Hall’s book writing and publishing activities, which are believed to represent its true and principal mission. Indeed, it is a common criticism of other phoenix halls that they “only perform jishi.” Especially for traditional rural phoenix halls it is not uncommon to focus almost exclusively on providing such oracular services.

This is seen by Mingzheng Tang members 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” by means of spirit-written books.

2 The lower importance attached to jishi séances is also reflected in its lower level of member participation. While 39% of respondents to my questionnaire indicated that they attended book writing séances on Sunday’s every time, only 25% said the same for the jishi séances held on the same day.

3 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 view that a phoenix hall that emphasizes jishi over the writing of books is of a lower order is applied by some Mingzheng Tang phoenix disciples to the Shengshou Gong 鈦鈦宮, 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 focusses 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 century, the Divine Lord of Reliable Succour (Fuyou Dijun 佐佑帝君) complains that during the several decades that he has been conducting spirit-writing
Vice-chairman Chen*, who usually acts as Mingbi’s assistant during jishi, has found a way to make the Mingzheng Tang’s jishi more respectable by using it as an opportunity to pose questions concerning doctrinal and liturgical matters. These together with the more generally interesting of the other questions asked are published in the Phoenix Friend and from time to time are collected into a series of books called Records Explaining Meanings and Expounding the Way (Shiyi chandao lu 釋義開道錄). Thus, even the Mingzheng Tang’s jishi is made to serve higher purposes than merely helping people choose a lucky day for their wedding or issuing them with a charm to assist in the university entry examinations.

3.1.2 The Birthday Congratulatory Ceremony (Zhushou Dianli 祝壽典禮)

The basic steps remain the same in a deity’s birthday celebration, although their concrete contents change. The exceptional character of the event is underlined by the use of a liturgist who calls out each step in the liturgy. After formally announcing the beginning of the ceremony, the greeting of the deity commences with thirty-six bell sounds and seventy-two drum beats, followed by the setting off of a string of firecrackers outside the Hall. After this the whole congregation performs three bows (san jugong) towards the altar. Then the here much more elaborate offering is presented.

in Beijing, “there have been very many shrines that relieve the world (jishi), but only very few that have requested books (qingshu 請書)” (quoted in Fan Chunwu 1996:124). The juxtaposition of jishi and qingshu parallels the Mingzheng Tang’s categories of jishi and zhushu.

4 This series has by now grown to ten volumes which have been a prime resource for my understanding of religious attitudes in the Mingzheng Tang.
The “principal sacrificer” (zhujisheng 主祭生), usually the chairman of the Hall, steps in front of the offering table, accompanied by two assistants (peijisheng 陪祭生). He is first handed incense-sticks from his right-hand side assistant, raises them three times, and then hands them to his left-hand side assistant who places them into the incense-burner. The principal sacrificer then proceeds to perform the “ritual of the three offerings” (sanxian li 三獻禮). The assistant to his right hands him a plate with vegetarian food, which he raises once towards the gods in the back of the hall, and then hands to his left-hand side assistant who places it on the offering table. The same procedure is repeated with a plate of fruits and a plate of “longevity peaches” (shoutao 寿桃, a peach-shaped pastry).\(^5\) When the offering is completed, the principal sacrificer unfolds a “prayer text” (zhuwen 祝文) consisting of poetic hymns celebrating the deity’s virtue and power which are chanted in the traditional style used for the recitation of poetry.\(^6\) Afterwards the zhuwen is burnt and the whole congregation performs three kneelings and nine kowtows to express their felicitations (baishou 拜壽). For the concluding part of the ceremony another string of firecrackers is set off and the whole congregation performs three bows towards the images of the deities.

The “greeting” and “departing” phases of the liturgy are marked with drum and bell beats, “three bows”, and the setting off of firecrackers. The offerings are much more elaborate here than in the spirit-writing séance: the simple offering of incense-sticks is complicated by the use of two assistants

\(^5\) The Mingzheng Tang insists that only vegetarian sacrifices be offered to gods, ghosts, or ancestors. It distances itself clearly from the popular religious practice of meat sacrifices which is often criticized by the Mingzheng Tang’s gods as a deplorable aberration.

\(^6\) Nowadays, few people are able to chant poetry in the traditional manner. In the Mingzheng Tang, Chairman Zhang* who comes from a traditional scholarly background is the only person capable of it. On one occasion he could not attend a birthday celebration and his place was taken by the medium Mingbi who simply read the zhuwen in unemphasized intonation.
Instead of one, and by the subsequent addition of the “three offerings”. In the “interaction” phase, the direction of ritual action is reversed. While in the spirit-writing séance at this point the descending deity speaks to the humans in the Hall, in the birthday celebration it is the humans who speak to the deity via the chanting and burning of the zhuwen. The three kneelings and nine kowtows following next are here part of the interaction phase as they affirm by ritual action the felicitations so eloquently expressed in the zhuwen.

Other rituals involving a communication directed from the Mingzheng Tang as a community to the gods follow the basic outline of the birthday celebration, with only minor changes necessitated by the nature of the occasion. For example, the ritual for presenting a new morality book to Heaven (jiaoshu dianli 上書典禮) substitutes a memorial (shuwen 疏文), declaring the presentation, for the “prayer text” (zhuwen) and leaves out the three kneelings and nine kowtows (which, as we have seen, are part of the birthday felicitations, and therefore have no place in the book-presentation ceremony). Similar variations occur in other solemn presentations of memorials, such as at the conclusion of a dharma assembly or when seeing off the gods shortly before the lunar New Year, or welcoming them back shortly thereafter.
3.2 Calendar of Ritual Events

3.2.1 Spirit-Writing Séances

The most frequent ritual activity at the Mingzheng Tang are, of course, the spirit-writing séances (luanqi 期). These can be differentiated into “book-writing” (zhushu 书) séances devoted to the composition of edifying texts on morality, and “charitable” (jishi) séances during which the practical problems and questions of petitioners are answered. Both types take place every weekend, “book-writing” séances being held Saturdays from 6:30 p.m. and Sundays from 3:30 p.m. These usually last anywhere from thirty to sixty minutes. “Charitable” séances are held Sundays between 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m., interrupted by a lunch break. The actual length of time devoted to “relieving the world” depends on the amount of requests and petitions to be processed. Such a time pattern is quite different from the usage of traditional phoenix halls which arranged their séances by the lunar calendar. For example, séances could be scheduled to take place on “every day containing a ‘two’” (mei feng er 㖼逢二), i.e., on the second, twelfth, and twenty-second day of each moon.\(^7\) In the first half of the 1970s, the Shengxian Tang, too, followed a lunar pattern in its séance schedules. In 1975, for example, “book writing” and “charitable” séances were held on the third, sixth, ninth, thirteenth, sixteenth, nineteenth, twenty-third, twenty-sixth, and twenty-ninth days of each moon; séances devoted to administrative affairs of the Hall were to be held every first and fifteenth day.\(^8\) While such lunar schedules could accommodate the farmer membership of rural phoenix halls, they

\(^7\) This, for example, was the schedule of the spirit-writing cult studied by Gary Seaman \[Seaman 1978:82\].

\(^8\) Luanyou 139:9.
created problems for urban halls whose membership usually followed professions with less flexible working hours. Soon after its founding, the Mingzheng Tang therefore adapted its ritual timetable to the secular work week, beginning its séances on Saturday nights, when most phoenix disciples had finished their day’s work, and continuing through Sunday, the work-free day of the week. The wide geographical dispersion of the Hall’s membership is another reason for this scheduling: some disciples, including some of the deputy chairpersons, travel two to four hours from their home towns to attend a séance at the Hall, something that would be impossible for them on regular working days.

The lunar calendar is still followed in the scheduling of the book-writing séances devoted to the Venerable Mother who descends into the Hall on the evening of every first and fifteenth lunar day. The retention of the quasi-sacred lunar schedule here marks the special status of the Venerable Mother. The higher merit amounts assigned for attendance at these séances are partly a reflection of the supreme status of the revealing deity, but are also understood to be a compensation for the greater inconvenience to phoenix disciples caused by the scheduling.

3.2.2 Dharma Assemblies

The Hall’s “dharma assemblies” (fahui 法会) are periodic events. While the weekly and semi-monthly séances are attended principally by the core adherents, dharma assemblies are large-scale occasions that mobilize segments of the two outer rings of the Mingzheng Tang’s adherents.
Periodical dharma assemblies held at the Hall include the spring and autumn sacrifices (chunji 春祭, qiuji 秋祭) and assemblies held for the birthdays of gods.

3.2.2.1 Divine Birthdays

The Mingzheng Tang celebrates the birthdays of altogether thirty-seven deities (see Appendix 5). The liturgical corepiece of the celebration is the solemn congratulatory ceremony described above. To enable disciples living in other areas of Taiwan to attend, for most deities on the list this ceremony is performed on the regular séance day nearest to the actual birthday. In recent years this practice has also been established for the two birthdays celebrated in grander style, those of the Venerable Mother and of the Divine Lord Sage Guan. For these two high deities, one-day dharma assemblies (yitian fahui 一天法會) are held, during which the congratulation ceremony is supplemented with scripture recitations, book-presentation ceremonies, and other ritual items (such as numinous healing). Formerly these birthday celebrations had been the main annual ritual events of the Hall, but since 1987 they have been replaced in significance by the so-called spring and autumn sacrifices.

3.2.2.2 The Spring And Autumn Sacrifices (Chunji 春祭, Qiuji 秋祭)

The spring and autumn sacrifices, now the most important ritual events of the Hall, are of comparatively recent origin. They were instituted in
1988 by command of the Venerable Mother and of the Yellow Thearch, shortly after the opening of the new temple building in Dakeng. They are closely tied to the Academy for Realizing the Way and are primarily intended as ancestral sacrifices directed towards the souls enroled as students in the Academy. The Academy schedules two examinations every year, one shortly before the spring sacrifice, the other shortly before the autumn sacrifice. These sacrifices are opportunities for the descendants of all students to worship their ancestors in the Academy, and for those whose ancestral souls have just graduated to express their gratitude to the Academy and their felicitations to their now deified ancestors by means of sacrifices. The spring sacrifice is held some time in the third moon, the autumn sacrifice in the ninth moon, the exact date being determined by the gods a few months in advance of the event. Invitations to attend are sent to the descendants of Academy students, hundreds of whom usually come to present their offerings and pay their obeisances to their ancestors and the Hall’s gods.

In the few years since their inception, these two sacrifices have developed into the year’s major ritual events. Starting out as one-day festivals focussing on the ancestral sacrifices, they soon came to cover two days, and to include progressively more ritual features. First, “charitable” séances and “numinous healing” were added for the benefit of the visiting relatives; then the significance of the event was heightened by the inclusion of presentation ceremonies for new morality books. Two other important additions were the veneration of so-called “bushels” (dou 斗) and that of a rite of universal salvation (pudu 普度).

Bushel veneration (lidou 禮斗) is a custom widespread in Chinese
popular religion. A “bushel” is a cylindrical container filled with rice into which a number of symbolic objects are stuck: a charm, scissors, scales, a mirror, a ruler, a sword, and a lamp. Although the exact meaning of these objects is unknown to most phoenix disciples, it is generally understood that the whole bushel creates a symbolic connection of its sponsor with the astral fate-determining deities. The most important of these are the Astral Lord of the Northern Bushel (Beidou Xingjun 北斗星君) and the Astral Lord of the Southern Bushel (Nandou Xingjun 南斗星君); they are responsible for the death and birth of humans respectively and are worshipped because of their powers of lengthening or shortening the life-spans of humans. However, they are not merely addressed for their straightforward bureaucratic function of keeping the life and death registers. As astral deities, they are part of a complex of beliefs pertaining to the determination of fate by the movement of the stars. Bushels are therefore sponsored mainly by persons or families concerned about a perceived astrological threat to their “original destiny” (benming 本命); they are thus at bottom fate-correcting ritual measures.9 Bushel veneration is practised by many popular religious temples and often is an important source of income for them, as each bushel is bought by a family desirous of the blessings conferred through it.10 There exists a hierarchy of bushels, the prominence of their display during the ritual service dependent on their rank and price. While the functionally related worship of the Year God (Taisui 太歲), who is represented by a bushel, had long been practised in the Mingzheng Tang, the sale of individual bushels during dharma

9 See McCreery 1973 on the use of bushels in the ritual repertoire of a Daoist fashi. For many ordinary worshippers not well versed in the astrological intricacies involved in bushel worship, these ritual objects are simply another means of praying for peace and averting calamities [Baity 1975:159].

10 Philip Baity estimated in the early 1970s that for many community temples in the northern Taiwanese Danshui area “income from the li-tou services constitute[d] the largest single source of income from ritual services.” [1975:195]
assemblies only began in 1992, ostensibly to offer believers a way to create merit for themselves and to obtain the numinous blessings of Beidou and Nandou Xingjun. To bolster the latter function of creating a bond of responsiveness (ganying 感應) with the astral deities, the Northern Bushel's Marvellous Scripture for Prolonging Life (Beidou yanshou miaojing 北斗延壽妙經) and the True Scripture of the Pure Empyrean Lord of Way of the Southern Bushel for Resolving Distress (Nandou Lingxiao Daojun jie’ezhenjing 南斗凌霄道君解厄真經) are recited during the dharma assembly. Besides the fate-determining astral deities, bushels can also create a resonance with the gods after whom they are named. At the 1994 spring sacrifice, which I attended, fifteen bushels devoted to different deities were for sale which were grouped in three price categories. The bushels to the Venerable Mother, the Jade Thearch, the Yellow Thearch, and the Divine Lord Sage Guan were priced at NT$10,000 each, while those to Wenheng Shengdi, Guanyin, Fuyou Dijun, Xuantian Shangdi, Siming Zhenjun, Yue Wumu Wang, Wenchang Dijun, Yuexia Laoren 月下老人, Zhusheng Niangniang 註生娘娘, and Wufu Caishen Yuanshuai 五福財神元帥 sold at NT$5,000 each. The lowest category was occupied by the "public bushel" (gongdou 公斗) a share in which could be bought for NT$3,000. The purchaser of a bushel had a memorial form filled out with the names of the family members which was then inserted into the bushel. All bushels were displayed during the dharma assembly on a temporary altar outside the Hall.

It was also in 1992 that apparently for the first time a Buddhist monk

11 The Northern Dipper’s Scripture is a Daoist text (cf. Daozang 341). The Southern Dipper’s Scripture seems to be a spirit-written text: its preface is dated the fifteenth day of the first month in the fifteenth year Guangxu (= 14 February 1889) by “Siming Wenchang” 司命文昌 in the “Plum Blossom Library” (Meihua Shuge 梅花書閣) in Fujian province.
12 The memorial is translated in Appendix 3.4.
was hired to perform a *pudu* ritual. As occasions devoted principally to the veneration of the spirits of the departed, the spring and autumn sacrifices had from their inception included a general sacrifice to the “lonely souls” (*guhun* 孤魂), unworshipped by any descendants, for whom a small separate offering table was set up. The performance of the *pudu* by a Buddhist monk represents a further elaboration of this aspect of the dharma assembly. During the 1994 spring sacrifice the *pudu* was a lengthy affair held in an elaborate temporary structure outside the Hall by a monk and the sutra-recitation group associated with him.

A brief description of the 1994 spring sacrifice may give the reader some impression how these disparate elements are fitted together. On 1 January the Mingzheng Tang’s Benevolent Master Guan determined that the spring sacrifice would be held on the sixth and the seventh days of the third moon (16 to 17 March 1994). On the next day, the Yellow Thearch, in his function as head of the Academy, announced the names of fifty-four Academy students whose terms of study had ended and who were allowed to take part in the spring examination. He also gave a list of fifty-seven other souls who were kept from admission to the examinations only by a lack of comparativey small merit amounts; the Yellow Thearch admonished their relatives to transfer merit to them so that they too could have a chance to graduate this spring and come to enjoy the rewards of divine office. Some of these relatives responded and two months later the final list of examination candidates came to ninety-seven.

The phoenix disciples were organized into work groups charged with different aspects of the dharma assembly (cf. above chapter 1.1), invitations
were sent out, announcements were printed in the *Phoenix Friend*. A Buddhist monk and a group of young nuns were hired to perform the ceremony of “universal salvation” (*pudu*). Outside the temple, temporary tent altars were erected, including most prominently the monk’s ritual area, the “Palace of the Three Treasures” (*Sanbao Dian 三寶殿*). On its back wall were hung picture scrolls of the Buddhas Sakyamuni, Bhaisajya, and Amitabha. Before them was set up a carved image of the Yellow Thearch as the head of the Academy and two spirit tablets, representing the Academy’s graduates and students respectively. This was where the main parts of the *pudu* were held. To the stage-left of the Sanbao Dian was placed a tent altar with brass spirit-tablets to (1) the Three Official Great Thearchs (*Sanguan Dadi 三官大帝*), (2) the Sweet Dew Great Thearch (*Ganlin Dadi 甘霖大帝*, a weather god), (3) the Academy’s “Hosts of the Earth Foundation” (*dijizhu 地基主*), (4) the spirits of military heroes who died for their country, and (5) all ancestors of the Phoenix disciples. To the stage-right the bushel altar (*doutan 斗壇*) was erected on which the fifteen bushels bought by believers were placed, in order of their rank, the whole display presided over by an image of the Venerable Mother.

The dharma assembly was formally opened with an opening rite (*qiqing 敖請*) performed by the monk and the nuns, followed by their recitation of various scriptures, both Buddhist ones and scriptures that were spirit-written by the Mingzheng Tang. This lasted all morning, during which time more and more guests arrived. They arranged their offerings, consisting

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13 A class of benevolent spirits attached to every building in the human world. They are “good souls” (*shanhun 善魂*) appointed by the underworld authorities to protect the inhabitants of a house. In return they are entitled to regular sacrifices by the human inhabitants, offered to them at the back door [*Shiyi chandao lu* VIII:42-44]. On the *dijizhu*, see also Wang Sung-hsing 1974:188-189.
of food and paper lotus-flowers (sold by the Hall) on tables in front of "dharma-shrine" (fatan 法壇) to the stage-left. Recitation of scriptures by the nuns, by the Mingzheng Tang’s scripture-chanting group, by a visiting scripture-chanting group from the Huide Gong in Caotun, and by the assembled guests continued throughout most of the fahui, creating vast amounts of merit for the large numbers of ancestral and ghostly souls flocking to the feast. The chanting was interrupted on Saturday only by a book-presentation ceremony (of the Sanjiao xiu zhen xin fa 三教修真心法, which had been completed a few months earlier), numinous healing sessions (performed by Mingbi and Longbi), and a spirit-writing séance during which it was announced that all ninety-seven candidates had passed their examinations and had been appointed to divine office, a long list of their titles being written out by the planchette. On the next day, Sunday, scripture-recitation continued throughout the day, interrupted only by a communal ancestral sacrifice to the spirits in the Academy by their relatives (jizu dian li 祭祖典禮), followed by the performance of the Buddhist universal salvation liturgy by the monk and the nuns. After another numinous healing session, the dharma assembly was concluded with a ceremonial declaration of gratitude for Heaven’s mercy (kouxie tian' en 謝天恩) by means of the reading of a memorial (shuwen). The gods, represented by the Hall’s presiding deity Guan responded to this declaration with spirit-written felicitations on the success of the dharma assembly. Guan then proceeded to assign the merit amounts participants had acquired by attending the assembly: one hundred gong 功 for the chief organizer, eighty gong for each of his deputies, sixty gong for each phoenix disciple, and thirty gong for each non-member who had made some special effort for the assembly.14

These semi-annual sacrifices are the principal occasions for the Mingzheng Tang to mobilize the less actively involved groups among its adherents. The increasing complexity of the ritual events, with the addition of bushel veneration and a Buddhist *pudu* rite, indicates a marked departure from the basic phoenix hall liturgical pattern described above; these heterogeneous elements are consciously incorporated to attract folk religious practitioners for whom the solemn and fairly low-key phoenix hall rituals alone are not attractive enough, but who look in a religious festival for the lively profusion of activities, colours, and sounds that mark an event as joyfully “noisy” (*renao* 熱鬧).

3.2.3 The Lunar New Year

The lunar New Year stands out in the Mingzheng Tang’s ritual calendar as the only time of the year that the Hall is officially closed and most of its gods are absent, having returned to the Heavens. Only a small number of deities are believed to take turns in looking after and guarding the Hall during the New Year season. No ritual activities, however, take place during that time.

The ceremonial closure takes place on the twenty-fourth day of the twelfth month, the same day that private households see their stove god off. This is not the only similarity between the two occasions: just as the stove god is believed to return to Heaven in order to report on the household’s conduct during the past year, so the Mingzheng Tang’s gods are believed to carry the
phoenix disciples' merit accounts back to Heaven where they will report upon them. The ceremony is the last time the planchette is used in the old year; afterwards it is sealed (fengbi 封筆) for the holiday season, i.e., it is left on the sand-tray covered with a red cloth and is not touched again until the reopening of the Hall. One deity that will not return after the New Year is the past year’s Year God (Taisui). There are sixty year gods who take turns in ruling over each year in a sixty year cycle. Therefore the name plaque of last year’s Taisui is removed from the bushel located to the right of the main altar, and the memorials to the Year God that had been stored beside it throughout the year are taken out and burnt. The whole ceremony is concluded by the reading of a memorial listing all participants in the seeing off ceremony.

On 2 February 1994 I was present at the year end seeing off ceremony (songshen yishi 送神儀式). It began with the recitation of two scriptures (the Beidou jing and the Wuji Huangmu huanxing tianjing), interrupted by a communal supper. The second recitation was followed by a spirit-writing séance during which first the Benevolent Teacher Guan appeared to comment on the Hall’s activities during the last twelve months. He expressed his pleasure with the Hall’s performance, pointing out that for the last few years the Mingzheng Tang had always ranked at the top of Southern Heaven’s merit records. He gave a special laudation to the scripture-recitation group for their untiring efforts at chanting the Venerable Mother’s scriptures. Then Guan determined that the planchette should be reopened (kaibi 開筆) on the tenth day of the first month and the new Taisui should be installed on the fifteenth day. After bestowing ten merit units on every participant in the ceremony, the deity wished everybody a happy New Year and left.
Subsequently the Mingzheng Tang’s “merit and demerit deity”, Yue Wumu Wang, appeared and summarized his merit report for the congregation. While Guan had commented only on the Hall in general, Yue Wumu Wang addressed the conduct of the Hall’s phoenix disciples. His judgment was favourable overall, all those present having created more merits than demerits for themselves. However, he warned that some still harboured grudges in their mind and incurred bad karma by uncharitable words. He reserved most of his criticism for those disciples who “are absent day after day and pointlessly pass year after year”, thus missing out precious opportunities to create merit. After Yue Wumu Wang had left, the Hall’s deity in charge of rituals (silishen 司禮神) made a brief appearance to formally announce the sealing of the planchette. When the old Year God, named Kang Zhi 康志, had been seen off in the manner described above, a memorial was read and burnt listing the names of 101 participants in the ceremony (this document had previously been displayed on the offering table where everybody could sign their names on it). The congregation dispersed to meet again in the New Year.

On the appointed date, the tenth day of the first month (19 February 1994), the phoenix disciples reconvened in the Hall for the first time in the new year to welcome the gods back and to open the planchette. The ceremony was very similar to the sending off, including scripture recitations, a short address by the Benevolent Teacher Guan (but not by Yue Wumu Wang), and the reading of a name list of all the eighty-eight persons present. The installation of this year’s Taisui, Shi Guang 誓廣, took place five days later; the new name plaque was placed in the bushel and the memorials of all persons wishing to “placate the Year God” (an Taisui 安太歲) were placed
3.2.4 Life-Releasing Assemblies (*Fangshenghui* 放生會)

The “release of living beings” (*fangsheng*) is a religious practice popularized in China through Buddhism. Put simply, it entails the purchase and releasing of captive animals in order to acquire religious merit. It is a common lay religious practice that has spread beyond the confines of orthodox Buddhism and has been adopted by a variety of religious traditions. The Wumiao Mingzheng Tang practises the releasing of animals (*fangsheng*) on an occasional basis at the command of the gods. Although we can find references to *fangsheng* in various contexts in earlier issues of the *Phoenix Friend*, as an organized ritual activity it made its first appearance at the Mingzheng Tang in 1982. At the time Yongbi was revealing the *Record of a Journey to the Water-Crystal Palace* (Shuijing Gong youji 水晶宮遊記), a travelogue describing the subaqueous realm of the dragon kings. This included a passionate appeal by the Dragon King of the Eastern Sea’s (Donghai Longwang 東海龍王) tortoise prime minister (*guixiang* 龜相) not to kill tortoises, the main reason adduced being that tortoises are beings whose numinosity ranks as equal to or even higher than that of humans.\[^{15}\] A few weeks into the writing of the travelogue, the Mingzheng Tang’s presiding deity Guan ordered the holding of a “life-releasing event” (*fangsheng huodong* 放生活動) at the Shimen Reservoir 石門水庫. This was organized and one Saturday the Mingzheng Tang’s phoenix disciples set out in a convoy of two buses and one lorry on the two and a half hour trip to the Shimen

\[^{15}\] Luanyou 324:9.
Reservoir in northern Taiwan. A temporary altar with an image of Guan Sheng Dijun was erected on its shore, incense was sacrificed, and the *Life-Releasing Mantra* (*Fangsheng zhōu 放 生咒*) chanted. The fish and turtles brought along on the lorry were released into the water and their reception was acknowledged by the god of the Reservoir via the planchette in a brief open-air spirit-writing séance held by Yongbi. On the way back the group visited several temples on the way with which the Mingzheng Tang maintained friendly relations and it was late night before the buses arrived back in Taizhong.

The great success of this first life-releasing assembly stimulated the holding of further such events. Between 1982 and 1985, the Hall conducted altogether seven life-releasing assemblies. They were usually held on public holidays and at scenic spots in different places all over Taiwan, combining a highly meritorious ritual activity with touristic entertainment. Undoubtedly, these *fangsheng* trips were the Mingzheng Tang’s answer to the “pilgrimage tourism” that became very popular with folk religious temples at that time. As phoenix halls do not participate in pilgrimage networks, life-releasing assemblies in scenic areas with visits to famous temples on the way provide a close functional alternative, affording the Hall’s adherents an opportunity for communal travel and entertainment.

No more life-releasing assemblies were held between 1985 and 1992, during which time the Mingzheng Tang was busy with its various building projects. When this hectic activity had quieted down, the holding of *fangshenghui* as a focus of communal activity became attractive again, and the Hall held one assembly each in 1992 and 1993. Unfortunately, no
fangshenghui was conducted during my field research period and so I was unable to gather first hand observation data on this ritual activity.
A phoenix hall is first and foremost a receiving station for messages emanating from the divine realm. Its central ritual is spirit-writing which the gods utilize to communicate with humans. It thus relays divine knowledge in written format to the human world; 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 throughout society by printing them and distributing them in book format. The production of these spirit-written "morality books" is the hallmark of phoenix halls, the essential fulfillment of their mission of "proclaiming [moral] transformation on behalf of Heaven" (daitian xuanhua). It is also the keystone of the phoenix hall as a religious association; the divine teachings dispensed through the hall's oracle are most immediately addressed to the attending congregation of phoenix disciples for whom the hall is a place to engage in self-cultivation under the guidance of the most perfected teachers imaginable -- the gods themselves. 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. As a communication node, however, it also provides channels for the transmission of messages in reverse direction, i.e., from humans to deities, and in this respect a phoenix hall fulfills functions similar to those of other recognized points of contact between the divine and the human spheres existence on the Taiwanese religious landscape: community temples, earth god shrines, domestic altars, "spirit shrines" (shentan 神壇) etc. All of these function as nodes connecting the human and the spirit world where humans can go to put their questions
and problems before the gods and can in return receive divine advice. What distinguishes phoenix halls is their pervasive use of written documents in communication directed to the gods. Thus, writing plays a central role in both modes of communication practised in the Mingzheng Tang, both from and to the gods, and a closer look at the concrete methods employed will give us a better understanding of the way a phoenix hall acts as mediator of human-divine communication.

4.1 Communication from the Gods to Humans

The planchette is the principal instrument for the transmission of divine messages to humans. However, besides verbal communication the planchette can also transmit the gods' numinous energy for a variety of purposes, but most importantly for healing. In the present section I shall analyze in some detail these two uses of this divination instrument.

4.1.1 Spirit-Writing

4.1.1.1 Forms of Spirit-Writing in Taiwan

We find the following forms of spirit-writing being practised in Taiwan:

TYPE A: writing on a sand-covered surface with a Y-shaped wooden stick held by two people. The writing medium holds the left arm of the stick with his right hand, while his assistant holds the right arm of the stick with his left
hand. Many traditional phoenix halls in central Taiwan use this method. Seaman describes such a séance for the “Pearl Mountain Village” temple, McCreery for the Xingling Si in Puli.\(^1\) It also seems to be the standard procedure among spirit-writing groups in Singapore and Malaysia\(^2\), and in the religious society “Sanctuary of the Dao” (Daoyuan).\(^3\)

**TYPE B:** writing on a sand-covered surface with a stylus held by one medium with both hands. This type is employed by the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang. The Yiguan Dao also practises fuluan with a single medium, the difference here being the shape of the stylus: while the Mingzheng Tang uses the Y-shaped type, Yiguan Dao séances are conducted with a wooden hoop to which a downwards pointing stick is attached.

**TYPE C:** writing on a sand-covered surface with a small metal stylus grasped with one hand by the (single) medium. I have witnessed this method in séances in two Taizhong phoenix halls.\(^4\) Another Taizhong phoenix hall, the Shengde Baogong, used (and may still use) the same method, except that the stylus here is of the traditional wooden Y-shaped type, albeit much reduced in size.\(^5\)

**TYPE D:** writing on paper by a single medium. In the Mingzheng Tang this entails writing with a red felt pen on yellow paper, a procedure called

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2. Cf. Elliott 1955:140-146. This applies in particular to the Religion of Virtue (Dejiao), a Nanyang Chinese association of spirit-writing cults (cf. Tan 1985:6-7). I myself attended in the summer of 1990 a séance at the Dejiao branch temple Jiyun Ge in Singapore, where two two-man teams were spirit-writing at the same time, one of them producing revelations in Chinese, the other in English.
3. However, the planchette used by the Daoyuan does not have the common Y-shape (cf. the illustration in Young 1989:3).
4. Chongsheng Tang (1 May 1994) and Mingde Gong Tiansheng Tang (18 May 1994). Single-handed fuluan is also practised by the Qingsong Guan of Hong Kong, though here a different, T-shaped kind of planchette is used (observations during a séance at the Qingsong Guan branch temple in Vancouver, B.C., summer 1990).
5. See the photograph in Shengde zazhi 聖德雜誌 74:29.
“marvellous method of the golden indicator” (jinzhi miaofa). The Mingzheng Tang’s chairman Mr. Zhang Yunchang* claims to have been taught the method in his youth by his father’s friend Hong Yueqiao 洪月樵, a well-known Japanese period scholar in Zhanhua. The Mingzheng Tang and its direct offshoot, the Gongheng Tang in Fengyuan, are the only Taiwanese phoenix halls where I have seen this particular type of spirit-writing being practised. Writing on paper instead of on sand is not uncommon, however: sometimes a brush is fitted to the end of a normal stylus to produce charms or calligraphy; in a Daoyuan-related group in Taipei, the Zhengzong Shuhua She 正宗書畫社, the medium paints pictures and calligraphy directly on paper with a hand-held brush.

The Huide Gong practised type A fuluan and it was this form of spirit-writing that was passed on by the Huide Gong’s medium Lin Huaiyi to his two Shengxian Tang apprentices Renbi and Zhibi, who in turn transmitted it to Yongbi. Throughout his association with the Shengxian Tang Yongbi continued employing type A spirit-writing, as can be seen from occasional photographs in the Phoenix Friend.6 This changed after the founding of the Mingzheng Tang; the first published photograph depicting Yongbi as the Mingzheng Tang’s medium shows him using type B spirit-writing.7 The picture is of a rather late date (1984) and I am not sure when and why this change took place. It is possible that it was influenced by the example of Yiguan Dao spirit-writing, which also is of the B type and can be very impressive in its speed and elegance. By comparison, the traditional phoenix hall type A spirit-writing is slow and cumbersome. The Shengxian Tang’s

6 Luanyou 64 :7; 117 :1; 119 :1.
7 Luanyou 354 :1.
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.” In the case of the Mingzheng Tang Yiguan Dao influence on the spirit-writing technique is made probable by its strong doctrinal influence in the early 1980s. The transition to a type B technique brought with it a change in the physical appearance of the stylus. Styli used for type A spirit-writing tend to be long, heavy, and richly ornamented instruments whose manipulation by the principal medium is facilitated when an assistant provides some balance. The styli used in the Mingzheng Tang for type B spirit-writing by contrast tend to be shorter, thinner, lighter and unornamented, better suited for rapid manipulation by a single person. A heavy, traditional stylus is still being employed, but not for writing purposes. Longbi uses it (in type B manner) to apply the massage known in the hall as “spiritual healing” (lingliao).

As already pointed out, the type D spirit-writing called “marvellous method of the golden indicator” is something of a specialty of the Mingzheng Tang which I have not encountered outside this phoenix hall and its illegitimate offshoot, the Gongheng Tang. It made its first appearance in 1979 when Moxianzi used it to write the Mind-Virtue of the Great Way (Dadao xinde). It is no coincidence that this was the Mingzheng Tang’s first book written by the Venerable Mother: the “marvellous method” is claimed to be the Mother’s own method of communication (muniang zhi dufa 母娘之獨法) and thus a superior technique of spirit-writing (shangsheng fuluanfa 上

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8 Luantang shengdian:10.
9 Shiyi chandao lu 1:12.
The "golden indicator" (jinzhī 金指) probably refers to the felt pen used, which is also called "golden brush" (jīnbi 金筆). The appellation "golden indicator" associates this method with the Venerable Mother in her identity as the Golden Mother of the Jasper Pool (Yaochi Jinmu). All appearances of the Venerable Mother in the Mingzheng Tang are recorded by "golden brush"; this applies to all books written by the Mother and also to her regular semimonthly séances. The "marvellous method" also came to be adopted for "relieving the world" (jīshi), i.e. the use of spirit-writing to answer specific personal questions posed by believers. Sometimes a great number of questions have to be processed and the "marvellous method" has the advantage of greater speed and convenience over and against type B stylus writing. The switch from the regular stylus to the golden brush in jīshi sessions was first allowed only when a large number of petitions had to be processed, but had become normal procedure by the time of my field research.

4.1.1.2 The Styli

A number of different terms are used in the Mingzheng Tang for the styli utilized in spirit-writing. As already mentioned, the felt-pen used for the "marvellous method" is called "golden brush". The wooden forked stylus is variously called "wooden brush" (mūbi 木筆), "peach brush" (tāobi 桃筆), or "phoenix brush" (luānbi 鶴筆). The most commonly used of these terms is mūbi, which is used in juxtaposition to the jīnbi of the "marvellous

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10 Luanyou 326:25.  
11 Luanyou 373:9.  
12 Luanyou 326:5.
method". *Luanbi* and *taobi* both are more formal terms with differing connotations.

*Luanbi* points to the mythical origin of spirit-writing in the revelations given by the *luan*-bird to Confucius (see below chapter 4.1.1.3). The stylus is said to resemble a *luan* in shape.

*Taobi* indicates that the stylus' body is made from peach wood; the protruding stick in the underside of its lower end, which is the part that draws the characters into the sand, is made from willow wood. Willow and peach are both credited with being able to ward off evil influences (*bixie* 避邪), 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. The same protective function is served by the stylus' red colour: the Mingzheng Tang possesses one large "dragon-headed" stylus which is lacquered red, and a number of lighter styli used for spirit-writing are wrapped all around with red cloth tape.

All these facts show that the stylus is deemed in need of protection from demonic forces that may want to disrupt the gods' 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

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13 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 1892-1910, vol.6:1295].

14 For a discussion of these protective functions of peach and willow wood see de Groot 1892-1910, vol.6:955-962 and 997-999.

15 More sophisticated explanations can be found in the literature. See for example the cosmological interpretation of the willow in *Luantang shengdian* [11. In a phoenix hall in Tanzi 湯子 (Taizhong county) I was told that peach wood represented *yang* and willow wood *yin*. This was not further elaborated, but the implication seems to be that the stylus represents a union of the two cosmic forces, an embodiment of the Taiji emblem.
or healing is confined to the inner sanctum (*neitang*), a square area in front of the central deity image, fenced off by a low aluminium railing. This *neitang* may not be entered at will, but only by 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 regularly used are stored inside the glass-cases containing the main deity images. Thus protected, a stylus does not need to be purified before every use; the only time I have witnessed a precautionary additional purification was when incense was passed all around a stylus that had not been used for a long time.

The same array of protective measures does not surround the felt-pens 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 still in its plastic sealing, which is only removed by the medium shortly before entering into trance.

### 4.1.1.3 Terms for Spirit-Writing

The most common term used in the Mingzheng Tang for spirit-writing is *fuluan* 扶鸞 ("supporting the phoenix"). *Fuji* 抾乩 ("supporting the stylus") occurs much less frequently. In the Mingzheng Tang I have never heard the term *bailuan* 拜鸞 ("worshipping the phoenix") being used, which Jordan & Overmyer take as the most common term in popular parlance. It is quite possible that there are regional differences in terminology and that the term *bailuan* is more common in southern Taiwan (where Jordan's & Overmyer's case studies are located) than in central Taiwan.
The original connection of the luan-bird with spirit-writing is obscure. Xu Dishan 許地山 proposes 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.\textsuperscript{16} 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 of knowledge concerning its connection with spirit-writing must have irked them. This cognitive gap was filled by an explanatory myth, which seems to be of recent origin and 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 子思夫子, 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 warn rebellious elements and rectify the customs of the time. These writings were called "luan writings" (luanwen 聲文). 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.\textsuperscript{17} This "just so" story was affirmed by its retelling in vol.78 of the Phoenix Friend\textsuperscript{18} and given further divine sanction in 1973 by a revelation from Taiyi Zhenren.\textsuperscript{19} 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

\textsuperscript{16} Xu Dishan 1941:7.
\textsuperscript{17} Huolin baoshu 獵麟寶書, (Fengshan: Puhua She Yishan Tang 普化社義善堂), quoted in Ruzong Shenjiao de kaozheng, p.44.
\textsuperscript{18} Luanyou 78:35.
\textsuperscript{19} Luanyou 109:11.
explains that the *luan*-bird vanished and upon praying to Heaven, the Divine Lord Guan gave them as a substitute the stylus, whose shape resembles that of the *luan*-bird. This was not the last word in this matter, however. The myth was spun on, and in 1980 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 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 landing on a patch of sand and writing 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 entreated Heaven-on-High to be allowed 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.20

20 *Dahan tiansheng* (Luanyou 267:9). This story gained wide currency through its inclusion in Lin Yonggen’s bibliography of spirit-written works [Lin Yonggen 1982:4-5].
The medium selected by Confucius was his disciple Zilu 子路; 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 of claiming Confucius himself as the founder of the phoenix hall tradition. The story seems to be widely accepted in central Taiwanese phoenix halls. It was recounted to me with slight variations in three different temples.

4.1.1.4 Theories of Spirit-Writing

Emic 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. 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.21

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

21 Elliott 1955:141-142.
in the ki."\(^{22}\) 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.\(^{23}\)

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” (kiō-ā) 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. Here 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 kiō-ā; anybody can have a go at it.\(^{24}\) Concerning spirit-writing proper, it is also sometimes claimed that the gods could move the stylus on its own without the intervention of a human medium. Such claims are usually made, however, for the past rather than for the present. The phoenix hall manual _Luantang shengdian_, for example, describes the former practice in the Sichuan centre of the Wenchang cult of suspending a wooden

\(^{22}\) De Groot 1892-1910, vol.6:1297.
\(^{23}\) Chao 1942:11.
\(^{24}\) Jordan 1989: 57-59, 64-67. On the other hand villagers are keenly aware that some people are better than others at getting the chair to move; cf. Jordan’s informant’s statement on p.66.
luan-bird with a brush in its beak from the central rafter, which would write automatically and without human intervention.  

Historical sources do indeed describe such a practice for the Wenchang cult centre, although they also give us the additional information that such séances were conducted in a closed and sealed room with no witnesses present.  

The *Luantang shengdian* indicates that only this method is properly called “flying phoenix” (*feiluan* 飛鸞), 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.  

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 grips with the division of forces between 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’ recorded 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

26 Kleeman 1994:17. 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 梵善社) contained a room for “a smaller suspended planchette which may be operated by the spirits without the help of even one man.” [1925:469]  
27 *Luantang shengdian*, p.10.
their messages, this mind has to be calm (jing 靜), clear (qing 清) and “oblivious of its self” (wangwo 忘我) 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 傳真).28 Any interference by the medium’s mind inevitably leads to “losses of authenticity” (shizhen 失真). 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 authentically transmitting the 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 authentic transmission will occur easily. Or sometimes erroneous transmissions may appear because [the medium’s mind] was controlled by his own consciousness.29

There seems to be no idea involved that the revealing deity controls the stylus in any direct manner. Rather the deity “borrows the body” (jieti 借體) of the medium to move the stylus, which accounts for the fatigue felt by the medium after coming out of trance.30 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

28 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.

29 Shiyi chandao lu 1:12.

30 Shiyi chandao lu 1:13.
human?"
The Benevolent Teacher replies, "It is carried out jointly."\(^{31}\)

The interaction between medium and deity, usually captured in the formula "deity and human become one" (shen-ren heyi 神人合一), 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."\(^{32}\)

Although the deity's response to this construction was only a somewhat lukewarm "put simply, one can say so", such explanations of spirit-writing using scientific analogies are not uncommon among the more thoughtful phoenix disciples. In our conversations, Mr. Weng*, a young primary school teacher from Xinzhu, 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 are the clearer the finer it is able to tune in to the signal-emitting station. The training of a medium serves to "fine-tune" (weitiao 微調) 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

\(^{31}\) Shiyi chandao lu VII:56.
\(^{32}\) Shiyi chandao lu VII:56-57.
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 氣) is commonly equated with "electricity".\(^{33}\) If we bear in mind that "numen" (ling 神) in turn is defined as highly refined matter-energy,\(^ {34}\) the interpretation of human-divine 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 smoking 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."\(^ {35}\) While thus a complex of practices tied to the idea of the planchette as the actual medium persists in the Mingzheng Tang, 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

\(^{33}\) Tiandao aoyi, chapter 8.
\(^{34}\) Tiandao aoyi, chapter 16.
\(^{35}\) De Groot 1892-1910, vol.6:1300.
functions is illustrated by the fact that the term for planchette, ji 卓, can be and often is used for the human medium. Thus in the quote above, what I translated as “body of the medium” reads in Chinese as jishen 卓身, “body of the ji”. Indeed, to the ordinary Taiwanese ji suggests in the first place a human medium, typically of the speaking kind known as jitong 卓童 or tang-ki 童乩. Jitong and spirit-writers are occasionally differentiated as “martial ji” (wuji 武乩) and “literary ji” (wenji 文乩), respectively. 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 笔: Yongbi, Mingbi, Zhengbi etc. The human medium and not the planchette is thus the true brush of the gods.\footnote{Cf. the similar argumentation on the primacy of the mind in planchette-mediumism in the passage translated in Thompson 1982:100-107.}

This interpretation is borne out by Mingbi’s testimony of his experiences. 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 counteracted 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 stressed the importance of the medium’s mind for successful spirit-writing.
Carried to the last conclusion, this reasoning ultimately makes the question whether it is actually the gods that communicate through the medium redundant. 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 the mind while in this state ultimately originates from the Dao, whether or not a personal deity is thought to intervene as a messenger.  

This point is made quite clear in the advice given by one of the Mingzheng Tang’s benevolent masters to a troubled tang-ki from the island of Jinmen who was afraid to act for his clients, because he might commit errors. The benevolent master said: “The gods are transformations of correct matter-energy. It is alright if you can solve other people’s problems with correctness and sincerity.”

In other words, if the tang-ki’s mind is “correct and sincere” (zhengcheng 正誠), the purity of its numinous nature fills it with the “vast correct matter-energy” (haoran zhengqi 浩然正氣) of the Dao; in effect, the tang-ki’s mind itself becomes divine and is thus able to exert its penetrating powers without fail. The medium should therefore not be overly concerned with the authenticity of the spirits that visit him, but rather focus on the purity and worthiness of his own mind, because this is the ultimate guarantor of his link to the divine realm.

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37 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 the same mind (or, heart) as immortals and buddhas, we ourselves are spirits and 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]

38 Luanyou 564:22.

39 On “vast correct matter-energy” 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 264:5); Zhenli, dunwu, chan, pp.40-41.
This affirmation of the central role played by the medium's mind opens an interesting perspective on the nature of mediumship and a link to psychological theories about it. While mediumship can and not infrequently does involve fraud and manipulation, many planchette-mediums seem to be sincere in what they are doing. This is certainly the impression I got from my observations of Mingbi’s séances, and earlier Western observers of spirit-writing have also reported on the apparent sincerity of the planchette-mediums they observed. These observers usually reconciled their belief in the sincerity of the medium and their disbelief in the revealing deities by recourse to the various psychological explanations common at the time for the somewhat similar spiritualist automatic writing in the West. Paul Twinem, for example, thought “[i]t perfectly possible in the light of subconscious psychology for a sincere man in a mystical or ecstatic state of mind to write unconsciously distinct characters and ideas.”\footnote{Twinem 1925:471-472. While recognizing the possibility, Twinem apparently was less then impressed with the séance held by a drunk planchette-medium in the Nanjing branch of the Wushan She he had been observing; he cautioned that “some of the results are no doubt better explained by the trained manipulations of the left hand of the more sober man.” [1925:472]}

The Rev. F.W.S. O’Neill displayed a sympathetic attitude towards the “psychical research” popular at the time and attributed the Daoyuan spirit-writing he observed “mainly or altogether to telepathy and the subliminal consciousness”\footnote{O’Neill 1925:70. Richard Wilhelm also observed Daoyuan séances and rejected the possibility of “conscious deception.” [1926:290] Although Wilhelm does not offer any further interpretation of the phenomenon, we may surmise that his views would have been sympathetic to that of his close friend and collaborator C.G. Jung, who saw in spiritualist mediumism one channel of access to the collective unconscious (cf. Charet 1993). It must also be pointed out, however, that although Wilhelm did not believe fuluan to be based on fraud, he was nevertheless not very impressed with the quality of the texts thus produced. To him, they seemed to be restricted “to rather vague moral exhortations” [1926:290] and often “flat and meaningless” [Wilhelm & Jung 1962:3]. He did not extend this judgment, however, to the Taiyi jinhua zongzhi, which treatise he translated and published with a commentary by C.G. Jung as The Secret of the Golden Flower [Wilhelm & Jung 1962]. Although Wilhelm did not realize it, this text most likely was a product of spirit-writing.} Modern psychology has since made some progress in the study of this and
related phenomena, even though apparently no unified theory has been produced so far. Agreement exists, however, on the fact that automatic writing is based on some kind of dissociative mental state that allows coherent written articulation with no or only minimal participation of the everyday consciousness. While the details of this process are disputed, its genuineness is generally recognized.

One approach sees the dissociation occurring between the two hemispheres of the human brain. While everyday consciousness is ruled over by the left hemisphere, trance-states indicate an inversion of consciousness, a shift to the right hemisphere. Right hemisphere based mental activity is experienced by the individual as divorced from their conscious self whose functions are mainly located in the left hemisphere. In religious contexts, the productions of the “other” located in the right hemisphere may be ascribed to variously defined external forces, e.g., the spirits of the departed in Western spiritualism, the Holy Spirit in Pentecostal Christianity, or the angels (maggidim) in Kabbalist circles. In Taiwan, these forces are the gods of the Chinese pantheon.

This hemisphericity model is employed by Timothy Lane, the only Western psychologist so far to have conducted a large-scale study of spirit-mediumship in Taiwan. He arrived at a number of conclusions that have a bearing on our present case. According to his findings, two discontinuous trance-states can be identified: light and deep trance. These refer to the extent of mental dissociation occurring during the trance. In light trance (“trance-1”)

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the dissociation is not complete, while deep trance ("trance-2") is characterized by a much more pronounced split between right and left. The different psychological characteristics of these two levels of trance also affect the messages produced during trance. Deep-trancing mediums tend to impersonate mainly gods marginal to the official pantheon, especially "naughty, unruly gods" such as Nezha, Han Xiangzi 韓湘子, and Jigong Huofo. These performances "invert" the accepted religious and social order. Lane ties the inversive and latently subversive tendencies of deep trance performances to the ascendance of the right hemisphere in this state:

For most of us the [...] right and left hemispheres are complementary and mutually restraining (though the LH asserts an "illusion" of dominance). Bicameral and conscious tendencies interact. But in trance-2 the two components of mind lose contact with one another. States intermediate between the bicameral and the conscious are no longer available. When the bicameral mind is detached from LH consciousness, a latent, ego-alien RH personality emerges. Seen in this light, it is not surprising that the gods of trance are antithetical to the rest of the pantheon. The LH is the "talker" and the doer [...]. Where the LH more actively engages the external world, the RH is more attuned to internal states [...]. Loosened from mediating interaction, they drift into antithesis: the RH, like the Freudian id, more sensitive to internal states, appears emotional, primitive, disorderly. The LH, by comparison, like the Freudian ego, appears rational, civilized, and orderly. [...] Consequently, those gods favored by the hemisphere that does most of the talking, builds the temples, and constructs the mythologies are the gods who must engage the external, social world. As Arthur Wolf and others have suggested, relations among these gods mirror the hierarchical relations of the Chinese social world. Gods favored by the liberated, id-like RH are those who appear disorderly and unrestrained. Not only do they not reflect the social order, they seem intent on subverting it.43

In light trance, by contrast, the right-left split is not complete. Right and left hands never do battle with one another. Trance-1 is an ambiguous state in which the conscious and the bicameral continue to exert

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43 Lane 1987:142.
influence over one another.\textsuperscript{44}

Trance-1 mediums are therefore less likely to produce inversive performances. An example given by Lane is a central Taiwanese spirit-writer by the name of "Su Shun-fa," who becomes possessed by Lü Dongbin:

He claims never to have experienced any tension over differences between what he wants and what god wants. He does complain, however, that trance is not always easily induced. Su Shun-fa is a trance-1 medium. When trancing he communicates with a god who fits neatly into the social bureaucracy.\textsuperscript{45}

The morality books produced by spirit-writing cults certainly are anything but subversive of social order. In spirit-writing séances no room whatsoever is given to the antics of "unruly godlings;" these are solemn occasions on which salutary dissertations on proper conduct are delivered. While it is true that in many cases the spirit-familiars of planchette-mediums are marginal deities with a history of "unruliness," such as Jigong, Nezha, and Han Xiangzi, to cite just three examples from the Mingzheng Tang, in spirit-writings these deities appear as emissaries of the official pantheon, championing structure rather than anti-structure. This fits in well with the generally "light" character of the spirit-writing trances I have been able to observe; certainly Mingbi is a good case-example for a "trance-1" medium and his theoretical constructions of mediumism tally closely with the experiences typical for this category. Lane's model tends to oversimplify and does not address certain contradictions, such as the fact that some spirit-writers are classified by him as "trance-2" mediums, but still seem to turn out the kind of orderly discourses typical for "trance-1".\textsuperscript{46} It does, however, shed light on Mingbi's trance behaviour and

\textsuperscript{44} Lane 1987:143.
\textsuperscript{45} Lane 1987:143.
\textsuperscript{46} Of the five spirit-writers included in his sample of primary subjects, two engaged in trance-1,
creates an epistemological bridge between Western psychological models and the above described “folk model” of mind-dominated mediumism.

4.1.1.5 The Making of a Medium

Mingbi believes that since spirit-mediumship depends mainly on one’s purity of mind it is essentially learnable. Every human being has the capacity for purifying the mind and can thus potentially be a spirit-medium if they apply themselves to the necessary process of cultivation. It is not that congenital factors do not play a role at all; they do. 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 業障) will find it more difficult to persevere in their efforts to cultivate themselves than those whose minds are less encumbered karmically 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 condition at the outset, the process of purification may thus take longer for one individual than for another; for some people it may even

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two in trance-2, and one case was ambiguous [Lane 1987:169-170]. Incidentally, a dichotomy of light and deep trance in spirit-writing mediumship is also formulated in a divine message channelled at the Shengxian Tang; in Thompson’s translation, it is referred to as “upholding the fabulous-luan-bird half-controlled” and “fully controlled” respectively [Thompson 1982:103].
take more than one existence to complete it. But its universal practicability for all humans is vouchsafed by the potential for cultivation embedded within human nature.

It is important to underline that a planchette-medium is not a specially 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* 通靈). Thus the planchette-medium is simply a person of higher attainment in moral cultivation than the ordinary mortal, but his abilities are not discontinuous with and out of reach of those of the rest of humanity. In the 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.

Because spirit-mediumship is tied to cultivational success and moral worthiness, it is fairly prestigious among phoenix disciples.\(^{48}\) 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 any new planchette mediums. Especially 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 only


\(^{48}\) In this, spirit-writing differs clearly from the mediumship of the *tang-ki*. To be a *tang-ki* is not particularly prestigious; quite to the contrary, a certain stigma attaches to people subject to violent spirit-possesison, leading many persons prone to such possessions to try and avoid becoming a full-fledged *tang-ki*. The (often futile) attempts to fend off the gods are an almost stereotypical pattern in *tang-ki*’s life-stories.
how to use the planchette in "numinous healing" (lingliao 靈療) and was not authorized to train in spirit-writing. When in 1995 Mingbi suffered a minor stroke and was unable to act as 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 chosen, but any male phoenix disciple under forty years of age could register for training. (The training of female mediums was to be "temporarily postponed") Eventually two new mediums successfully completed their training and were given the pen-names "Heroic Stylus" and "Chaste Stylus" respectively.

The training of a medium is formally called xiaibi 煅筆 or xiaji 煅姫; informally it is referred to as xunlian 訓練 ("training"). The term xia 煅 is a little tricky to translate. Its root meaning is "hot" or "to heat", "to burn". In the composite xialian 煅練 ("to heat and refine") it refers to the Daoist alchemical practice; 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. An exception to this rule was Yongbi's training which only lasted fifteen days. This was justified by Yongbi's excellent qualifications. It seems that occasionally his orthodox status was questioned, because he had not

49 Luanyou 584:2-3.
50 Luanyou 586:1.
undergone the usual forty-nine day period of training. At one point, Yongbi transmitted a message from Taiyi Zhenren reaffirming the prescribed forty-nine day period, while at the same time explaining Yongbi’s fifteen day training as a special dispensation from Heaven due to Yongbi’s “complete roots of the Way and of wisdom”.\textsuperscript{51} This means that Yongbi’s moral constitution was already so far perfected that he did not have to go through the whole forty-nine day period. His superior capabilities as a medium are expressed in his laudatory title tongtian lingbi 通天靈筆, “numinous brush penetrating Heaven”, a title later also claimed by Mingbi.

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 人師), typically an experienced planchette-medium, and an “immortal teacher” (xianshi 仙師), 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.\textsuperscript{52} It is

\textsuperscript{51} Luanyou 109:11.
\textsuperscript{52} See Luanyou 308:14.
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 can 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 靈通).\footnote{See for example \textit{Luanyou} 309:15.}

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 and critical comments on the candidates’ progress.

The training of a medium has to be formally authorized by the gods. Thus, Yongbi’s training was authorized by Wenheng Shengdi, the ruler of Southern Heaven, which was the recognized official position of Guan Sheng Dijun in the Shengxian Tang of that time. Later, after the propagation of Guan’s ascension to the throne of the Jade Thearch, such authorization was given by the Jade Thearch. In the Mingzheng Tang a complicating factor enters with the so-called “marvellous method of the golden indicator,” which is seen as the Venerable Mother’s 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 Mingzeng Tang in 1995 so far have only studied the “marvellous method,” again under the guidance of Jiutian Xuannü.

4.1.2 The Transmission of Numinous Energy

The Mingzheng Tang does not merely transmit verbal messages from the gods but also their numinous energy and power. In fact, the whole temple is supposed to be suffused with numinous power, produced partly by the great merit accumulated in it and partly by reflection of the numinosity of the high-ranking gods present in the Hall. Just as a person’s “numinous light” is an indication of his or her degree of spiritual cultivation, so the light emitting from a temple is a measure of its purity and power. In the Record of a Journey to the Penglai Isles of the Immortals (Penglai xiandao youji 蓬莱仙島遊記) Mingbi and Nezha hover above the Dakeng area and view the numinous lights emitting from the numerous temples in the area. A comparison shows that the strongest and most brilliant light comes forth from the Mingzheng Tang, while the phoenix hall Shengshou Gong and the various Buddhist temples produce only a relatively smaller luminescence.

This numinosity suffusing the Mingzheng Tang can also be channelled and transmitted to humans in a number of ways. A simple way is to consume
Foodstuffs and beverages previously offered on the Hall's altar. We have seen that this is done ritually at a new phoenix disciples induction when he or she is given a cup of water from the altar to drink. Through its exposure to the numinosity of the gods, this water is charged with their energy and creates a bond between the disciple and his or her "teachers". A similar potential inheres in the pieces of pastry called "longevity peaches" (shoutao 舊桃) that are offered to a deity on its birthday; after the conclusion of the congratulatory ritual, these "peaches" are shared among the worshippers present. Other altar offerings are routinely consumed, i.e., outside of a specific ritual context. Fruits, sweets, soft drinks displayed on the altar are usually distributed among the phoenix disciples (and any field researchers that happen to be present). Some of the fruits (usually oranges, apples, and water melons) are cut up and served for communal consumption right after a séance, while other offerings can be taken home.

Foodstuffs and drinks are specifically charged with numinous energy by touching them with the planchette. This is done from time to time when a disciple brings special offerings to the Hall to share his or her celebration of a personal event with the gods and the fellow disciples. Such offerings frequently consist of a high quality liquor and small snacks (such as peanuts, melon seeds, and candies). Just before the end of a regular "book-writing" séance these are handed into the inner sanctum, are lightly touched with the planchette, and then placed on the offering table. After the conclusion, the liquor and snacks are shared among those present and consumed right away inside the temple.

The planchette is the principal conduit of numinous power in a
phoenix hall; its main function is, of course, to transmit verbal messages, but it is equally possible to transmit more amorphous forms of energy through it. Thus, for example, the planchette can be used to "open the [numinous] light" (kaiguang 開光) of new god images. An important application of the planchette in the Mingzheng Tang is the so-called "numinous healing" (lingliao). This involves using the planchette to apply pressure to specific points on an individual's body, generally on the back, in the neck, on the head, in the face, on the chest, and along the arms, as well as, if necessary, to specific afflicted parts of the body. This "massage" infuses the body with numinous energy and "opens the blood channels" (kai xuedao 開血道) or the body's "energy channels" (tong qimai 通氣脈). As many diseases are deemed to be caused karmically, medical therapy on its own often does not address the root cause of a condition. The infusion of numinous energy channelled through the planchette counteracts the energy blockages brought about by the accumulation of turbid and heavy matter-energy which in turn is a manifestation of a person's burden of bad karma.54 By thus addressing the karmic causes of disease, numinous healing creates favourable conditions under which other measures (such as medication) can become more effective. "Numinous healing" alone does not usually suffice to effect a cure and this is a point that is stressed again and again by the Mingzheng Tang, so as to dampen exaggerated expectations.55 While it can be used prophylactically,

54 As extremely pure and refined energy-matter the numinosity transmitted by the planchette can be used not only against the turbid qi created by the individual's own sins, but also against forms of such energy-matter invading the mind from the outside. In other words, lingliao can be used for the exorcism of evil spirits. This is not very common, but it is used for this purpose from time to time [cf. Luanyou 543:12; 564:25; 574:28].

55 On one occasion, for example, a patient complained that his pain had not vanished after receiving numinous healing. The Benevolent Master replied: "The Old Patriarch's [= the Yellow Thearch's] numinous healing aids the free flow of matter-energy; only then can medicine and drugs be effective. [In your particular case] you should in addition seek a benefactor in the north [qiu guiren yu bei 請人於北] and use Chinese medicine. (People
numinous healing is strictly speaking is reserved for therapeutic application, and we find again and again injunctions issued by the gods against its use by people without serious complaints.\textsuperscript{56}

Numinous healing at the Mingzheng Tang is usually provided by the Yellow Thearch whose association with medicine is based on his alleged authorship of the \textit{Huangdi neijing} (Interior Classic of the Yellow Thearch), a classical work of Chinese traditional medicine. It was not introduced in the Mingzheng Tang until 1990 when it was offered as a special favour to a deputy chairman of the Hall who was suffering from diabetes. Although in this particular case the healing was not very successful (the deputy chairman died the next year), the idea caught on and healing sessions became part of the more important dharma assemblies held by the Mingzheng Tang. As the descending deity was the Yellow Thearch, the medium Moxianzi who at first was in charge of these sessions dressed himself in a Xuanyuan Jiao (Yellow Thearch Religion) gown for these occasions.

By the time I arrived the Mingzheng Tang, Moxianzi was too frail to perform this rather exhausting service and it had become the responsibility of Mingbi. Over the years, this ritual service became ever more popular and soon was offered on normal séance days as well, usually right after the Sunday book-writing séance. As it was now a continuous part of the normal generally suffer from the delusion that numinous healing can immediately remove a disease. However, [in fact] numinous healing aids in the permeability of the [body's] numinous caverns [\textit{lingxue} refers to acupuncture spots] and helps the effectiveness of drugs. If it did more than that there would be no more need for physicians.)" [\textit{Shiyi chandao lu} VIII:54].

\textsuperscript{56} See for example \textit{Luanyou} 529:5; 556:17-18; 559:36; 580:2. In practice, however, this restriction is not strictly enforced.
séance activities, it was not feasible to change dress for the occasion, and so Mingbi performed "numinous healing" in his usual blue gown rather than in the elaborate Xuanyuan Jiao dress. By 1994 the practice had become so popular, especially during dharma assemblies, that Mingbi alone could not handle the great crowds of patients any more. At this point, Heaven decided to allow the training of a new medium solely for the purpose of performing numinous healing. Wang Yingbei*, a deputy chairman, was chosen and underwent fourteen days of planchette training. After its successful completion he was given the pen-name "Dragon Brush" (Longbi 龍筆) as the dragon is an emblem of Huangdi.57 At first Longbi was merely supposed to shoulder some of Mingbi's work load during dharma assemblies, but he soon came to also perform numinous healing on other occasions. Later in 1994 (after I had already left the Hall), a regular lingliao séance by Longbi was instituted Sunday afternoons between 3:30 and 4:30, i.e., during the time that Mingbi performed the jishi séance. It appears that numinous healing has now become the sole responsibility of Longbi.

The Mingzheng Tang has not invented numinous healing; it is offered in different forms by many religious bodies in Taiwan. The other phoenix hall in Dakeng, the Shengshou Gong, has made quite a specialty of it, though there the massages are not performed with the planchette, but administered by hand by an elderly lady renowned for her spiritual abilities. Every weekend long queues of lingliao clients form in the Shengshou Gong’s central courtyard, patiently awaiting their turn. It may well have been the example (and competition) of the Shengshou Gong that first prompted the

57 The Mingzheng Tang’s planchette reserved especially for use by the Yellow Thearch has its end shaped like the head of a dragon.
introduction of numinous healing to the Mingzheng Tang. Its great success is reflected in the increasing frequency of lingliao séances at the Mingzheng Tang and in its institutional differentiation by the training of a specialized medium for the performance of this service at regularly scheduled times.

A further way of channelling divine energy is the production of charms (fu 符) by means of the planchette. Typologically, this practice has to be placed somewhere between the verbal communication of morality book writing and the channelling of pure energy in numinous healing, as a charm is on the one hand a written document, but on the other hand a carrier of divine energy. Their effectiveness rests both on the contents of their texts, which are commands that a desired end be brought about, and on the "numinous force" (lingli 靈力) invested in them. This force guarantees the enactment of the command, but also acts in a more generalized, diffuse way simply by its presence. Charms can be written both by gods and by humans. Those of divine origin can be relied upon to contain tremendous numinous force and all charms at the Mingzheng Tang are written by the gods through the planchette. Humans can also write charms, but have to observe a complex array of ritual rules in doing so; also, the writer has to be a person of high cultivation and thus capable of infusing the charms with "numinous force". Otherwise they do not acquire any efficacy.

As divine script, charms are extremely pure objects and as such counteract impurity; the whole variety of uses to which the Mingzheng Tang’s charms are put can ultimately be reduced to this basic function.

59 Ji Fo dianhua jinpian, pp.68-70. Penglai xiandao youji, pp.49.
Impurity can appear as ritual pollution (for example, by death), evil spirits, disease, or even as deficient intelligence. Against all of these, charms can be and are used. However, one has to take care not to expose charms to random impurity, as this will dissipate their potency before they can act upon the specific impurity for which they were requested. Thus, for example, one should not wear a charm when sleeping in one’s bed (which as the locus of sexual intercourse is considered impure) or when using the toilet.

The Mingzheng Tang's repertoire of charms has developed over time, some charms dropping out of use, and others being added in new revelations. As a kind of "sacred writ", charms are revelations just as morality books and scriptures are. Like shanshu, they are promulgated periodically by Heaven to address certain pressing problems of humanity. For example, the Mingzheng Tang distributes a healing charm against cancer (zhiai lingfu 治癌靈符) which was first revealed by Han Xiangzi in 1990 and a charm to prevent miscarriages during pregnancy (antaifu 安胎符) revealed by Guan Sheng Dijun in 1993. Also in 1993 a charm against drug addiction (jiedufu 解毒符) was bestowed by the Venerable Mother, reacting to what at that time came to be perceived as a serious social problem in Taiwan.

Just as they can be issued, charms can also be retracted by Heaven. In the 1980s a rumour existed in Taiwan that all charms had been recalled (shouhui 收回) by Heaven and that therefore charms were no longer effective. Addressing the issue, the deity Han Xiangzi affirmed that this applied only to “harmful or improper charms”, but that beneficial charms were still an important instrument for the gods’ saving work.\textsuperscript{60} The

\textsuperscript{60} Penglai xiandao youji, p.49. Later revelations, however, acknowledge the continued
Mingzheng Tang’s charms, being new revelations, anyway are fairly immune against the implications of the rumoured general retraction of charms in the past. However, these implications are occasionally employed by the Mingzheng Tang to cast doubt on the validity of older charms. For example, in a revelation dating to 1987, the Mingzheng Tang’s Yue Wumu Wang claimed that most of the charms included in the phoenix hall liturgical manual *Rumen kefan* had been taken back by Heaven, because they had never been intended for public circulation in the first place.61

The Mingzheng Tang’s charms are intended principally for use by individuals, phoenix disciples and others, in their private environment. They are only rarely used in the Mingzheng Tang’s ritual proceedings. During the first ten years or so of the Mingzheng Tang’s history, charms were occasionally ingested by mediums to produce a special state of mind required for certain tasks connected with their mediumship. For example, when writing the *Niaoyu souyi ji* Yongbi had to swallow a “charm [bestowing] penetrating numinosity” (*tongling fu* 通靈符) that enabled him to understand the birds’ language.62 Moxianzi took a “charm for concentrating one’s numinosity” (*juling fu* 聚靈符) before embarking on a journey to the Heavens.63 With Mingbi’s ascendancy, the use of charms in connection with spirit-writing has ceased. I have not elicited an explicit explanation for this change, but from my knowledge of Mingbi’s views I would surmise that as he regards successful mediumship as a matter of the

existence of so-called “heterodox charms” (*xiefu* 邪符) originating from the “chaotic way of the heterodox demons” (*xiemo zhi luandao* 邪魔之亂道) [Luanyou 543:12-13], and recommend the use of the Mingzheng Tang’s charms to counteract this black magic [ibid.; Luanyou 590:27].

61 *Shiyi chandao lu* III:70-71.
62 *Chudao xinsheng*, p.8.
63 *Yaochi shengzhi*, pp.7-8.
cultivation of the medium’s mind, charms are unnecessary to a good medium. Their use would even suggest a need on the medium’s part to supplement cultivational deficiencies and thus be harmful to his reputation. A similar reasoning probably applies to the very sparing use of charms in other activities of the Hall. The Mingzheng Tang claims to be a pure outpost of the Heavens, under the protection of the highest gods. Charms would compromise this claim by implying the presence of (actual or potential) impurities that the Hall’s gods are unable to handle by themselves. They are thus used mainly in events taking place outside the Hall proper, such as in life-relasing assemblies when the turtles to be released are sprinkled with charm water (water containing the dissolved ashes of a charm) to increase their numinosity. Purifying charms (jingfu 淨符) are used when new god images are installed and generally on any ritual objects newly introduced to the Hall; for example, the gourd-shaped spirit-money oven (jinlu 金炉) outside the Hall was thus cleansed before it was officially opened for use.

The Mingzheng Tang continues to offer a wide variety of charms for use outside the Hall which are given to petitioners for an equally wide variety of purposes. One can differentiate three broad classes among the Mingzheng Tang’s charms: therapeutic, prophylactic, and inductive ones. Therapeutic charms, intended to correct an already existing problem, are usually burnt (literally “transformed by burning”, fenhua 焚化) and its ashes are dissolved in water which is then applied to the affected location. Prophylactic charms are pasted up in one’s house, affixed to one’s motorcycle or suspended in

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64 These are my categories, derived from the data at hand. They are not, to my knowledge, folk categories.

65 Examples from the Mingzheng Tang’s repertoire are the “purifying charm” (qingjingfu 清淨符) and the “Venerable Mothers golden elixir charm” (Huangmu jindanfu 皇母金丹符). See Appendix 4.1 and 4.4.
one's car, or are carried on the body in a little yellow plastic pouch provided for the purpose by the temple. They have a protective function, warding off negative influences and preventing a problem from arising in the first place.\footnote{A broad spectrum prophylactic charm in the Mingzheng Tang’s collection is the “Old Patriarch’s sacred charm” (Laozu shengfu 老祖聖符). See Appendix 4.2.} Inductive charms work to bring about a desired result not by counteracting negative forces, but by strengthening positive ones. A good example is the Mingzheng Tang’s “examination charm” (gongmingfu 功名符) which is said to help the bearer concentrate during exams.\footnote{See Appendix 4.3.} Therapeutic charms are by their nature intended for short-term use; their application leads to their destruction. Inductive charms may or may not be destroyed by their use. A “charm for raising numinosity” (qiling fu 起靈符) is used during life-releasing assemblies; it is burnt and dissolved in water which is then sprinkled on the animals to strengthen their numinosity before they are released. The “examination charm”, by contrast, is worn in a pouch during an exam and thus survives its application. After the examination, it is to be returned to the Mingzheng Tang where it is then burnt; alternatively the user him or herself can burn it and dispose of the ashes in clean water or clean earth. Prophylactic charms are usually intended for long-term and continuous use. They have, however, an “expiry date”; usually a charm is not to be used longer than one year after which time its “numinous force” is believed to have been depleted. It can be “recharged” by passing it over the Mingzheng Tang’s incense burner, but preferably it should be exchanged for a new one.

Some charms are dealt out to anybody who requests them; they are advertised in the Hall’s publications and are frequently specifically requested
by petitioners. Of these, the Hall has a preprinted stock produced from an original that at one point had been drawn by means of the "golden brush". Their efficacy is initialized by the seal of Guan Sheng Dijun, the Hall's presiding deity, which is imprinted on each charm by hand, and by their "transformation by command" (chihua 救化) of a deity which is achieved by means of the planchette. To further increase their numinous efficacy, charms are passed once or thrice through the smoke of the Hall's main incense burner. There are other charms that are not publicly available and are only produced by hand for specific purposes; examples are the "charm for raising numinosity" used on animals to be released, or the exorcistic "charm of the seven gang stars" (qigangfu 七星符). It is one of the perks of discipleship that the Hall's gods will occasionally favour individual phoenix disciples with specially drawn charms as a reward for services rendered or in response to some immediate need.

Functionally similar to a charm are the "red ribbons" (hongxian 紅線) granted by the Hall to unmarried persons in search of a partner. Questions concerning future marriage figure prominently among the petitions processed by the Hall. A hongxian is a narrow red fabric ribbon, about 20 cm long, which is carried on the body and is said to hasten the arrival of the bearer's "marital affinity" (yinyuan 姻緣). They are issued by the "Old Man under the Moon" (Yuexia Laoren 月下老人) and are physical representations of the red ribbon tied by this deity between two prospective spouses.68

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68 The Old Man Under the Moon was added to the Mingzheng Tang's roster of deities in 1987 with the opening of the new building in Dakeng [Lunyou 414:5]. The Old Man is visualized as holding a "register of marital affinity" (yinyuanbu 姻緣簿) in one hand and a "red satchel" (chi'nung 赤囊) in the other, containing the red ribbons with which the feet of the two partners destined for each other are bound together. The deity describes his functions in a revelation at the Mingzheng Tang, using the opportunity to bemoan his thankless duties which earn him no gratitude from happy couples and only grudges from the unhappy ones.
In many cases, the charm is only part of a problem’s solution and other ritual measures are recommended to supplement it. If a charm succeeds in solving the problem at hand, its user is expected to come to the Hall and offer his or her thanks through an incense offering and possibly some meritorious deeds. In fact, a vow (shanyuan 善願) to perform meritorious deeds made before using the charm is believed to enhance its efficacy by adding a tangible expression of the petitioner’s sincerity to the numinous force of the charm. Another supportive measure is the recitation of the name (shenghao 聖號) of the charm’s divine author.\(^69\)

### 4.2 Communication from Humans to the Gods

Communication from humans to the gods in a phoenix hall takes place predominantly in written form by the submission of written memorials (shuwen 疏文 or wenshu 文疏). The use of written memorials and petitions is a prominent feature of Daoist ritual, a “hallmark of Taoist practice,” in Kristofer Schipper’s words.\(^70\) In a major rite, such as a jiao 鄉, the Daoist priest reads a memorial on behalf of the sponsoring community, but many smaller rites also involve the reading and burning of written memorials.\(^71\) The presentation of memorials is a bureaucratic procedure that has to be performed by a properly authorized functionary; it is therefore a prerogative

\(^69\) Appendix 4 contains photoreproductions of eight of the Mingzheng Tang’s most common charms with short explanations on their history and use.
\(^70\) Schipper 1974:311.
\(^71\) See Schipper 1974 for two translations of Daoist memorials. A selection of other Daoist memorials can be found in Oofuchi 1983.
of the *daoshi* 道士 as an official in the celestial bureaucracy, and is by the same token absent from the rites of the "lower" order of Daoist functionaries, the *fashi* 法師. From the Daoist viewpoint, a mere layperson would then be even less qualified to communicate with the gods by means of written memorials, and indeed, memorial writing by laypeople seems to be generally unknown in Taiwan. There is an important exception recorded in the ethnographic literature, however: some major folk religious temples perform Confucian rites that feature the reading and burning of "prayer texts" (*zhuwen* 祝文). Although these are not identical in nature with the Daoist memorial, they also are formal written communications presented by humans to the gods. The performers of these rites are not Daoist priests, but members of the temple committee and of the local elite. They establish their authority to thus communicate in writing with the celestial hierarchy by anchoring their rituals in a non-Daoist, namely, the Confucian tradition, thus obviating any Daoist questioning of their legitimacy. The same strategy is followed by phoenix halls: they explicitly claim to be standing in the Confucian line, calling themselves "Divine Teachings of the Confucian Tradition" (Ruzong Shenjiao) and structuring their rituals in a manner generally perceived as "Confucian". The earliest liturgical manual specifically

72 Schipper 1974:310-311. McCreery [1973:177] reports the reading of a memorial in the performance of the *baidou* 拜斗 rites by a *fashi* he studied in Puli township (Nantou county); in this respect, however, the *baidou* is exceptional in the *fashi*’s ritual repertoire.

73 The ethnographic evidence is not completely unambiguous. While Schipper seems to assume that a layperson cannot personally present a memorial [1974:323], a passage in L. Wieger’s *Moral Tenets and Customs in China* [p.521-523] describes a lay religious practice involving the presenting of a memorial (*huangbiao* 黃表, "yellow missive" in Wieger/Davrout’s translation), often containing prayers and vows for the achievement of certain ends. The burning of such a "yellow missive" is called *fashu* 魚 (Wieger/Davrout 1913: "sending a letter," literally "issuing a memorial"). No involvement by religious specialists is mentioned.

74 For examples see Thompson 1981, Dean 1995:154-159. Robert P. Weller also describes such a Confucian rite a popular temple, but does not mention the reading of a prayer [Weller 1994:172-173].

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compiled for use by phoenix halls is entitled Liturgical Regulations of the Confucian School (*Rumen kefan* 儒門科範) and clearly derives its basic ritual structure from the rites celebrated in honour of Confucius at the Confucian temples. Once this basic frame of reference is established, however, the *Rumen kefan* goes on to incorporate into it ritual texts derived from the Daoist tradition. Thus the Confucian prayer texts (*zhuwen*) may be replaced by memorials (*shuwen*) addressed to Daoist, Buddhist, and popular religious deities for such purposes as the staging of a *jiao*, for the restoration of a person's destiny, and for the deliverance from purgatory of ancestors. In this way, phoenix halls set themselves up as providers of ritual services homologous to those offered by other religious specialists.  

McCreery observed correctly that among the various channels of access to spiritual power

[t]he spirit-writing cult is the analogue of access by way of proper bureaucratic channels. The petitioner goes to the temple as he goes to a government office. There he encounters a clerk and presents his problem. The problem is written down and forwarded to higher levels for handling. The decision reached by higher authorities is then returned via the clerk to the petitioner.  

Indeed, while direct individual communication with the gods by means of spoken prayers said when offering incense is not rejected by the Mingzheng Tang, written communication is deemed to be safer and more likely to reach

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75 See Seaman 1978 for a description of the variety of ritual services offered by a Nantou county phoenix hall in the 1970s (especially p.69 and pp.83-94). These included the conducting of funerals, opening up (*kaiguang*) of new deity images, the issuing of charms, the performance of various fate-correcting rites, the dispensation of geomantic advice and of medical prescriptions. In a 1987 article Seaman discusses the funeral rites conducted by Puli township phoenix disciples in more detail, in the process also throwing some light on the function of phoenix halls as competitive providers of ritual services also offered by other practitioners such as Longhua Pai vegetarian halls, Daoist priests, and Buddhist clergy.  

76 McCreery 1973:35.
the correct divine official. Written communication occurs in basically two forms: written requests are handed in by petitioners during jishi séances on standardized “petition forms” (bingdan 禪 紙). These state the petitioner's name, gender, age, address, lunar birthdate, and the matter in question. Believers state all these details to a phoenix disciple acting as a clerk who enters them into the form which he passes on to the medium's attendant in the inner sanctum. The attendant reads it out to the medium who then writes down the god's answer in “grass script” on a large yellow sheet of paper. This sheet is then handed back to the “clerk” who copies the reply in more easily readable characters onto a preprinted reply form which is given to the petitioner. This form of communication is used for matters that can be decided on the spot by the deity present during the séance, for example, questions concerning health, education, work, and family. If the problem thus submitted is not one that the deity thinks can be decided right away or that should be referred to other levels in the celestial bureaucracy, it will recommend the submission of a formal memorial.

A shuwen can be submitted for a wide variety of purposes, including those that could also be handled by the simplified procedure during a jishi séance described above. Submitting a memorial (chengshu 呈 疏) is, however, a much more formal and solemn procedure that carries more weight in the celestial bureaucracy. As an administrative document, a memorial has to be submitted on behalf of the petitioner by an officer of a temple established by the command of Heaven since only such temples are deemed to be legitimate subunits of the celestial bureaucracy and therefore authorized to write and

77 The yellow sheets with the god’s writing are burnt and thus returned to Heaven, there to be filed in a celestial registry.
submit official documents. The memorial is a yellow sheet of paper on which the request is written in red or black ink, dated and stamped with the Mingzheng Tang’s seal. It is then folded in accordion style and bound with two red strips of paper. Later a functionary of the Mingzheng Tang kneels down in front of the main altar, ceremoniously unfolds the memorial, reads it out aloud, and then burns it in a small portable tin oven, such as is used by many households for burning spirit-money. Most memorials in the Mingzheng Tang are directed first to the Hall’s chairman Guan who if necessary passes them on to the appropriate higher levels.

*Shuwen* may be submitted on behalf of individuals or of the Mingzheng Tang as a whole. Although a memorial may contain a simple petition or question, more commonly this elaborate form is used for the conveyance of information intended for the files of the heavenly bureaucracy, such as vows and declarations of merit produced by specific actions. Individual *shuwen* may, for example, announce to Heaven the vow made by a new phoenix disciple upon his or her induction (*ruluan*), the merit created by sponsoring the printing of a morality book or by sponsoring a “bushel” at a dharma assembly. These are very common occasions and the Mingzheng Tang has ready-made memorial forms for them which only have to be filled in with the details of the individual case (see my translations in Appendix 3). Collective memorials are submitted to record a meritorious achievement of the Hall as a whole, e.g., at the presentation of a new morality book or at the sending off and welcoming back of the deities around the lunar New Year.

While memorials usually have to be “transformed by burning” when

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they are sent up to Heaven, there exists one exception to this rule. Memorials asking the Year God (Taisui) for his protection are not burned, but stored throughout the year reigned over by the Taisui beside the bushel that represents him in the Mingzheng Tang. They are burned only after the Taisui has been sent off at the end of the lunar year and are replaced by new ones once the new year’s Taisui assumes his office. Strictly speaking, only persons whose astrological constellation “clashes” (chong 冲) with that year’s Taisui have to placate the deity (an Taisui 安太歲) in this manner, but the ritual is performed every year by most phoenix disiples whether or not their cyclical characters indicate a “clash”. Therefore the Taisui’s bushel is always surrounded by substantial stacks of memorials.
CHAPTER 5: CULTIVATION AND THE ACCUMULATION OF MERIT

5.1 Principles, Method and Aim of Cultivation

The Mingzheng Tang is a node where the three realms of existence meet: the physical world, the heavens, and the underworld. These three realms (sancao 三曹, sanjie 三界) are not radically different from each other or mutually antagonistic and their denizens all share a common ontological root. They are born from the Dao, the underlying unitary principle of the cosmos. Because every sentient being is born from the Dao, it carries the Dao as a kind of divine spark within it. This part of every sentient being, and in particular every human being, that partakes of the cosmic unity is called its "numinous nature" (lingxing 禮性). The immanence of the Dao in humans creates the possibility of a union between the Great Dao and humanity; this, however, is not just a possibility, but a duty. The cultivation of the divine spark within oneself is the individual's greatest responsibility and the true objective of human life. A belief in the fundamental unity of the cosmos and its immanence in human beings is common to practically all forms of Chinese religious thinking. The Confucian Classics speak of human nature as bestowed by Heaven and therefore partaking in the nature of Heaven; popular sects express the same idea by conceptualizing humanity as the offspring of a cosmic Mother. Both models imply an underlying unity and therefore the possibility of reunion. This reunion is to be achieved by the cultivation of the numinous part of human nature, that part that it shares with the Dao. The Tiandao aoyi puts this premise very succinctly:

Humanity comes from Heaven and can return to Heaven. Where one comes from, one can by oneself return to. If one wants to return to
one’s place of origin, one must cultivate the Way of Heaven. The Way of Heaven is the bridge between Heaven and Humanity.”

Unfortunately, celestial nature is only part of what constitutes a human being. Being imprisoned in an impermanent body, human nature becomes clouded by attachments and delusions and the brightness of the numinous nature diminishes, until it is almost extinguished. Cultivation entails removing the obstructions to one’s numinosity created by attachment to the outside world and the strengthening and development of one’s numinous nature. The more the mind is dominated by the brilliance of one’s numinous nature the closer one gets to the original source of this nature, the Dao.

Many methods have been developed for the cultivation of this numinous nature, such as meditation, study, and internal alchemy. The specific method practised and propagated by phoenix halls is morality. The Dao is fundamentally good and therefore the numinous nature that represents the immanent Dao also is good. By cultivating goodness one cultivates one’s numinous nature. Goodness is to be cultivated internally by the removal of all selfish desires and the nurturing of virtue, and externally by the extension of goodness towards others in meritorious acts of charity. This double approach is summarized by the term “inner sageliness and outer kingliness” (neisheng waiwang 内聖外王). The cultivation of morality can and should be pursued in the context of everyday life. It does not require ascetic retreat from the world, but is to be embedded within one’s secular life

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1 Tiandaoyi, chapter 5 (see Appendix 1).
2 Tiandaoyi, chapter 5.
3 Tiandaoyi, chapter 9. This distinction can be seen in parallel to the two paths of deification recognized in Seaman’s Pearl Mountain Village cult: that of “self-cultivation” and that of “merit accumulation through helping others” [Seaman 1978:53].
4 Tiandaoyi, chapter 5.
whose moral fulfillment is the true method of cultivation. The cultivational method of the Phoenix School is therefore easy to practise and in accordance with human feelings, the conditions of modern society, and the religious needs of the current age of universal salvation.5

This cultivation of goodness takes place in a cosmos that is fundamentally moral in nature, where every moral or immoral action produces an equivalent reaction. The cosubstantiality of every part of the cosmos makes a moral resonance between its parts possible; it is this resonance (ganying 感應) that brings blessings to the good and calamities to the evil. Thus, the cultivation of the Way of Heaven (tiandao 天道), which is the cultivation of virtue and goodness, is not just an abstract ideal, but has very real rewards in this life and in existences to come. In this life the virtuous person will enjoy worldly blessings and an untroubled life; after death he or she will be rewarded by assuming a higher form of existence. According to the stage of cultivational success attained during the individual’s lifetime, the surviving spirit will be reborn into a better human existence or even become a transcendent being no longer subject to the suffering that is an inextricable part of human existence. Such deification as a way of “escaping from the cycle of birth and death” (jietuo shengsi 解脱生死)6 is the ultimate aim of the phoenix disciple’s moral cultivation.

However, the same mechanism of moral resonance, which is equated with the Buddhist concept of karmic retribution, also metes out punishment to the wicked. Those who fail to develop their moral nature are pursued by

5 Daoxin micang, pp.54-56.
6 Cf. Tiandao aoji, chapter 8.
suffering during their lifetimes and punished by rebirth into a lower form of existence after death. All beings in the three realms of existence share in the same basic heaven-endowed nature and the difference between a god, a human being, an animal, or a soul incarcerated in purgatory lies merely in the degree to which their numinous natures have been purified by cultivation.

Success and failure in the process of cultivation are measurable in terms of “merit” (gong 功) and “demerit” (guo 過), the former assigning a positive numerical value to good deeds, thoughts, and words, the latter a negative numerical value to evil ones. Merits and demerits are tallied with each other and the resulting positive or negative balance is believed to determine one’s fate in this and the next existences. Together they provide a language to talk about and conceptualize moral cultivation, and they form the foundation for the kind of moral cultivation propagated by phoenix halls. Seen from this angle, a phoenix hall is a merit administering agency: it offers its members opportunities for the creation of merit, reports the created merit to Heaven, informs its members of the current balance of their “merit accounts”, and provides confirmation of the reliable functioning of the merit and demerit system through the revelations channelled by the planchette. Merit is a key concept around which most of the Mingzheng Tang’s activities and beliefs revolve and therefore deserves a close analysis.
5.2 Merit Accumulation

The most common term for merit is *gongde* 功德. Buddhist doctrine gives several explanations of the term's meaning: according to one interpretation, *gong* is the kind of action able to bring about blessings; it is the power (*de* 德) inherent in moral conduct (*shanxing* 善行). In another view, *de* is seen as that what is gained from the cultivation of *gong*; here the latter may be translated as "meritorious action", while the former is the virtue achieved thereby. Finally, *gong* is viewed as outward-directed charity, while *de* is inner virtue. One Buddhist dictionary for lay use phrases the latter interpretation very succinctly: "*Gong* is good conduct, *de* is a mind of goodness." 

The Mingzheng Tang adopts this view of *gong* and *de* as referring to outer and inner aspects of merit. Confucius, in a message channelled through Bright Stylus on 20 April 1985, defines *gong* "as the way of perfecting others", and *de* as "the way of perfecting oneself, so that one gains something for one's mind" (*Cheng wu zhi dao wei zhi gong. Cheng ji zhi dao, you de yu xin wei zhi de.* 成物之道謂之功。成己之道，有德於心謂之德。) These two aspects of cultivation are, however, not separate, but interdependent, i.e., no one of them can be practised without the other. The second Buddhist definition described above, viz. the interpretation of *de* as the virtue acquired by means of meritorious action, throws light on one side of this dependency, namely, on *de* as an outcome of *gong*. This is echoed in another revealed text of the Mingzheng Tang, where *gongde* is defined as "creating merit in order

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7 Ding Fubao 1921:464.
9 Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lu 1:14.
to complete one’s own virtue”\textsuperscript{10}.

In what way does meritorious action contribute to the perfection of inner virtue? By cancelling out bad karma which clouds one’s spiritual nature. Why is merit able to cancel out karma? Because merit and karma are basically the same thing. Karma is a formless and thus intangible force acting upon our lives; it can be made tangible and calculable, however, when conceptualized as the balance of merit and demerit. Merit and demerit can thus be said to be the quantifiable aspect of karma (ye 業). Merit and demerit represent the karma we are accumulating in our present existence; thus, they are continuous with the karma received from former existences, and will be passed on as karma into future existences. From this it becomes understandable that the main use of meritorious action is the cancellation of past karma (su\text{\-}ye 夭業) and the building of future rewards (shang\text{\-}guo 善果). Each merit collected in this life takes away from the karmic ballast, while each demerit adds to it. The quality of one’s next existence depends on whether one has succeeded in reducing one’s karmic ballast or whether it has grown heavier during the present existence.

How does karma relate to an individual’s virtue? Karma affects the natural capacities of Man’s spiritual nature, leading to cognitive and behavioural confusion. In this function, karma acts as an “obstruction” (ye\text{\-}zhang 專障) to the natural goodness of the spiritual nature of human beings. Meritorious action, by cancelling out karma, helps in removing these “karmic obstructions”, thus clearing up the spiritual nature and making it “brighter”. This fact is stressed in the practice of transferring merit to

\textsuperscript{10} Shi\textit{\-}yi ch\textit{\-}andao lu VIII:24.
ancestors, which is said “to increase the brightness of their spiritual natures”
(zengjia qi .... lingxing zhi guangming 增加 .... 其靈性之光明).\textsuperscript{11} In physical
terms, the relative brightness of one’s spiritual nature is supposed to manifest
itself in one’s “energy-force” (qi 氣). Human beings possess an aura just above
their head, which seems to be a emanation of energy-force. This aura will be
clear, half blue, and half red for the person whose merits and demerits
balance each other. Those with many demerits and few merits have a dark, or
even black, aura. Those with many merits and many demerits have an aura
that is sometimes clear and sometimes turbid. Those with many merits and
few demerits have a largely white aura with some turbid spots. Those with
vast merit have a completely clear aura.\textsuperscript{12}

Virtue is thus to a certain extent an outcome of the accumulation of
external merit, which clears away the karmic obstructions hindering the
spontaneous expression of goodness, which is humans’ true nature.
However, as indicated, this link works the other way round as well. Only the
virtuous person is properly able to accumulate merit, because meritorious
action is not simply objective behaviour, but is qualified by the inner attitude
of the actor.

The proper attitude to take in accumulating merit is that of a “sincere
mind” (chengxin 誠心).\textsuperscript{13} Only merit accumulation for the sake of doing
good, without expectation of immediate reward and without a specific aim in
mind, will be effective. Merit accumulated with insincere intention, e.g. with
a view towards immediate profit, still counts as merit, but it is much less

\textsuperscript{11} Shiyi chandao lu II:4.
\textsuperscript{12} Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü I:37.
\textsuperscript{13} Mingzheng zhi dao. pp.7-8.
valuable than merit arising out of sincerity. Accordingly, two kinds of merit are differentiated: "open merit" (yanggong 陽功) and "hidden virtue" (yinde 隱德). Yanggong is merit accruing from deeds of goodness that are done openly, for everyone to see, with the purpose in mind of enhancing the actor's reputation among his contemporaries, while yinde derives from hidden acts of goodness. Supernatural rewards (literally "results" or "fruits", guo 果) can only be reaped from hidden virtue, which will not only benefit the actor himself, but also his or her ancestors and descendants. Open merit, on the other hand, has been rewarded already by worldly prestige and thus cannot produce any further supernatural benefits. Thus it is said that "ten units of open merit do not even equal one unit of hidden virtue".14

Crucial in the accumulation of merit, however, is not whether it is collected openly or in a concealed manner: these are only external indications of an attitude of mind. Thus another source defines "open virtue" as merit created "with the expectation of retribution, seeking fame and profit, and thinking only of oneself in a selfish manner"15.

That merit (and demerit) accumulation is not simply a matter of outward performance of certain acts, but involves an evaluation of inner attitude, has a bearing on views on the calculation of merit and demerit for little children. A phoenix disciple asked from what age on the merits and demerits of a human being are recorded. The Benevolent Teacher replied that


15 Mingzheng zhi dao, p.7.
recording starts either from the moment when the child is able to act or from the point in time when its destiny commences.\footnote{16} This explanation, in offering two answers to the question, is somewhat ambiguous. The beginning of a person’s destiny must be calculated on the basis of his or her “eight characters” (bazi 八字) and may be located anywhere between four months and ten years of age.\footnote{17} While such a calculation yields a definite date, in practical terms, the alternative interpretation seems to play a more important role: that merit and demerit are recorded from the moment the child is able to act responsibly. But even so, while he or she is still very young and under parental guidance, any transgressions on the child’s part are booked to the parents’ merit accounts. As long as a child is not completely self-responsible, all or some of his or her demerits will go to the parents, who are deemed to have neglected their educational duties. After the child has received some education and learned to distinguish between good and bad, the greater part of any merits or demerits will go into its own account, while a smaller part is still booked to the parents. Only when the child has grown up to the stage of being the master of its own capabilities, will its merit records be completely separated from those of the parents.\footnote{18}

There exists a certain tension between the ideas of “merit” as observable acts and of “virtue” as a mental attitude or achievement. Throwing these two aspects together in the one term gongde exemplifies the ambiguity surrounding the whole practice of merit accumulation. As the phoenix disciples of the Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy are not the first to have encountered this ambiguity, at this point, a short excursion into history

\footnote{16} Shi yi chandao lu III:78.  
\footnote{17} Cf. Berthier 1987:88-89.  
\footnote{18} Shi yi chandao lu III:78.
seems in place to show how earlier practitioners of merit accumulation have dealt with it.

Writers and users of so-called “ledgers of merit and demerit” (gongguo ge 功過格) in traditional China were very much aware of this ambiguity. These ledgers are listings of good and bad deeds with merit and demerit amounts assigned to them. Their immanent tendency to be (mis-)used as tools for mechanical registration of external acts of goodness, without taking account of moral attitude, was the main target of their critics and the cause of some disquiet even to their propagators. The criticism was countered by emphasizing the necessity of a correct attitude when performing meritorious acts. Already before the appearance of the genre of ledgers, the differentiation of open and hidden merit seems to have been current: Cynthia Brokaw affirms for the “early Chinese tradition” that “merit earning activities had to be done in secret, for if the individual received public praise or remuneration for a deed, he could no longer expect any rewards from the gods—one was never recompensed twice.”\textsuperscript{19} While here the motivation for the accumulation of hidden merit may still be external, the Ming dynasty ledger author Yuan Huang 袁黃 gave a decidedly moral turn to the idea of hidden merit, making the (originally good) mind the principal creator of merit:

...the simple performance of good deeds was not enough. Even more than Yungu, Yuan Huang stressed that continual moral anxiety and absolute mental purity were prerequisites for the successful performance of good deeds, and that merit accrued only if good was done with a mind empty of considerations of profit.\textsuperscript{20}

Thus, merit was not to be assessed mechanically by just looking at the act

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{19} Brokaw 1991:33.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Brokaw 1991:98.
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itself, but was qualified by the intentions of the performer. Yuan Huang gives the example of donations of money:

... with a pure mind, "one cash can dissipate a thousand kalpas of crime." But, 'if a man does not forget his mind [i.e., if he is conscious of his goodness], then even if he distributes 200,000 taels of pure silver, his good fortune will not be complete."21

Yuan Huang located the accumulation of merit within the philosophical premises of the Ming dynasty Neo-Confucian xinxue 心學 ("School of the Mind"), which gives moral supremacy to the individual's mind. The innate knowledge (liangzhi 良 知) and innate ability (liangneng 良 能) of this mind will, if unencumbered by outer influences, lead it to goodness. Behavioural goodness is therefore authentic only as an expression of the mind's innate knowledge and ability.

Yuan Huang [...] interpreted merit accumulation as a practice requiring great mental discipline. A ledger user had to develop the same constant attentiveness to the moral details of his daily actions that Zhu Xi demanded of the serious scholar. In terms that could be appealing to both Chan Buddhists and Neo-Confucians (most particularly those of the Wang Yangming school), Yuan also emphasized the need to do good with a mind free of calculation and selfish thought. And in language reminiscent of Wang Yangming, Wang Ji, and the Taizhou thinkers, he repudiated worldly judgments and urged men to follow the springs of goodness in their own minds. No longer could mechanical merit accumulation [...] be considered efficacious. In fact, a ledger user needed an unusually sensitive moral vision to accumulate merit that would actually yield rewards.22

The link between action and intention was introduced into the system of merit accumulation by Ming Neo-Confucian considerations of the nature of the mind such as those espoused by Yuan Huang. The resulting ambiguity

22 Brokaw 1991:106.
was never resolved by Yuan Huang: in his own work, statements such as the one according unlimited merit to one single cash given with a pure mind stand alongside ledger equations of 1,000 cash with 1 gong. What is the use of concrete assignments of merit and demerit to specific acts, if these numbers are ultimately relativized by the moral quality of the accompanying intentions? What is even more surprising than Yuan Huang’s acceptance of this contradiction, which in a single individual may be due to a lack of philosophic discipline, is its acceptance by a number of other Ming dynasty thinkers, particularly from the Taizhou school of Neo-Confucianism. This indicates that more is involved here than simply a lack of consistency of thinking. The answer is to be found not on the conceptual, but rather on the practical level of Neo-Confucian cultivation. Cynthia Brokaw points out that conceptually ledger use and an intention-less state of mind are irreconcilable. On a practical level, however, merit accumulation by means of ledgers can play an important role in a Taizhou project of cultivation. A ledger can counterbalance the enormous psychological pressure placed upon the individual by the Taizhou-style quest for sagehood, which required the student “both to define for himself and then to follow, perhaps in the face of public criticism, the ‘true’ moral rules within his mind.” Ledgers of merit and demerit and their identification of indicators of cultivational success served as external guidelines against which to measure the progress of one’s own mind. They thus provided a certain degree of “moral certainty” to the struggling Taizhou follower otherwise thrown back solely upon his own mind. In Weberian terms we might say that the system of merit

accumulation served as a *Heilsmethodik* for the otherwise potentially anomic Taizhou cultivation, and supplied the practitioner with a certain degree of *Heilsgewißheit*.

The inclusion of moral intentionality in the system of merit accumulation also had a system-stabilizing function as a rationale for failure. In the pre-Ming systems of merit accumulation, failure in spite of assiduous and documented accumulation of merit was attributed to a heavy karmic ballast either produced by the individual himself in former existences or inherited from his ancestors. When moral intentionality came into play, it offered another explanation for apparently undeserved failure: maybe the supposed merit had never been accumulated, because the meritorious acts had not been performed in the correct state of mind. Yuan Huang made frequent use of this argument to explain the failure of seemingly deserving scholars in the state examination system.

The Ming Neo-Confucians' preoccupation with merit accumulation lives on in the modern Mingzheng Tang. Yuan Huang's relevant writings have been reprinted by the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society, and much of his understanding of the nature of merit accumulation has come to be reflected in the gods' messages received by the Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy. Let us now take a look at some of these messages and at the manner in which they address the tension of intentionality and performance in the project of

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29 *Liaofan sixun baihua jieshi*, no date. The preface of this reprint edition, which includes a commentary and a vernacular translation of Yuan's essays, is dated 1943. Yuan Huang's essays are still enjoying a wide circulation in today's Taiwan and can be found on the morality book racks of temples all over the island. In this, my own observations tally with those of Cynthia J. Brokaw [1991:226 (note 140)].
merit accumulation.

For one thing, the Benevolent Masters of the Mingzheng Tang consistently refuse to answer questions concerning the exact amount of merit necessary for the attainment of a specific aim. E.g.:

A reader asks: “I have been suffering from a nose disease for a long time, and urgently want to have it healed as soon as possible. How much meritorious virtue do I have to make to balance my merits and demerits? If there is no fixed number, how do I go about it?”
The Benevolent Master answers: “This is not a matter of buying and selling, where you bargain and abate the price. It all depends on karma; just exert yourself always and everywhere, then it can be done.”

A reader asks: “To resolve the various karmic obstructions of my little son, if I was to sponsor the printing of morality books, how many would I need to print in order to extinguish his previous transgressions?”
The Benevolent Master answers: “If one was to discuss it in detail, it is difficult to fix an amount. I hope you will continuously root your conduct in a mind of sincere offering and [thus] establish meritorious virtue, then you can gradually remove the karmic obstructions.”

Thus, questions making simple equations between specific amounts of merit and specific desired results are always deflected by the gods’ answers towards an emphasis on the doing of good with a purposeless mind. This emphasis on the primacy of the mind in the creation of merit is further illustrated by some practical applications of the principle. For example, the release of captive animals is considered more meritorious when done on a momentary impulse of compassion, than when performed with the purpose of creating merit in mind. Although the gods should only receive vegetarian sacrifices, meat sacrifices are not considered blasphemous when offered with a sincere

30 Shiyi chandao lu III:24.
31 Shiyi chandao lu V:9. Cf. also Shiyi chandao lu VII:68.
32 Shiyi chandao lu III:22.
mind (although the sacrificer will still be allotted some demerits for the killing of living beings). Once, in late 1988 or early 1989, a phoenix disciple from Pingdong (in southern Taiwan) got stuck in a traffic jam on his way to Taichung and spent altogether seven hours on the road. By the time he arrived at the Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy, the séance was already over, and he only had time left for a quick worship before heading back home. The Benevolent Teacher, however, lauded his determination and granted him the merit, as if he had been present during the séance. The latter case in particular shows that, in the final analysis, it is the mental attitude that counts, not the actual performance of a meritorious act.

As the accumulation of merit is a central concern of phoenix disciples and believers of the Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy, the Benevolent Masters are often approached with questions concerning the balance of a person’s merit account. The Masters responses to these questions vary, but they never offer a numerical account balance. The following are two typical cases:

A reader asks: “How big still is the discrepancy between my merits and demerits of former existences? How can I cancel out my karma?” The Benevolent Master replies: “There are still more demerits than merits. If you want to cancel out your own karma, there is only the one way of creating merit and establishing virtue. The person who creates merit and establishes virtue, must do so with a persevering mind; irrespective of what you do, whether you spend much or little money on alms, what is of greatest importance therein is the manifestation of the proper set of mind. If you understand this, you will succeed.

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33 Shiyi chandao lu IV:58.  
34 Shiyi chandao lu V:10.  
35 The term used here is faxin 反心, used in Buddhism to describe the mental initiative or resolve fundamental to any spiritual endeavour. In connection with charity, it points the piety or kindness of mind that expresses itself in the charitable act. Cf. Soothill & Hodous:384.  
36 Shiyi chandao lu II:47.
Zeng Boren asks: “How about my merits and demerits? What transgressions are there?”
The Benevolent Master replies: “Generally phrased, it may be said that karma from your former existences is still there. Although in this life the merits are many, you have not yet been able to attain the stage where [merits and demerits] are balanced. You should try harder. As to transgressions in this life, your “mind karma” is difficult to remove.”

As can be seen, the Benevolent Masters answer questions in vague terms of the balance of merit and demerit. Such information is then usually complemented with an exhortation of the questioner to keep cultivating him or herself and continue to collect merit.

Occasionally a Master will refuse to answer a question concerning merit balance, when the questioner appears to be worrying too much about his or her merit account:

Lin Liling asks: “How big still is the difference between my merits and demerits? [Could you please reveal this] so that I can create merit to balance my demerits?”
The Benevolent Master replies: “You do not really need to know how many merits and demerits you have. Just keep your mind towards goodness and act it out forcefully.”

If the gods are unwilling to grant the security and accountability

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37 *Yiye* 意業. Karma resulting from impure thoughts.
38 *Shiyi chandao lu* VIII:60.
39 In 1993, the Hall’s gods finally gave in to repeated requests from phoenix disciples and revealed the merit account balances for all phoenix disciples of the Hall, albeit still in general terms of balance and surplus. Not surprisingly, the leading members of the cult were revealed to have large merit surplusses, in some cases enough for posthumous promotion to the upper ranks of the gods. Most of the rank-and-file membership were shown to have “almost balanced” accounts, while some disciples were warned to work harder to equalize their still considerable ballast of demerit [*Luanyou* 558:19-24]. While such revelations may be a powerful instrument to encourage greater activism among the membership, they also carry risks. For example, it caused some consternation when in 1995 Mingbi suffered a stroke, as his huge merit surplus revealed in 1993 should have protected him against any such untoward afflictions. After an unsuccessful attempt to declare the cause of his illness a “celestial secret”, it was eventually ascribed to the fruition of a negative affinity, the result of a personalized grudge he had incurred in a previous existence.
inherent in concrete numbers, the phoenix disciple still has the possibility of
taking recourse to the Mingzheng Tang’s own ledger of merit and demerit.

The Sagely Thearch Wenheng’s Statutes of Merit and Demerit (Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü 文衡聖帝功過律) were written by the Founders of the Five Religions through Bright Stylus and published in two volumes in 1985 and 1986. The Statutes use a graded system of merit and demerit units, which in its general outline bears some similarity to that of an earlier spirit-written ledger, the Golden Book of the Jade Statutes (Yulü jinpian 玉律金篇), produced by a phoenix hall in Fengshan (Gaoxiong county) in 1951.40

According to the Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü’s system, the basic merit unit is an “attainment” (de 得); 100 “attainments” equal one “good” (shan 善); 100 goods equal one “merit” (gong 功); 100 merits equal one “virtue” (de 德); one hundred virtues equal one “way” (dao 道, also called “merit in the way” daogong 道功). The system of demerit shows the same hierarchical structure, with “lapses” (shi 失), “transgressions” (guo 過), “sins” (zui 罪), “evils” (e 悪), and “punishments” (xing 刑) as its units.41 The postmortem fate of human beings depends on the relative amounts of merit and demerit at the time of death. A surplus of five “merits in the way” (daogong), the equivalent of 50,000 basic merit units (gong) guarantees the virtuous individual an appointment as a low-level deity (e.g., an earth or city god). Fifteen merits in the way will make him a medium-level deity, twenty merits in the way a high deity, and one-hundred merits in the way bring about his ascension to the “principle heaven” (litian), the realm of the August Mother, removed from the cycle of reincarnations.42

Souls who possess a merit surplus lower than the minumum five “merits in the way” required for divine

40 Cf. Seaman’s summary of the Golden Book’s system of merits and demerits [1978:58 seqq.].
41 Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü 1:6-7.
42 Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü 1:7.
appointment are classified as "good souls" (shanhun 善魂), and may obtain permission to enter the "Institute for Gathering the Good" (Jushan Suo), located within purgatory, where they can continue to cultivate themselves and produce the additional merits needed. Souls who arrive in purgatory with a balanced merit account are straight away passed on to the tenth court to be reincarnated without having first to undergo any suffering. Only souls with more demerits than merits have to suffer the tortures of purgatory.43

While at first sight the writing of the Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü seems to represent a countervailing tendency in reestablishing a close, numerical link between merit, cultivation, efficacy, and achievement, on second consideration this turns out to be only partially true. In fact, we find here the same ambiguity towards merit accumulation. Some sections of the Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü are patterned after traditional ledgers of merit and demerit, assigning clear merit amounts to single, quantifiable actions. The greater part of the Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü, however, is devoted to extolling virtue and warning against vice in more general terms. Let me use an example to show what I mean: on page 32 of the Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü, it is stated that NT$100 donated towards the printing of a morality book are rewarded with one merit unit. Earlier, however, on page 15, we had been told that for the sponsoring of morality books three "merits in the Way", i.e. 30,000 merit units, were to be assigned. It is not made clear how many books have to sponsored, over how long a period of time, and with how much money. What is rewarded (and richly rewarded at that) is the

43 Cf. Difu zhizui tiaoli 地府治罪條例 (The Regulations of Purgatory for Dealing with Sin), a book revealed in the Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy between 1986 and 1987. As a systematic description of the regulations in force in the underworld concerning the punishment of sinners, it is a complement to the Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü's description of the heavenly statutes concerning merit and demerit [cf. Difu zhizui tiaoli:3].
state of mind that expresses itself in such moral action. The inclusion of such a general provision serves, I believe, to counteract the mercantile tendency inherent in the equation of money and merit amounts. The Heilsmethodik provided by the tabulation of merit points is thus relativized by the introduction of non-quantifiable sources of merit, and can therefore never in itself provide complete Heilsgewißheit. This uncertainty is not a flaw in the system, but the guarantor of its continued operation. Only a residual “uncertainty of salvation” provides the motivation for continuing moral action and is therefore crucial in preserving the dynamics of the system.

Non-quantifiable sources of merit and demerit create uncertainty in two different ways: on the one hand, unquantifiable demerit acts as an unknown variable in one’s merit tabulations. There are some clearly identifiable actions that bring about specific amounts of demerit. For example, a phoenix disciple who without a good reason does not attend a séance is assigned five demerits. However, such equations of specific acts with demerit amounts are very rare in the Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü. The vast majority of regulations concerning demerit are like the following:

The sin of carrying a benevolent and compassionate expression on the outside, while harbouring cruel poison in one’s mind --fifteen punishments ..... 

In order to balance fifteen “punishments” one would need to create fifteen “merits in the Way”, i.e. 150,000 merit units, something that is virtually unattainable with the puny merit amounts assigned to quantifiable acts of goodness. Staving off despair at this point, however, is the provision of unquantifiable merit: the promise of huge rewards, calculated in units of

44 Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü I:34.
daogong, for generalized moral conduct, such as we seen above. The system provides a huge store of potential merit which the disciple can control only imperfectly during his or her lifetime, but which he or she may always hope to attain.

Some of this dynamic ambiguity is discussed in the following exchange between a vice-chairman of the Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy and one of the Benevolent Teachers:

The disciple Chen* asks: “In the Statutes of Merit and Demerit it is recorded that with more than five merits in the Way one becomes a lower deity. In terms of money, $100 equal one merit unit. Thus one needs to spend more than five million dollars to cancel the accumulated demerits from former existences, and then has to create merit for another five million dollars. Are there not only very few among common mortals who can attain this?”

The Benevolent Teacher answers: “This is what is clearly written black on white, and it would seem that it is very difficult to achieve one merit in the Way. However, this is merely the counting method for merit that has form, but formless, hidden meritorious virtue is much greater. Therefore the later regulations all calculate merit in units of "merits in the Way", because they all record hidden meritorious virtue. For example, in terms of money, the sponsoring of morality books is calculated in units of gong, but according to chapter 3 ("Meritorious Virtue and Benevolent Conduct"), section four, three daogong can be registered for the sponsoring of morality books. This illustrates the origin of this rationale. Nowadays one can create merit and establish virtue very fast; if only one does good with a true mind, meritorious virtue will be measureless.”45

Thus, ultimately, for the individual’s salvation hidden “formless” (wuxing 無形) virtue is much more important than the comparatively small merit amounts of merit “possessing form” (youxing 有形). However, the “merit possessing form” is of greater practical importance to phoenix disciples, as it is easier to control and tabulate. The gods have recognized this fact by including

some regulations concerning specific, countable meritorious acts in the Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü, and by pronouncing themselves on the merit values of certain moral actions in various revelations scattered throughout the Hall’s literature. After all, in spite of the gods’ principal concern with purity of mind, the performance of outer acts of goodness and the recording of merit and demerit points do play a major role in phoenix halls in general.46 In this respect, the Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy is no exception. It offers a wide array of religious activities, all of which produce merit for the participants: e.g., spirit-writing séances, publishing of morality books, reciting of scriptures, sacrifices to the gods, charitable activities, dharma assemblies, releasing of captive animals. To all of these activities, specific merit amounts are assigned. However, until the 1980s, when the Mingzheng Tang wrote its own ledger, the exact amounts are difficult to determine. A “ledger of merit and demerit” may have been used for this purpose right from the beginnings of the cult, although I do not know which one. One ledger that is fairly common on Taiwan is the Ledger of Merit and Demerit of the Divine Lord Wenchang (Wenchang Dijun gongguo ge 文昌帝君功過格), a seventeenth century spirit-written text. However, the Wenchang ledger was not written specifically for use by phoenix halls, and thus it does not cover some of the specific meritorious activities engaged in by phoenix disciples (e.g., attendance at séances). Some of this ground is covered by the Yulü jinpian, of which Seaman reports that it was in constant use at the village phoenix hall near Puli (Nantou county) which he studied in the early 1970s. Whether it was in use in the early phases of the Shengxian Tang or the Mingzheng Tang, I do

46 The Daoist Association of the Republic of China seems to view this aspect as most characteristic of phoenix halls, and thus classifies them as part of the “Way of Accumulating Goodness” (Jishan Dao 積善道), which has as its main scriptural points of reference the Taishang ganying pian and the Wenchang Dijun gongguo ge. Cf. Zhonghua Minguo Daojiao Hui 1991:66.
not know.\(^{47}\) It is quite possible that no one standard ledger was used, as occasionally the gods had to make revelations concerning the proper merit amounts for specific acts. Thus, on 22 January 1973, the Shengxian Tang’s presiding deity Guan determined that for attendance at one séance (\textit{xiaolao yiqi} 效勞一期), each phoenix disciple was to obtain one merit unit.\(^{48}\) Occasionally, Guan chose to reward disciples who had come to attend a séance in spite of inclement weather with an additional merit point.\(^{49}\) The same special favour was granted to disciples of the branch hall in Wuri 鳥日 (Taizhong county), who on their accord came to attend séances at the mother hall.\(^{50}\) These special merit dispensations quite obviously were the carrots intended to induce members’ loyalty towards their phoenix hall. The logical stick supplementing the carrot would have been the registering of demerit for every absence from a séance, and in the Mingzheng Tang of the 1980s such a rule was actually instituted.\(^{51}\) It is not clear, however, whether such a regulation existed already in the 1970s. The only clear punishment for absence from séances was that if a phoenix disciple had not attended a séance for one year in a row, his or her “phoenix register” would be cancelled, i.e. the person would be effectively excommunicated. This rule was enshrined as the eleventh of the Shengxian Tang’s “Hall Regulations” (\textit{tanggui 堂規}).\(^ {52}\) The \textit{Wenheng Shengdi gongguo liu} eventually defined the following attendance rules: one \textit{gong} is assigned for each participation at any activity of the Hall.

\(^{47}\) However, the book was most probably familiar to many disciples. In 1972, the chairman of the Hall of Assisting in Goodness, where the Jade Statutes had been written in 1951, advertised the continued free distribution of the book in the \textit{Phoenix Friend}. Cf. \textit{Luanyou} 72 (15 April 1972):19.

\(^{48}\) \textit{Luanyou} 92(1973):11.

\(^{49}\) See for example \textit{Luanyou} 100:11; 101:13; 103:12; 120:8; 163:11.

\(^{50}\) \textit{Luanyou} 103:28.

\(^{51}\) Cf. above.

\(^{52}\) \textit{Luanyou} 92:10-11.
Attendance at séances devoted to the writing of a morality book is worth two gong per séance. Luansheng enjoy the privilege of receiving a special reward of merit when attending all séances devoted to the writing of a morality book. If they miss séances, their merit is calculated as the sum of the merit units gathered by attending the individual séances. If the absences are simply due to a lack of determination on the phoenix disciple's part, he or she is assigned five demerits for each missed séance. It is an important function of the Statutes to define common standards for the assignment of merit amounts, thus creating a transparency in the process that helps reduce conflict and dissatisfaction among the membership.

5.3 The Investment of Merit

The Mingzheng Tang does not merely provide opportunities to create merit for oneself by attending séances, sponsoring the printing of its shanshu, participating in its dharma assemblies, donating money for new god images and building projects, etc. etc., it also offers institutional support for the investment of one's merit. It is perfectly possible (and from a moral viewpoint even especially commendable) for an individual to create merit for no specific purpose except his or her spiritual advancement, and this is commonly done by phoenix disciples. Frequently, however, newly created merit is directed towards a specific purpose. Thus a person may have two hundred copies of a morality book printed for the express purpose of helping to resolve a health problem he or she is currently suffering from. Such a dedication of merit is achieved by a written declaration in the form of a memorial which is read out at the Hall and then transferred by burning to the...
proper celestial registry that after consideration of the overall state of the petitioner's merit account will apply the merit to the requested purpose. Examples of such memorials are regularly reprinted in the Phoenix Friend and show us the range of objectives believers hope to achieve with their sponsoring of morality books. In a random sample we find a Mrs. Wang from Shalu (Taizhong County) who donates NT$5,000 for the printing of the Book to Warn About the Manifold Phenomena of the Floating World (Fushi baitai jingxing pian 浮世百態警醒篇) and dedicates the merit to the resolution of a karmic grudge (sushi yuanjie 浮世冤結) which causes her a severe pain in the right foot.53 Mr. Li from Miaoli County gives NT$5,000 for the printing of the Earth Mother’s True Scripture for Universal Transformation (Dimu puhua zhenjing 地母普化真經) to help him find an auspicious residence in the Zhu’nan area.54 Mr. Huang from the Penghu Islands sponsors the printing of the Fushi baitai jingxing pian with NT$10,000 to help him pass the civil service examinations.55 Mr. Cai, a thirty-four sui old bachelor from Taizhong, gives NT$5,000 for the jingshi yinguo baoying shilu 警世因果報應實錄 so that he may soon find a wife.56

For each of these pledges, the Mingzheng Tang’s presiding deity Guan writes a response, usually promising assistance to the petitioner. In most cases, the petitioners do not come to the Hall in person, but submit their memorials (and the money) by mail. Merit is a kind of freely convertible moral currency that can be used much like the money that is commonly used to create it, i.e., it can be exchanged for a wide variety of goods such as success,

53 Luanyou 585:22.
54 Luanyou 590:25.
55 Luanyou 577:15.
56 Luanyou 564:18.
health, marital bliss, and good fortune of every kind. Just like money, merit can also be transferred to other persons. The above examples all involve individuals using their merit for personal purposes. The following are cases of individuals creating merit for the use of other persons.

A Mr. Zeng from Miaoli County, for example, donates NT$5,000 for the printing of unspecified “morality books” and transfers the resulting merit to his second son so that he may pass the university entrance examinations.\(^{57}\) The two brothers Guo Mingmin and Guo Mingjiang from Tainan County pass the merit from their NT$5,000 donation for the printing of the *Earth Mother Scripture* on to their younger brother Guo Mingchong so that nothing untoward may happen to him during his army service.\(^{58}\) A Mr. Lin, resident of Australia, sponsors the same scripture with 300 Australian dollars and asks that the merit be given to his mother for her health and the extension of her life-span.\(^{59}\)

In general, when merit is dedicated to a specific purpose, the merit created is strictly that of the act of goodness performed and it is used up when it is applied to the stated purpose. However, if a merit transfer to another person is involved, the merit creator often obtains some additional merit as a reward for his or her unselfish act. The example above of Mr. Lin from Australia is a case in point. His mother will receive the merit created by his money donation, but Mr. Lin himself will also earn an unspecified amount of merit for his filiality in caring about his mother’s health and well-being. A similar merit reward will be given to the two brothers from Tainan in

\(^{57}\) Luanyou 564:19.  
\(^{58}\) Luanyou 593:23.  
\(^{59}\) Luanyou 589:27.
recognition of their loving care for their younger brother. Whether Mr. Zeng from Miaoli will be rewarded depends on his intention in wanting to help his son pass the university entrance examinations: if his action is motivated by fatherly concern for his son, it is laudable and will create merit for him. However, if it is simply a matter of advancing the family fortunes no additional merit will accrue to the father.

Merit transfers to living persons to whom one is close are undertaken quite frequently and are an expression of solicitude for those dear to one. This solicitude is extended beyond death, and becomes even more important and significant in the relations between the living and the dead, as the dead are dependent on the living for their welfare. The regular ancestral sacrifices are only the most basic expression of the support given by the living to the dead. The filial descendant will supplement them with other measures for the benefit of his ancestors. The various Buddhist and Daoist varieties of merit-making rituals performed before and after the burial to supply the deceased with enough merit to pass through purgatory without having to undergo its tortures are well-known from the ethnographic literature. The Mingzheng Tang does not perform burial services, but it does offer another way of helping one’s ancestors out of purgatory: the Academy of Limitless Heaven for Realizing the Way. The reader may remember that in 1984 the Mingzheng Tang established this “Academy” as a ritual institution devoted to the salvation of ancestors. I already gave a short overview of its functions (see above part I, chapter 3.3), concluding that ancestral salvation in the Academy nowadays has become one of the principal ritual services offered by the Mingzheng Tang. At this point I would like to take a closer look at this institution and the role merit transfers play in its functioning.
The “Academy of Limitless Heaven for Realizing the Way” was proposed by the Mingzheng Tang’s presiding deity Guan and established by the Venerable Mother in order to facilitate the return of the souls of the departed to the Mother’s paradise. The Yellow Thearch was assigned to act as the Academy’s director. The Academy functions as a kind of elite fast-track school preparing “good souls” (shanhun) for high divine office. It is the earthly counterpart of a celestial institution of the same name. An “Academy for Realizing the Way” is located in the Limitless Heaven; headed by the Venerable Mother herself, it is a school where deities of the lower heavens can study towards a reward position as a “golden immortal of the great canopy” (daluo jinxian 大羅金仙) which guarantees final salvation and escape from samsara.60

A precondition for enrolment in the earthly Academy is that the soul in question should possess sufficient “roots of goodness” (shan’gen 善根). In most cases these have to first be built up by means of merit transfers from the descendants to the soul in purgatory. These serve to first balance the soul’s merits and demerits and then to create a sufficient surplus of merit to enable the ancestral soul to enter the Academy. All applications are submitted to the Mingzheng Tang’s Benevolent Master Guan who examines them before making a recommendation on the candidate’s qualifications to the Yellow

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60 This celestial Wuji Zhengdao Yuan is another example of the cumulative nature of revelation by spirit-writing. It was not mentioned in the Mingzheng Tang’s earlier descriptions of the celestial spheres such as the Tianjie chuanzhen and the Yaochi shengzhi; neither does it appear in other phoenix halls’ records of spirit-travels to the heavens that I had occasion to examine (such as the Tiantang youji 天堂遊記 and the Tianjie toushi 天界透視). Apparently the celestial Academy was an innovation introduced together with the establishment of its earthly counterpart in 1984, perhaps in imitation of (and competition with) the Yiguan Dao’s “Celestial Buddha Academy” (Tianfo Yuan 天佛院), an educational institution for the cultivation of initiated souls situated in the Principle Heaven (on the Tianfo Yuan see the Tianfo Yuan youji 天佛院遊記).
The following is a translation of the application form reproduced in every issue of the Phoenix Friend:

**Letter of Application for the Deliverance of Ancestors**

___ day of the ___ month of the ___ year of the Republic of China

Name of the Applicant:
Address:
kowtows and requests
of the Benevolent Master that he may agree to recommend the soul of the below recorded deceased to be installed in the Academy of Limitless Heaven for Realizing the Way, there to cultivate him/herself in reclusion.

1. Name of the soul of the deceased: ___
   Gender: ___

2. Year, month, day, and hour of death: ___

3. Relationship with applicant: ___

The applicant sincerely and gladly aids in the printing and gratuitous distribution of the morality book ___ or gladly assists with the regular costs of the Academy of Limitless Heaven for Realizing the Way [with the sum of] ___. He/she transfers this merit to the soul of the deceased.

He/she bows and requests
in front of throne of the Benevolent Master Guan, presiding deity of Martial Temple, Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy that he may consider [this application].

It is up to the applicant to decide how much money to donate; the Benevolent Master Guan never stipulates a fixed sum. However, the amount must create sufficient merit to warrant the ancestral soul's deliverance. Insufficient donations may result in a rejection of the application; in this case, the applicant can reapply with a more generous donation. At present (1996) the average donation is about NT$5000 (about C$250). This usually suffices to procure the Benevolent Master Guan's permission for the soul in question to enrol in the underworld's Institute for Gathering the Good (Jushan Suo) for about one year, after which preparatory period it will be admitted into the Academy for an average study period of nine to ten years. This fairly standard
routine took some time to evolve, however. A trend is discernible over the years towards easier accessibility, shorter study periods, and lower enrolment fees. The following table shows the development of the Academy’s admission practices as displayed in spirit-written decisions on Academy applications received in the month of June in the years 1986 through 1996:

Sample Enrolment Data, Wuji Zhengdao Yuan, June of Each Year, 1986-1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>G</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>NT$ 40,000</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>NT$377,000</td>
<td>13,464</td>
<td>17,952</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>NT$110,800</td>
<td>5,276</td>
<td>11,080</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>NT$349,900</td>
<td>10,291</td>
<td>15,213</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>NT$200,200</td>
<td>7,700</td>
<td>9,100</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>NT$177,500</td>
<td>6,574</td>
<td>6,827</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>NT$ 74,500</td>
<td>5,731</td>
<td>5,731</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>NT$116,000</td>
<td>5,273</td>
<td>5,273</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>NT$248,000</td>
<td>5,636</td>
<td>5,636</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>NT$281,000</td>
<td>5,302</td>
<td>5,302</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>NT$155,500</td>
<td>5,016</td>
<td>5,016</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These trends can be attributed to several factors: the relatively high average donations in the early years are partly tied to capital-intensive building projects undertaken by the Mingzheng Tang at the time. These projects elicited greater amounts of financial contributions than usual, some of which were dedicated to the deliverance of ancestors. The absence in later years of this incentive is a factor in the drop of the average donation. More significantly, however, the above figures taken together illustrate a process of standardization and routinization. In the early years, each application was treated individually, each decision taking into account the sum of money donated.

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61 A = June of (year); B = total amount of donations; C = average donation; D = average donation for those souls eventually admitted to the Academy; E = number of souls admitted; F = number of souls rejected; G = average decreed study time (in years). Information extracted and summarized from Luanyou 414, 437, 461, 483, 500, 525, 543, 555, 567, 580, 592.
donated (or rather, the amount of merit created thereby) and the relationship of the soul to the living applicant. These influenced the decision on acceptance or rejection, and also influenced the number of years a soul was required to study in the Academy. An acceptance notification in the year 1989, for example, ran as follows:

[The Benevolent Master Guan] reveals: “The believer Lin Fangzhi sincerely and joyfully donated NT$10,000 for the construction of the Academy of the Limitless for Realizing the Way, transferring this merit to her departed father Lin Jinchi. She bowed and requested that [her father] may be recommended for induction into the Academy of the Way, there to cultivate himself in seclusion. Recognizing her filial heart I grant the recommendation to induct him into the Academy for Realizing the Way to cultivate himself there as a student for a term of fourteen years.”

The basic pattern of such notifications was: (1) name of applicant, (2) amount and purpose of donation, (3) transfer of merit to a named soul, (4) the deity’s praise for the applicant’s virtue, (5) the deity’s accession to the request, (6) conditions of the soul’s induction to the Academy. The conditions of enrolment were handled on an individual basis; sometimes a soul would be inducted into the academy right away, sometimes it would first be required to spend a stipulated time in the underworld’s Jushan Suo, usually ranging between one to six months. In the first years of the Academy’s operation, rejections of applications were not uncommon; these usually occurred in cases where the sum donated was fairly small and/or the soul in question was not a lineal ancestor. The following example illustrates the difference in treatment between ancestors and non-ancestors:

The disciple Wang Xiujin has joyfully donated NT$2,500 to contribute to the construction costs of the Precious Palace of the Numinous

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62 Luanyou 437:18.
Empyrean and has aided in the printing of the Shiyi chandao lu with NT$2,500. Transferring this merit to his deceased father Wang Rongtang and to his friend Jiang Guanming he bowed down and requested their recommendation. Receive the Benevolent Master Guan's sagely edict: I grant the recommendation of Wang Rongtang as a good soul to be inducted into the Academy for Realizing the Way there to cultivate himself as as student in seclusion for a term of ten years. As for the soul Jiang Guanming, he is at present still in the City of the Wrongfully Deceased (Wangsi Cheng). As his merit is still insufficient, his release from suffering cannot yet be recommended.63

Presumably the total merit NT$5,000 is split evenly between the two souls, but while NT$2,500 are deemed sufficient to deliver a father's soul, they are not enough for a friend's soul. The salvation of souls should properly proceed in order of the souls' closeness to the individual applicant, i.e., a person should first save his/her inner circle of patrilineal relatives, starting with the direct ancestors (parents, grandparents, great-grandparents), then uncles and aunts, then those in the same generation as oneself or in generations below oneself. Having accomplished this one may then proceed to save one's matrilateral relatives and after these one's close friends. While parents and patrilineal grandparents indeed are the most common categories of souls chosen for salvation by believers, this general order of priority is not consistently observed by everybody. Not infrequently the particular choice of the soul to which merit is transferred is determined by emotional bonds and personal needs. It is not uncommon, for example, for parents to try to have the soul of a dead son or daughter inducted into the Academy even before taking care of their ancestors. Apart from the strong emotional bonds involved here, souls of deceased children are also deemed to have a much more urgent need for this service than departed grandparents and parents: while the latter can at least receive regular sacrifices at the domestic altar,

63 Luanyou 500:21.
children are marginalized dead with no right to ancestral sacrifices and have to be taken care of in another way. In this respect the Academy fulfills a function analogous to that of the Buddhist merit halls where many of the tablets represent just such marginal spirits. There exists a strong feeling, however, in the Mingzheng Tang that the Academy should in the first place provide an opportunity to do one's filial duty by one's ancestors and that it is not supposed to be a refuge for the marginalized dead. Thus, at least in theory the induction of non-ancestors is supposed to be more difficult. A random overview of decisions on such applications shows, however, that this bias is supported more by anecdotal than by statistical evidence. In the early years, applications for the induction of non-ancestors were slightly more likely to be rejected than those for ancestors, but in recent years this bias seems to have vanished, with all categories of relatives being equally likely to get accepted into the Academy.

Strictures do remain in place, however, against the salvation of friends. The example quoted above illustrates the fact that the salvation of a non-relative is more likely to be rejected than that of a relative. While the Benevolent Master Guan's response in the above case does not rule out the friend's soul's induction at a later date, such applications are tricky and highly uncertain affairs. Strictly speaking, only persons who have already ensured the posthumous well-being of all their ancestors and relatives should be allowed to induct their friends into the Academy. Even if this condition is fulfilled, however, the salvation of a non-relative always runs the risk of that soul's own relatives objecting to the procedure should they learn of it. Things get even more difficult when an application concerns neither a relative nor a friend, but the soul of a total stranger. Such requests are granted only in
exceptional cases and only as a recognition of the applicant’s sentiment of “all-embracing love” (bo’ai 博愛). A case in point is the soul of a Japanese tourist who was raped and murdered by a Taiwanese taxi driver; Mingbi and another phoenix disciple together successfully applied for the induction of this soul into the Academy. On the other hand, a request by deputy chairman Chen* to deliver the soul of a well-known singer was denied.

Once a soul is enroled, its sponsors are encouraged to keep transferring merit to it to help it increase its merit store and thereby its “numinous brightness”. In effect, continued merit contributions can help reduce the soul’s study time in the Academy and procure a speedier deification. A large part of the Phoenix Friend is now taken up by the proceedings of the Academy, i.e., the records of the merit transfers to its students and the Benevolent Master Guan’s response to it. The following is a fairly typical case of an acceptance notice for a merit transfer to an Academy student:

[The Benevolent Teacher Guan] announces: The disciple Chen Wude* has joyfully helped the [Phoenix Friend] magazine with NT$3,000 and has transferred the merit to the two students Ge Puxian* and Chen Jiaojing*, praying that their rewards of the Way (daoguo 道果) be increased. I have received the sagely edict of the Academy’s director, the Old Patriarch Yellow Thearch: The rewards of the Way of Ge Puxian* and Chen Jiaojing* shall be increased and their study period shall be shortened from ten to eight years.

Even after the soul’s graduation from the Academy and appointment to divine office these merit transfers continue. As a rule, fresh graduates are appointed to an entrance level celestial office. In comparison with traditional phoenix hall practice, where deceased cult members usually became deities within the human world (earth gods, city gods), this is already quite high for an initial appointment and is deemed proof of the marvellous efficacy of the
Academy. However, these new deities have to continue cultivating themselves upwards to higher positions in the celestial hierarchy until one day they may obtain the rank of "golden immortal" (jinxian) and a "reward position" (guowei) in Limitless Heaven and thus attain ultimate and final salvation. Until then, however, they still need their descendants' support in the form of merit to supplement their own efforts at spiritual cultivation, support which as deities they are now able to repay with divine protection.64

64 The reciprocal relationship pertaining between ancestors and descendants with the former granting protection and blessings and the latter offering up worship and sacrifices is thus continued on a heightened level after the ancestor's deification. A reciprocity in kind is involved in the practice of transferring merit to ancestors in that these transfers reciprocate the bestowal of "ancestral merit" (zude 祖德) on the descendants. Ancestral merit is an important supra-individual source of merit and is often invoked to rationalize the moral problem of a bad person enjoying a good life by pointing that he is still enjoying the benefits produced by his ancestors' merit, but will not escape punishment once the ancestral merit store is used up.
CHAPTER 6: THE MINGZHENG TANG’S MORALITY BOOKS

6.1 Morality Book Publishing and Sponsoring

From the founding of the Mingzheng Tang in 1976 to the end of my field research period in 1994, the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society had published altogether sixty-two book-length spirit-written texts. In addition, the Phoenix Friend magazine appeared without interruption on a semi-monthly basis from 1976 to 1989, and since then as a monthly publication. What is the driving force behind this high level of publishing activity? Among the multitude of conditioning factors, I shall discuss two that I believe to be crucial: first, the religious beliefs and practices connected with morality book publishing which create the motivation to engage in this kind of activity, and, second, the institutional structures developed by the Mingzheng Tang which stimulate morality book publishing and in turn are dependent upon it.

6.1.1 Religious Factors

We have seen that the Mingzheng Tang’s belief system hinges on the idea of merit; it is merit (and its opposite, demerit) that determines a person’s destiny in this life and in the following existences. Merit is the direct product of a person’s deeds, words, and thoughts, and cultivation is the process of learning to do, say, and think only meritorious things. In the category of

1 Since then, another ten books have been published. Currently (October 1996) the Hall is working on six more books.
meritorious deeds, the printing and distribution of morality books is at the same time one of the easiest and the most meritorious to perform.\textsuperscript{2} It is easy since it merely requires an outlay of money, but very little investment of time and personal effort; it is meritorious because it is the most effective way of "proclaiming transformation on behalf of Heaven", i.e., of spreading the true principles of the Way and guiding other people to moral reform. We noticed that the mid-nineteenth century morality book Jiusheng chuan already stressed that the dissemination of morality books is a more effective method of influencing one's contemporaries than public lecturing, because books can reach every corner of the empire and be transmitted for many years, while "the usefulness of public lecturing is restricted to one place and one point in time".\textsuperscript{3} This perception of the greater effectiveness of the written as against the spoken word still pertains today. "The spoken word serves to admonish to goodness on one occasion, a book can admonish to goodness for a hundred generations"\textsuperscript{4}—when asking phoenix disciples why they spend so much time, effort and money on producing morality books, one will invariably get this or a similar answer. In printed and widely disseminated form, the words of the gods have a much greater impact than if they had been merely spoken in a temple on one evening. How great this impact is in actuality is very difficult to gauge. How many Taiwanese actually read the shanshu they find in temples, bus stations, clinics, and many other places? And if they do read them, what effect do they have on their moral thinking and conduct? I have no data at hand that would yield an answer to these questions, and it may well be that if a nation-wide statistic was to supply an answer, it would turn

\textsuperscript{2} Shiyi chandao lu VII:54.
\textsuperscript{3} See above part I, chapter 1.3.2.
out to be quite disheartening for phoenix disciples. Historical studies throw some doubt on the conversionary effectiveness of morality books. Robert L. Chard has compared the historically documented actual stove god rituals practised in late Imperial commoner households with the quite different worship pattern prescribed in the voluminous and widely circulating morality book literature and the stove god. He detected no significant influence of the morality books' prescriptive model on actual ritual practice. While his study only addresses relatively easily observable variations in ritual patterns and does not attempt to deal with morality books' potential influence on the readers' system of moral values, Chard's conclusions should at the very least warn us not to take ideological claims of morality books' effectiveness at their face value.

The actual statistical success rate of morality books is, however, no major concern for the Mingzheng Tang's phoenix disciples. True, some more contemplative individuals do worry about this question and sometimes seek the gods' advice. During the writing of the Penglai xiandao youji 蓬萊仙島遊記 in 1991, for example, the following dialogue took place between Mingbi and his immortal teacher Han Xiangzi:

Mingbi: “Since I, your disciple, completed my training as a planchette-medium, I have received mandates to write a considerable number of books. In each of these sacred books or scriptures, the sages, deities, immortals, and Buddhas have untiringly explained and discoursed, and patiently admonished and guided. But I do not know if they have any effect. I have my doubts.”

The immortal old man: “Whence come these doubts? Scriptures and sacred books that are sent down into the secular world definitely are effective in saving people. You must have no doubts about that. They will continue to save people.”

Mingbi: “Of course, about this point I am not very clear, because I cannot see it; I merely receive mandates and write one book after the other.”

The immortal old man: “This is as it should be. ‘Concern yourself only with the ploughing, not with the harvest’\(^6\) -- this is what ‘proclaiming transformation on behalf of Heaven’ means.”

Mingbi: “This I have now understood. There will always be some that are saved and transformed by probably every sacred book or scripture descending into the secular world!”

The immortal old man: “Right. If [books and scriptures] did not have at least some effectiveness in saving and transforming [people], why would the gods bother to enter into union with humans and descend upon the phoenix to write books séance after séance?”\(^7\)

“To concern themselves only with ploughing, not with the harvest” -- this advice is invariably given to phoenix disciples who voice their doubts about the meaningfulness of their work. Advice the easier to accept as beyond all statistics the living community of the phoenix hall is an ever present proof for the effectiveness of *shanshu* publishing. The majority of the Mingzheng Tang’s core adherents came to the cult through reading its magazine and books and every one of these disciples is living proof to the others and to him or herself that morality books have a morally transformative effect on humans.\(^8\) In addition, most of these core adherents have remained avid *shanshu* readers after becoming phoenix disciples, confirming in this way again to themselves and to others that there exists a readership for these books.\(^9\)

Furthermore, while a *shanshu* is supposed to work for the moral

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\(^6\) *Zhi wen gengyun, bu wen shouhuo* 只問耕耘，不問收穫 -- a Chinese proverb.
\(^7\) *Penglai xiandao youji*, p.206.
\(^8\) 60.3% of questionnaire respondents indicated that they first came to the Mingzheng Tang after reading its books or magazine.
\(^9\) The questionnaire indicates that 33.3% of valid respondents read morality books every day and another 42.6% at least twice a week. Into this group of “regular *shanshu* readers” thus fall more than 75% of the Mingzheng Tang’s core adherents.
reform of contemporary society, this is only one of its functions. It is at the same time a source of merit for everyone involved with its production and dissemination. While a general belief in these books' effectiveness as means to induce the moral transformation of others is indispensible, usually the most immediate motivation to print a shanshu is the merit accruing thereby to the individual. The concrete merit amounts are determined by the Mingzheng Tang's gods in some detail, and in the following I will summarize the relevant rules and practices.

Merit is created (1) by aiding in the writing of a morality book, (2) by sponsoring its printing, (3) helping in its distribution, and (4) by the conversion of people through the book. Let us take a look in turn at each of these phases in the life of a shanshu.

Simple attendance at the séances devoted the writing of a morality book counts as participation in the project. The Mingzheng Tang's Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü rules that one gong is assigned for each participation at any activity of the Hall. Attendance at séances devoted to the writing of a morality book is worth two gong per séance. Luansheng enjoy the privilege of receiving a special reward of merit, when attending all séances devoted to the writing of a morality book, but if they miss séances, their merit is calculated as the sum of the merit units gathered by attending the individual séances. If the absences are due to a lack of determination on the phoenix disciple's part, he or she is assigned five demerits for each missed séance.\(^{10}\) To clarify the merit received by all participants, the gods usually reveal the concrete merit amounts after the completion of a shanshu. Thus, for the writing of the

\(^{10}\) Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü, vol.1, pp.33-34.
Records of a Journey to the City of the Wrongfully Deceased (Wangsi cheng youji 枉死城遊記), one daogong was given to anyone who had participated in at least two thirds of the séances devoted to the writing of this book. Otherwise five gong were calculated per séance.\textsuperscript{11} At this time, in 1985, the Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü had not yet been written, but the same practice of determining merit amounts for each individual shanshu after its publication continued. At the time of my field research a consistent pattern of merit assignment had established itself. The following is an example of divine merit assignment occurring during my time in the Hall, on 17 April 1994:

[The Benevolent Teacher Guan] reveals: “All [phoenix disciples] who have attended the writing of this sacred book [= the Sanjiao xiuzhen xinfa 三教修真心法] with complete diligence shall have one daogong recorded. Those who have attended at least three quarters of the séances shall also be rewarded with one daogong. All other participants shall receive twenty gong per attendance, but the total sum is not to exceed half a daogong.”\textsuperscript{12}

One daogong equals ten thousand gong and therefore represents a very significant merit amount. As posthumous ascension to the rank of a low-level deity only takes five daogong and as the great majority of séances at the Mingzheng Tang is devoted to morality book writing, the granting of one daogong to every phoenix disciple participating in at least three quarters of the séances for a new morality book constitutes a strong incentive for regular attendance. The generosity of this reward is justified by reference to the great morally transformative power inherent in morality books.\textsuperscript{13} Once the book is completed, it is ceremoniously presented to Heaven with the reading of a

\textsuperscript{11} Luanyou 385:15.
\textsuperscript{12} Luanyou 565:9.
\textsuperscript{13} Shiyi chandao lu V:68.
memorial and the subsequent burning of a copy of the book together with the memorial. Participation in this ceremony also is rewarded with a small merit bonus, usually between five and ten gong per participant.

The next merit opportunity offered by a new shanshu is its printing. For the printing of morality books, varying merit amounts were fixed by the gods on a case-by-case basis in the early years of the cult. For the sponsoring of the Phoenix Friend magazine, one merit unit was calculated for each copy.\textsuperscript{14} For morality books produced by the cult, initially individual merit amounts were determined by the gods for each book. Thus the two scriptures written in the Shengxian Tang by Yongbi were set at six merit units per copy sponsored,\textsuperscript{15} the Tianjie chuanzhen at three units per copy,\textsuperscript{16} and the Dadao kangzhuang at five units per copy.\textsuperscript{17} The Dadao kangzhuang is, as far as I can see, the last morality book to have been assigned a specific merit amount per copy by the gods. After that, the merit earned by the sponsor of a shanshu is described stereotypically as being "limitless" (gongde wuliang 功德無量). This does not mean, however, that no fixed merit amounts were assigned anymore to the printing of morality books; most probably a general rule was applied for the calculation of this merit. In the Statutes of Merit and Demerit, written in 1985, such a general rule for assessing the merit value of morality book (and scripture) sponsoring was formulated. According to this rule, merit was no longer calculated on a per copy basis, but rather based on the total amount of money donated.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, for every NT$100 spent, one gong was

\textsuperscript{14} Luanyou 50:3. At this time the price per copy was NT$2.
\textsuperscript{15} Luanyou 73:19, Luanyou 91:13.
\textsuperscript{16} Luanyou 155:11.
\textsuperscript{17} Luanyou 233:13.
\textsuperscript{18} On one occasion, after the promulgation of the Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü, a per copy merit amount was again decreed: on dingmao/10/15 (5 December 1987), the Venerable Mother decided that for the printing of a collection of her lectures given at the Hall, one gong per
assigned; every NT$1,000 were converted into fifteen *gong* (ten times the merit of a NT$100 donation, plus a “bonus” of five *gong*); every NT$10,000 came to 200 *gong* (ten times the merit of a NT$1,000 donation, plus a bonus of fifty *gong*). The *Statutes* may be viewed as an attempt to rationalize the Hall’s merit management through replacing the former case-by-case arrangements by a single, generally applicable rule. The sponsoring of a *shanshu* is announced to Heaven by means of a memorial read and burnt at the Mingzheng Tang. It states the amount of money donated, the person to which the merit is to be transferred (which could be the sponsor him or herself, or any other person), and the purpose for which it is to be used.

Next, merit can be created by distributing the new book. Every phoenix disciple is encouraged to help distribute the books and magazines in public places and at least some are very active in this respect. One very pious non-member of the Hall carries books and magazines from a number of phoenix halls around with him all the time, depositing them wherever he goes: banks, supermarkets, phone booths, temples, railway stations, government offices. He even revisits the locations after a few days to check up on the copy should be assigned [Luanyou 448:13]. In monetary terms this meant that, at a a price of NT$15 per copy, one could earn almost seven *gong* per NT$100, instead of the one *gong* fixed by the *Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lu*. This immediately caused some confusion among the phoenix disciples who asked a Merciful Master to confirm the accuracy of the transmission of the Mother’s message. The Merciful Master explained this exception from the rule as a special grace conferred by the Venerable Mother [Luanyou 451:14 = Shiyi chandao lu III:80].

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19 *Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lu* 1:32.
20 The equation NT$100 = 1 *gong* harmonizes with the Wenchang ledger’s assignation of one *gong* to 100 cash spent on printing a morality book [Wenchang gongguo ge, p.120]. It is in conflict, however, with the *Yulü jinpan*’s regulation that for the printing of “scriptures” three *gong* shall be assigned per copy, irrespective of the size of the sponsored text [Yulü jinpan, p.22]. When a reader of the *Phoenix Friend* pointed out to one of the Benevolent Masters that the merit amounts in the morality books of some other phoenix halls are at variance with the regulations of the *Statutes* and inquired which was to be considered accurate, he was told laconically that the *Statutes* are the correct standard [Shiyi chandao lu II:53].
21 Cf. my translation of the standard memorial form used for this purpose in Appendix 3.3.
books; if they have gone, he places more in the same place; if they are still there, he removes them and puts them in a better place. Although everyone is encouraged to contribute “effort” (li 力) for the physical distribution of morality books, it is particularly recommended as a merit creating method for the impecunious who cannot offered to contribute “wealth” (cai 財) for the printing of these books.

Apparently the Mingzheng Tang has no fixed merit amounts for the distribution of morality books. Neither are there fixed amounts for the so-called consecutive merit (houxu zhi gong 後績之功) accruing from morality books; still, although difficult to measure, this “consecutive merit” is often adduced as proof for the great effectiveness of shanshu as an instrument of merit creation. The principle behind this concept is that the sponsor (and also, to a lesser extent, the distributor) of a morality book gets a share of all merit created as a consequence of his or her good deed. For every day that a morality book stays in circulation, the sponsor earns merit. Should a morality book actually succeed in converting a person to goodness, the sponsor of the book is assigned additional merit. Thus, sponsoring the printing of a morality book is an investment that does not merely give an immediate return in the form of the merit assigned for the actual printing of the book, but may in the future bring additional, as yet uncalculable merit, produced by the transformative action of the book. In the case of the sponsoring of scriptures,

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22 Some Buddhists show similar zeal and imagination in the propagation of their own religious literature. There exist Buddhist printing and publishing centres, such as the “Lotus Society” (Lian She 蓮社) in Taizhong, that concentrate on the printing and distribution of sponsored religious literature. I once happened to ride in a taxi steered by a very enthusiastic young driver who had transformed his car into a missionary centre on wheels, complete with taped sutra-recitations, Buddhist images on the dashboard, and a pouch with Buddhist devotional literature, published by the Lotus Society, hanging from the back of the driver’s seat.

23 Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lu, p.32.
similar "consecutive merit" is reaped by the sponsor whenever someone is converted through this scripture; in addition, a sponsor obtains 10% of the merit every time one of the sponsored volumes is recited.\textsuperscript{24} Such consecutive merit continues to be booked to the sponsor's merit account even after his or her death, and may assist in saving him or her from purgatory by progressively balancing the soul's karma.\textsuperscript{25}

This long-term effect of books, however, is also cause for caution: should one be so careless as to sponsor the printing of a heretical book, one will have to share in the demerits occasioned when the book in question leads people astray. The \textit{Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü} contains no clear regulation to that effect, but on one occasion the question came up and was dealt with in the following way:

Zhang Yixiong* asked: "From a nearby temple I have brought back some old morality books which are in rather disorderly a state. What should I best do with them?"

The Benevolent Teacher replied: "The main thing is to clean them, and then to recirculate them. However, although this is a meritorious act, you must decide upon it only after looking at the books' contents. If they are not true morality books that give expression to the gods' ideas, you will incur the transgression [or "demerit"] of abetting errors."\textsuperscript{26}

Because of this danger of inadvertently spreading heresy, in a report about an exemplary \textit{shanshu} sponsor in northern Taiwan, it is pointed out that he first checks the correctness of a book's contents before sponsoring it.\textsuperscript{27}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[24] \textit{Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü}, p.32.
\item[25] One such case is described in \textit{Luanyou} 552:26-27.
\item[26] \textit{Shiyi chandao lü} VIII:5.
\item[27] Chunlian, "Zhuyin \textit{shanshu} de fubao", \textit{Luanyou} 362(1984):27.
\end{footnotes}
6.1.2 Institutional and Economic Factors

Religious fervour for proclaiming transformation on behalf of Heaven and the desire to create merit for oneself are important factors in the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society's flourishing publishing concern. It is not sufficient, however, to explain the size of this concern when one compares it with the relatively small output of traditional phoenix halls. Surely religious fervour and cultivational interest are roughly constant among phoenix disciples in traditional phoenix halls and "new style" ones such as the Mingzheng Tang. There must be an additional factor to explain the difference in productivity of the two types of phoenix halls.

This factor is to be found in the institutional structure of the Mingzheng Tang and the composition of its membership. While most traditional phoenix halls (such as Seaman's Pearl Mountain Village cult) are rural and community-based, drawing their membership and resources from the local community, new-style urban phoenix halls are characterized by the geographical dispersion of their membership. A traditional phoenix hall only has to serve its local community to maintain itself, and the majority of its activities are geared towards this community. This is one of the main reasons for the preponderance of "charitable" (jishi) over book-writing séances in rural phoenix halls. The former are the primary service rendered by the hall to the community; book publications, though considered meritorious and prestigious, are not the hall's primary objective. A new-style phoenix hall such as the Mingzheng Tang, by contrast, has no local community to serve, but exists solely by and for its mission of "proclaiming transformation on behalf of Heaven". It is a specialized religious organization, totally separated
organizationally from the surrounding local community, that serves a clientele of believers all over Taiwan with its print products and ritual services. Its professional organization with full-time, paid staff makes a degree of productivity possible that is beyond the capabilities of the community based rural phoenix hall, even if the latter wanted to achieve such a productivity. This productivity, however, is not only possible for the Mingzheng Tang, it is also necessary for its continued survival. In many respects, a body like the Mingzheng Tang with the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society is a religious business, and like any business it has to create revenue. It has to keep supplying the religious market with a diversified range of ritual services and products in order to maintain or increase its market share. There is a trend in the Mingzheng Tang’s development towards an ever greater diversification of its ritual services; the ancestor-saving institution of the Wuji Zhengdao Yuan, for example, was an important addition to the Mingzheng Tang’s catalogue of services and subsequently became one of an important source of revenue. Later numinous healing was added and developed, and even a specialized medium trained for this purpose. Then bushel veneration was introduced as part of the semi-yearly sacrifices which had been established for the Wuji Zhengdao Yuan. Building projects, life-releasing assemblies, the periodic reemphasis of a new deity (as most recently the Earth Mother) with the attendant need for new god images and ritual texts -- all these are, in addition to and beyond their religious meanings, attempts to keep the present clientele investing its money and allegiance in the Mingzheng Tang, and, if possible, to attract new groups of believers. Among all the by now fairly broad range of “merit products” sold the Mingzheng Tang, the publishing of spirit-written morality books, however, has remained the most fundamental. While most of the other services are
offered by many kinds of temples and religious specialists, it is the production and distribution of spirit-written books that differentiates a phoenix hall from its competitors; these works are its "flagship product". The donations of printing-sponsors have always been and still are the Hall's main source of income. At the same time it is the Mingzheng Tang's shanshu that create and support the Hall's reputation of being especially close to and favoured by the Heavenly authorities; this reputation and prestige, in turn, give credibility and value to all of the other services offered by the Hall.\footnote{An interesting test case for the operation of the “publish or perish” principle in Taiwan's religious market is the Shengxian Tang. While still maintaining a large publishing concern, the Shengxian Tang has not had a medium for many years now. The books it is printing and distributing at the moment are reprints of its earlier publications and of older shanshu. It has not published a new spirit-written book of its own for a long time and is living off the great prestige and reputation it built in the late 1980s with books such as the Record of a Journey to the Underworld (Diyu youji) and Record of a Journey to the Heavenly Halls (Tiantang youji). How long will it be able to survive without the charisma conferred by the gods’ continuing patronage, as evidenced in an active spirit-writing and publishing programme? Time will show.} The great activism and productivity of new-style phoenix halls such as the Mingzheng Tang are therefore conditioned at least as much by economic necessity as by religious fervour.

6.2 Overview of The Mingzheng Tang’s Corpus of Morality Books

6.2.1 The Emancipation of the Morality Book Genre

New style phoenix halls have not only revolutionized morality book publishing by the volume of their output, but also by their development of the genre in terms of form and content. Traditional Taiwanese spirit-written books mostly were loose collections of short texts in the classical language.
Attempts have been made to organize these traditional works into categories by their general style. Zheng Zhiming, for example, differentiates a northern and a southern tradition (beizong 北宗, nanzong 南宗), both heavily employing classical poetry, but the former concentrating more on moralistic treatises, while the later emphasizes stories about karmic retribution. What both traditions shared, however, was the generally loose construction of their books. They were compiled from short revelations collected over many years. Many of the traditional phoenix halls did not have separate book-writing séances, but produced such texts at the beginning of séances devoted primarily to the solving of petitioners' practical problems. Due to the fragmentary nature of this revelatory process, practically no spirit-written books consistently organized as a coherent treatment of one particular topic were produced in pre-war Taiwan.

On the Chinese mainland, by contrast, a development had taken place that saw spirit-writing being employed as a technique for the production of lengthy and well-structured books. A detailed examination of this phenomenon awaits further study that would go far beyond the scope of this thesis. My impression is that this development was tied to the fusion of sectarian and non-sectarian spirit-writing and is a sign of the influence that the "precious scroll" tradition exerted on late nineteenth century spirit-writing groups. The previously mentioned Golden Basin of Jade Dew 玉露金盤 is an early example of a well organized spirit-written book with a clear narrative line. In the early years of the Republic we continue to find sectarian spirit-writing cults producing lengthy spirit-written works. They also

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29 Zheng Zhiming 1984b:103. He later refined this model by adding a "mixed" and an "innovative" category, without, however, abandoning the basic north-south dichotomy (see Zheng Zhiming n.d.:2-15).
introduced another innovation: the use of the vernacular language. The *Golden Basin* was still written in the classical language, though in a very much simplified version of it. In the late 1920s there appear spirit-written works employing a language much closer to the spoken vernacular. One of the earliest of these works was the *Dongming baoji* produced in the early 1920s by a group of spirit-writing cults in the province of Yunnan that apparently maintained close connections with the Tongshan She. The *Dongming baoji* is a lively record of a spirit-journey to the underworld and to the Heavens whose conditions are described minutely and whose denizens are interviewed by the travelling mediums. It apparently was a huge success and spawned a large number of imitations, often referring explicitly to the *Dongming baoji*’s example. It is interesting to observe that while in many places the *Dongming baoji* contains severe criticism of the new age of the Republic, its authors have whole-heartedly adopted one innovation of that age: the vernacular language as a legitimate means of written communication. Thus, the *Dongming baoji* in many ways signifies a new departure for the spirit-written morality book literature. From now on we find more and more book-length spirit-written works with a clear concern for narrative and doctrinal coherence, phrased in the vernacular rather than in the classical language, however simplified.

This movement at first seems to have been restricted to the Chinese mainland. With Japanese policies severely restricting Chinese language instruction, the *baihua* movement hardly affected Taiwan at all until 1945. The written Chinese language there remained synonymous with the literary idiom, called *Hanwen*, and it was a point of pride for phoenix halls to assist in the preservation of this Chinese linguistic heritage. There existed little
cultural incentive or political maneuvering space to experiment with vernacular spirit-writing.

After the retrocession of Taiwan, the political, cultural, and religious climate changed. The vernacular became the standard in the written language, and spirit-written vernacular literature gained a wider circulation in Taiwan. Sectarian spirit-writing groups formed which imitated their mainland predecessors by producing structured expositions of doctrine. A successful early example was the Daozhong jingming, produced in 1960 by an Yiguan Dao affiliated spirit-writing cult in Pingdong county (southern Taiwan), which was still written in (easy) classical Chinese. In central Taiwan, however, it took several more years for the new format to establish itself.

If we focus our attention now on our little group of spirit-writing cults in Nantou County and Taizhong, we find that the rural Huide Gong operated largely along traditional lines. Most of its revelations printed in the early issues of the Phoenix Friend were written in classical poetry. There was little use of prose, whether classical or vernacular, and there were no ambitious book projects. Things began to change in the urban Shengxian Tang. After the Huide Gong’s medium had trained two planchette-mediums for the Shengxian Tang, they at first followed the Huide Gong’s model, writing almost exclusively poetry. With the increasing alienation of the Shengxian Tang from the Huide Gong the two mediums became free to experiment and in early 1971 we find the first spirit-written texts in the vernacular language revealed at the Shengxian Tang. The innovation seems to have been made by Renbi; he used it in the narration of underworld trials held for the
instruction of humankind at the Shengxian Tang, involving lively exchanges of dialogue between a poor soul and its netherworldly interrogators. These trial records apparently were never published in book form, but merely serialized in the *Phoenix Friend*. It is possible that these vernacular dialogues were at that point not yet considered fit for book publication; in fact, all the morality books and scriptures published by the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society during its association with the Shengxian Tang were written in a simple classical idiom.

While Renbi was innovative in matters of language, Yongbi, the Shengxian Tang’s third and star medium, showed particular interest in the development of phoenix hall doctrine; still largely clinging to the classical language, he nevertheless managed to shape a coherent belief system and cosmology for the Shengxian Tang in a series of publications, including most significantly the two scriptures *Yuhuang pudu shengjing* 玉皇普度聖經 and *Taishang wuji hunyuan zhenjing* 太上無極混元真經, the series of essays published in instalments under the serial *Shengxian zhenli* 聖賢真理, and, finally, the grand plan of the heavenly realm, the *Tianjie chuanzhen* 天界傳真. In early 1976 Yongbi went off to do his military service; during these three years he missed a revolution in the *shanshu* genre initiated by his successor in the Mingzheng Tang, Yang Zanru 楊贊儒. Yang, an *Yiguan Dao* trained planchette medium, made the Shengxian Tang famous with the first book spirit-written by him, the *Record of a Journey to the Underworld* (*Diyu youji* 地獄遊記). An ingenious and entertaining combination of mythological summa and moral exhortation, all written in a lively vernacular dialogue

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30 This format of narration is also employed by other phoenix halls, including the Hall of the Wondrous Dharma studied by Jordan and Overmyer [1986:114].
style, the *Diyu youji* was an instant success. Like the *Dongming baoji* fifty years earlier on the mainland, it created a whole movement among spirit-writing circles and in the following years one spirit-travelogue after the other was written, at the Shengxian Tang, at Yang Zanru’s own phoenix hall, the Shengde Baogong 聖德寶宮, which he founded in 1980, but also in halls all over Taiwan.\(^{31}\) Today the *Diyu youji* still is the most renowned Taiwanese morality book, known among most Taiwanese, even those without any contact to spirit-writing circles, and also widely read among Chinese outside of Taiwan. And the influence of the *Diyu youji* was not restricted to setting off a temporary fashion in spirit-travelogues; rather, it played a crucial role in giving final legitimation to the use of the vernacular language for expressing the gods’ teachings in coherent, book-length format. It opened the floodgates for free experimentation with different kinds of literary formats, freeing the spirit-written literature from its traditional formal constraints.

Why did this shift take place? The standard explanation given by phoenix halls themselves is that in modern society the gods’ writings use simple and easy to understand language so as to reach and influence a maximum number of people. The argument is developed in Yuanshi Tianzun’s preface to the *Yuhuang pudu shengjing*, quoted above (part I, chapter 3.2). However, adaptation of the style of writing to the needs of the time gives no licence for vulgarization, and formal rules of composition still have to be observed. It is a matter of concern that the quantitative increase in new *shanshu* has sometimes led to a decrease in quality as some phoenix hall employ mediums that have not been properly trained and manipulate the planchette for their own purposes. This has led to the appearance of spirit-

\(^{31}\) On this *youji* fashion see Zheng Zhiming 1988b, Song Guangyu 1993b.
written texts with formally incorrect poetry and prose.\textsuperscript{32} The use of the vernacular idiom in prose texts, however, makes it more difficult to gauge their quality, as formal rules for vernacular composition are not as fixed and standardized as they are for classical composition. This has led to an emphasis on poetry as the main yardstick for quality control. The trend to vernacularization has not affected the lyrical mode of spirit-writing. Poetry is still written in accordance with classical patterns and compositional correctness is easy to check. Therefore “the sacred poems descending by the phoenix, although they, too, should strive forcefully for simplicity, must have correct rhyme patterns and their meaning must be clear; [...] otherwise they will be laughed at and will be an insult to the sages and gods.”\textsuperscript{33}

Phoenix halls’ argument that the gods have nowadays adopted a vernacular style so as to better communicate their meaning to humans addresses an important factor in the reform of the morality book literature, namely, the fact that literary taste has changed and less and less people are interested or even able to read classical prose. However, as we have seen, the morality book output of new style phoenix halls such as the Mingzheng Tang is conditioned by economic as well as by religious motives. The adoption of the vernacular can therefore also be seen as a reaction to market demand. The great success of the \textit{Diyu youji} showed the existence of a market for entertaining, vernacular religious literature; the subsequent explosive development of the spirit-travelogue genre and other vernacular \textit{shanshu} is the product of inter-hall competition for this market. New style phoenix halls had to cater to the taste of their clientele if they wanted get their share of the

\textsuperscript{32} Dahan tiansheng (Luanyou 267:10).
\textsuperscript{33} Dahan tiansheng (Luanyou 267:10).
big pie of merit money available on the religious market.\textsuperscript{34} The impressive
variety of religious literature produced by the Mingzheng Tang since its
founding thus mirrors the market-driven trend towards diversification
which we had noted earlier for its repertoire of ritual services in general. In
the following I would like to give an overview of the varied corpus of
morality books and scriptures produced by the Mingzheng Tang between 1977
and the present day.

6.2.2 Typology of the Mingzheng Tang's Morality Books

A first distinction to be made is between scriptures and morality books.
In most texts of the Mingzheng Tang a clear line is drawn between "books"
\((shu \text{ 書}, \text{also called } shanshu \text{ 善書}, \text{"morality books"}, \text{or } shengshu \text{ 聖書},\)
"sacred books") and "scriptures" \((jing \text{ 經}, jingdian \text{ 經典}, jingwen \text{ 經文}).\) This
dichotomy is also commonly employed by the Mingzheng Tang's phoenix
disciples. "Morality books" are texts to be read, while scriptures are
crystallizations of the Way to be recited in a ritual context.\textsuperscript{35}

The scripture - morality book dichotomy provides us with two basic
categories into which to fit the Mingzheng Tang's texts. While only a few
scriptures have been written, the vast majority of texts produced by the
Mingzheng Tang fall into the morality book category, which I therefore

\textsuperscript{34} The intense competition between new style phoenix halls has been noted by Zheng Zhiming,
although he sees its effect on the \textit{shanshu} literature mainly in publication pressures
shortening the time available for the composition of a morality book and thus leading to
simpler products [Zheng Zhiming n.d.:20].

\textsuperscript{35} Cf. my article "The Birth of a New Scripture" (Clart 1994/95) for a more detailed analysis
of the concept of "scripture" in the Mingzheng Tang.
propose to divide into three subcategories, differentiated by the approach they take to their subject matter: (1) expository, (2) narrative, and (3) prescriptive texts. In the following I shall discuss these categories individually and discuss some of the works that fall under them.

6.2.2.1 Scriptures

Scriptures being the more highly valued texts, their number is much smaller than that of morality books. During his time at the Shengxian Tang, Yongbi had written two scriptures that, as we have seen, were to provide a firm doctrinal basis for the Shengxian Tang by serving as charter texts for its worship of Yuanshi Tianzun and of Guan Sheng Dijun as the Jade Thearch. The Mingzheng Tang has over the years written four scriptures, each of which can be interpreted as a charter text for a new ritual focus of the Hall. The first was the *August Mother of Limitless Heaven’s Celestial Scripture for Awakening [Her Children] (Wujì Huangmu huanxing tianjing 無極皇母喚醒天經)*, written in 1982 by Yongbi, which laid the foundation for the Hall’s

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36 Mr. Wang Zhiyu, who is currently working on a Ph.D. thesis on Taiwan’s new style phoenix halls, has custom-tailored a different and more complex typology for the Mingzheng Tang’s literature. He divides it into ten broad categories: (1) spirit-travelogues (*youjilei shanshu* 遊記類善書), (2) thematic morality books (*zhutishi shanshu* 主題式善書), (3) morality books explaining problems (*jieshilei shanshu* 解事類善書), (4) children’s primers (*yifang qimenglei shanshu* 幼教啟蒙類善書), (5) biographies and example stories (*xingshu anzheng lei luanshu* 行述案證類善書), (6) medical morality books (*yiyaolei luanshu* 医療類善書), (7) “jade regulation”-like morality books (*jululei shanshu* 玉律類善書), (8) “family letter”-like morality books (*jiashulei shanshu* 家書類善書), (9) scriptures and mantras (*jingzhoulei shanshu* 經咒類善書), and (10) miscellaneous morality books (*zalunlei shanshu* 雜論類善書). In my opinion, this is not the most effective and appropriate way to classify the Mingzheng Tang’s religious literature. In the first place, by making scriptures a subcategory of morality books, it disregards the fundamental difference between these two types of texts. The remaining nine categories are too narrowly focussed on specific contents to be useful, some of them being applicable to just one of the Mingzheng Tang’s books (e.g., categories #6 and #9). Cf. Wang Zhiyu 1996a.
newly introduced mother worship.\textsuperscript{37} The second scripture to be written was \textit{The Thearch Shun’s Scripture Admonishing to Filial Piety (Shun Di quanxiao jing 舜帝勸孝經)}, revealed in 1984. If this text was intended as a charter text for a new focus on the Thearch Shun (mythical early emperor of China and one of the Three Official Great Thearchs), it failed. Its revelation seems oddly out of step with the general trend of the Hall’s development at the time; it is possible that it represented a pet project of the medium Orthodox Stylus (Zhengbi) who apparently developed a special bond with the Thearch Shun during the previous writing of the \textit{Xiaodian 孝典}, a book authored by the Thearch Shun and channelled by Zhengbi. Perhaps Zhengbi’s decision soon afterwards to leave the Hall and set up his own phoenix hall was related to his failure to establish his favourite deity as a cult focus in the Mingzheng Tang. The third scripture, the \textit{Mysterious and Marvellous Scripture of Limitless Heaven for Realizing the Way (Wuji zhengdao xuanmiao jing 無極證道玄妙經)}, was composed in 1987 by Mingbi as the charter text for the “Academy” (Wuji Zhengdao Yuan). Finally, in 1995/96 the \textit{Earth Mother’s True Scripture for Universal Transformation (Dimu puhua zhenjing 地母普化真經)} was revealed by Mingbi to accompany the installation of a new image of the Earth Mother beside the Venerable Mother on the third floor of the temple building. This new focus upon the Earth Mother is another pet project by a leading member of the Hall, in this case one of the deputy chairmen. He initiated the fund raising project for the new Earth Mother image and afterwards repeatedly requested the gods to reveal an Earth Mother scripture. After some procrastination, Mingbi finally received a mandate to channel the scripture. There are some similarities here with Zhengbi’s attempt to establish an individual cult for Shun Di in 1984 in that
\footnote{37 For an English translation see Appendix 2.}
the Earth Mother also seems to lack a broad basis of support among the phoenix disciples and is pushed mainly by a small faction supporting her. It remains to be seen whether the Earth Mother and her scripture will gain a permanent place in the Mingzheng Tang’s ritual structure. However, if the fate of the Mingzheng Tang’s previous scriptures can teach us any lesson, it is that a scripture is far more likely to succeed if it merely confirms and elaborates a new ritual focus that has already taken hold among the Hall’s membership, rather than if it is part of an attempt to establish such a new focus from scratch.

As already mentioned, scriptures are qualitatively different from morality books in that they are not primarily intended as reading matter, but for recitation. Scripture recitation is an important of the phoenix disciples programme of cultivation and is strongly encouraged by the Hall’s gods. While morality books teach people about the Dao by way of intellectual argument and narrative persuasion, the “truth” (zhendi 真 諦) cannot be understood on a merely intellectual and abstract basis alone, but has to be intuitively apprehended and comprehended by the mind. In scriptures, this truth is formulated in the most essential and concise way. Regular recitation of these scriptures thus can help “imprint” the divine truth upon the believer’s mind. Only when the stage of “mind-imprint” (xinyin 心 印) is achieved, has true understanding come about. For scripture recitation to

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38 This is also reflected in the language used in scriptures which adheres much more closely to a classical pattern than morality books do; there is little sign of vernacularization in scriptural language. However, so as not to compromise the objective of general comprehensibility for a modern audience, the Mingzheng Tang has produced a vernacular commentary for each of its scriptures (except for the Shun Di quanxiao jing, which never played a significant ritual role in the Hall).

39 This is an interesting reinterpretation of the Chan concept of xinyin, which originally denotes the mental impression of the truth which is transmitted directly from mind to mind, without the mediation of the written or spoken word [cf. Soothill & Hodous 1937:150; Ding
have this effect, however, the reciter has to cultivate a receptive state of mind, i.e., he or she has to be “sincere”. “If the mind is not imprinted, meaning cannot be obtained; if the mind is not sincere, it is difficult to imprint.”

Done the right way, scripture recitation is indispensible for the phoenix disciple’s spiritual development. Its effects, however, are not restricted to such intuitive comprehension of the ineffable. The impression of the divine onto the believer’s mind creates a resonant relationship (ganying 感應) with the gods (in particular with the deity to whom the scripture in question is devoted), procuring for the reciter the gods’ assistance and protection. It is also believed to purify the mind and increase its numinous brightness (lingming 禮明) and is therefore seen as inducing heightened intelligence, especially in one’s next existence.

Furthermore, like any other cultivational method, scripture recitation also is a source of merit. The Mingzheng Tang’s scriptures all contain at their end a merit transfer formula (huixiang zhenyan 迎向真言) devoting the created merit to the reciter’s advancement on his or her way back to Heaven. This merit can, however, also be passed on to others; the communal scripture recitations during a dharma assembly are believed to benefit the many orphaned souls congregating around the Hall on such an occasion. While this is a kind of indiscriminate reflection of the created merit on all spirits, more focussed transfers to specific recipients are also possible. In general,

Fubao 1921:352]. In the present context, by contrast, the written (scriptural) word is made the vehicle for the “impression” of the ineffable truth upon the mind -- a shift in meaning fully congruent with spirit-writing cult’s bibliocentrism.

Laomu yixun 1:22.

Shiyi chandao lu VI:45. See also a story on this theme in Jingshi yinguo baoying shilu, p.133. The principle is enshrined in the apocryphal Sutra of Causes and Effects (Yinguo jing 因果經).

This, however, is not very common with scriptures in the narrow sense; an example from the Mingzheng Tang’s records concerns scripture recitation to pay off a karmic debt to a
however, scripture recitation is seen as a method mainly for one's own cultivation and is frequently recommended to persons in need of supplementing their deficient merit accounts.

6.2.2.2 Expository Morality Books

By “expository morality book” I mean a work devoted to the systematic and mainly abstract treatment of a topic. It takes the shape of a treatise or a collection of treatises on general topics such as “cultivation”, “karma”, “merit”, “sincerity” etc. etc.

If the Shengxian Tang is renowned for its spirit-travelogues, the Mingzheng Tang's claim to fame rests on its expository morality books, especially those written by Moxianzi, i.e., its chairman Zhang Yunchang*. The best-known and most respected example of this type kind is The Mysterious Meaning of the Celestial Way (Tiandao aoyi 天道奥义), a complete English translation of which is included in Appendix 1 where I also have included a brief note on its history and contents. The expository treatise was something of a specialty of Moxianzi whose traditional scholarly background clearly made itself felt in this respect. Other works by Moxianzi in this vein include The Great Way (Dadao kangzhuang 大道康庄, 1978), The Mind-Virtue of the Great Way (Dadao xinde 大道心德, 1979), Heavenly Voices of the Great Han (Dahan tiansheng 大汉天聲, 1980/81, co-authored with Yongbi), Secrets of

malevolent creditor from a previous existence [Luanyou 587:30]. More frequently, however, mantras (zhou 呂) are recited for the transfer of merit to specific others. Thus a person suffering from the intrusion of ghosts in his home may be advised to recite the Compassion Mantra (Dabei zhou 大悲呪) for the ghost's salvation, and for animals to be released the Life-Releasing Mantra (Fangsheng zhou 放生呪) may be chanted.
the Way and the Mind (Daoxin micang 道心秘藏, 1983/84), and, finally, The August Mother’s Book for Showing the Way to Confused Souls (Huangmu zhimi pian 皇母指迷篇, 1985/86). The pattern of the expository treatise has also been used by other mediums of the Hall, such as Zhengbi (The Way of Enlightened Orthodoxy, Mingzheng zhi dao 明正之道, 1982) and later Mingbi (Explications of the Admonitions of the Sages and Wise Ones, Shengzhe zhenyan shiyi pian 聖哲箴言釋義篇, 1988/89; An Investigation of Morality, Rensheng lunli zhi tanqiu 人生倫理之探求, 1990/91; True Principles, Sudden Enlightenment, Chan, Zhenli, dunwu, chan 真理, 頓悟, 禪, 1991/92; Thinking about Returning to the Correct Way of Life, Sigui zhengdao rensheng 思歸正道人生, 1992/93; Mind Dharma of the Three Religions’ Cultivation of Perfection, Sanjiao xiu zhen xinfa 三教修真心法, 1992/93; Book of Phoenix-Teachings of the Immortals and Perfected Ones Stationed [in the Precious Palace of the Spiritual Empyrean], Zhujia xian zhen xunluan pian 駐駕仙真訓鸞篇, 1993-95; Records of Karmic Causation, Yinguo yinyou lu 因果因由錄, 1993-95). A different approach is taken in The Ancient Buddha Maitreya’s Book on Universal Transformation (Mile Gufo puhua pian 彌勒古佛普化篇, 1981, channelled by Yongbi) which supplements short treatises by Maitreya on such topics as “merit transfer”, “the three treasures”, “attachment” with conversations between Maitreya and various Buddhas and Bodhisattas during which the key points are further elucidated. A similar use of dialogue, but now between the medium and one or several deities, is adopted in Zhengbi’s The Buddha Ji’s Golden Book Pointing out Transformation (Ji Fo dianhua jinpian 濟佛點化金篇, 1982/83) and Mingbi’s Book to Warn About the Manifold Phenomena of the Floating World (Fushi baitai jingxing pian 浮世百態警醒篇, 1994/95).
6.2.2.3 Narrative Morality Books

These are works whose main emphasis lies upon the telling of stories or a story. There are two basic subtypes: novel-like book-length works that integrate their narrative content into a single overarching plot, and loose collections of individual moralistic stories.

At the Mingzheng Tang, the first type consists exclusively of spirit-travelogues (youji 遊記). Although the unifying framework of the journey is in most cases not strongly developed, but merely serves to connect a series of more or less autonomous short narratives, basic narrative coherence is still provided by the continuity of the protagonists, usually the medium and his guiding deity. We have seen that the Shengxian Tang’s Diyu youji created a fashion for spirit-travelogues after 1977 and this movement also affected the Mingzheng Tang. Spirit-travelogues at first became a specialty of Yongbi who between 1979 and 1980 produced his first such work. Entitled Historical Records of Short-Cuts to Completing the Way Among the Three Realms of Beings (Sancao chengdao jiejing shizhuan 三曹成道捷徑史傳), this book describes Yongbi’s journeys in the “three realms” of Heaven, the human world, and the underworld, where under the guidance of his immortal teacher Nezha he interviews various perfected ones about their methods of cultivation. He followed this book up with another travelogue, Voices from the Hearts of Souls Caught in Animal Reincarnations -- Record of the Travels of Master Spirit-Pearl (Chudao xinsheng Lingzhuzi youji 畜道心聲靈珠子遊記, 1980/81), a description of a series of visits to animals who are made to tell of the sins in past existences that earned them reincarnation as animals. This
is taken as an opportunity to condemn some famous bad guys of Chinese and world history, including for example the evil Song minister Qin Hui and Soviet dictator Stalin who have been reborn as pigs in the Taizhong abattoir. Yongbi’s next travelogue, the *Sacred Gazetteer of the Jasper Pool* (*Yaochi shengzhi*, 1981/82) served to supply more detailed information about the Venerable Mother’s realm in Limitless Heaven, which had been sadly neglected in Yongbi’s earlier uranography, the *Tianjie chuanzhen*, and had become important now that the Mingzheng Tang had come to worship the Venerable Mother as its supreme deity. In 1982/83 there followed a lengthy journey to the subaqueous territories of the dragon kings (*Record of a Journey to the Water-Crystal Palace, Shuijing Gong youji* 水晶宮遊記). Yongbi’s travelling on behalf of the Mingzheng Tang ended in 1985 with the completion of the *Record of a Journey to the City of the Wrongfully Deceased* (*Wangsicheng youji* 枉死城遊記). Neither Zhengbi nor Moxianzi ever dealt with spirit-travel to any significant extent and so it was left to the ever-versatile Mingbi to continue this literary line, which he did with a series of travelogues. The first was the *True Principles of the Journey of the Way* (*Daocheng zhenli*, 1985/86) whose plot was similar to that of Yongbi’s first travelogue in that it consisted of a series of visits to perfected beings who were then interviewed about their methods of cultivation. This work set the tone for all of Mingbi’s travelogues which differ clearly from Yongbi’s works. Where Yongbi delighted in the fanciful elaboration of transcendent realms and the narration of humorous and often somewhat frivolous little sketches, Mingbi’s emphasis lay on matters of morality and

43 He resumed his spirit-travels after he had founded his own phoenix hall, the Gongheng Tang, which has by now published a number of new travelogues, such as the *Record of a Journey to the Purple Yang Pass* (*Ziyang Guan youji* 紫陽關遊記, 1989), and *Selected Examples of Numinous Cultivation in the Three Realms* (*Sanjie caizheng lingxiu* 三界採證靈修, 1993).
cultivation; for him the journey provides merely an attractive packaging for more serious concerns. Even the enormous cosmographic potential of a journey to the Penglai Isles *(Record of a Journey to the Penglai Isles of the Immortals, Penglai xiandao youji 蓬萊仙島遊記, 1989-1991)* could not seduce him; this like most of his other travels only served as a background for the discussion of various matters of moral conduct, personal cultivation, and religious problems. The remaining two travelogues by Mingbi are appropriately located in the human world which is where his real concerns lie. The *Record of Pointing Out Transformation to Confused Souls* *(Miling dianhua ji 迷靈點化記, 1986/87)* records spirit-travels to various correctional facilities in Taiwan where the souls of inmates are given a chance to confess their sins and express their remorse. The *Record of Awakening to the Way in the Midst of a Fleeting Life* *(Fusheng xingdao ji 浮生醒道記, 1988)* describes visits to the souls of an assortment of good and bad people all over Taiwan whose present life demonstrates the consequences of their conduct.

A category of narrative *shanshu* related to the *youji* type are works where the medium does not travel to other places which he describes or beings which he interviews, but where the places or beings are summoned into the temple to be interacted with in situ. During Yongbi’s “zoological period”, when he wrote his records of travels to the oceans, to pigs in slaughterhouses etc., he introduced a variation on this theme by interviewing the souls of birds right in the Mingzheng Tang. Phoenix disciples bought birds, which were placed in cages in the inner sanctum, there to give testimony through Yongbi’s planchette of their previous existences. The resulting book, the *Record of Collected Oddities of Bird Talk* *(Niaoyu souyi ji 鳥語搜異記, 1983/84)*, inspired the holding of a life-releasing assembly for
birds in the mountains near Taizhong. A second example of this kind are the *Court Cases of the Underworld* (*Difu shen’an 地府審案*, 1984/85), a cooperative product of Yongbi, Moxianzi, and Zhengbi; this was a revival of the Shengxian Tang’s practice of holding underworld trials in a phoenix hall where its proceedings are transcribed by the planchette and serve as warnings by showing the condemnation of sinful souls and as encouragement by displaying the favourable treatment of good souls. Mingbi’s contribution to the form of “stationary travelogue” is the *Record of Revelations of the Perfected Ones’ Cultivation of the Way* (*Qunzhen daochezhi qishi lu 群真道程啟示錄*, 1987/88) which tells of the visits of a series of perfected beings in the Mingzheng Tang where they are interviewed by Mingbi on various matters of moral cultivation.

The other fundamental type of narrative morality book, the loose collection of stories, is represented by a considerable variety of works to which all mediums of the Hall have contributed. The moralistic story is a stock form of the *shanshu* genre and can look back upon a long history. Collections of such stories served as prompt books for public lecturing, blurring the border line between *xuanjiang* and storytelling for entertainment purposes. Among the Mingzheng Tang’s literature we can differentiate two basic forms of such stories: the karmic retribution story and the miracle story. Karmic retribution stories tell of the consequences in this life of one’s conduct in past existences, while the miracle story describes divine interventions in the lives of good and bad people. The two types, of course, are not mutually exclusive, as divine intervention is attracted by extraordinarily bad or good karma, but in most collections we usually find an emphasis either on the personalized actions of gods or on the impersonal workings of karmic causation.
Miracle stories are usually grouped together for one specific deity or another. In 1977/78, for example, Yongbi revealed a slim collection of ten stories about the merciful intervention of Guanyin in believers' lives (*True Transmission of Guanshiyin's Saving from Suffering and Distress, Guanshiyin jiuku jiunan chuanzhen 觀世音救苦救難傳真*). In 1979/80, Moxianzi channelled a more substantial collection of Mazu stories (*The Boat of Return in the Vast Sea, Manghai guizhou 芒海歸舟*), and in 1982/83 Mingbi wrote the *Sacred Record of Manifestations of the Numinous Efficacy of the Thearch Guan (Guan Di xianling shengji 關帝顯靈聖記)*.

Karmic retribution stories have recently experienced a kind of revival. Yongbi had composed a collection of such stories at the Shengxian Tang (*Simple Narrations of Karmic Retribution for Good and Bad [Persons] in Ancient and Present Times, Qianshu gujin shan'e yinguo baoying 淺述古今善惡因果報應*, published 1975), and the very first new *shanshu* published by the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society after its break with the Shengxian Tang was a collection of such stories under the title *True Cases of Karmic Retribution (Shiren shishi yinguo baoying 實人實事因果報應*, 1977). However, the next such book, channelled by Mingbi, was only published in 1985 (*The True Way of Living in the World, Chushi zhenquan 處世真諦*). Recently, however, the Mingzheng Tang has published a substantial collection of karmic retribution stories (*True Records of Karmic Retribution to Warn the World, Jingshi yinguo baoying shilu 警世因果報應實錄*, 1993/94).

Related to the karmic retribution stories are stories which restrict
themselves to recounting cases of this-worldly reward and punishment. The Phoenix Friend Magazine Society so far has published two of these, each focussing on one specific virtue or vice. Between 1983 and 1984, Zhengbi wrote the *Canon of Filial Piety* (*Xiaodian* 孝典), a collection of stories on filial behaviour; the revealing deity was the Thearch Shun who subsequently reinforced the message of his book with the revelation of his *Scripture Admonishing to Filiality*. The second work was revealed by Mingbi and contains stories told by the Eight Immortals on the harmful consequences of licentious behaviour (*The Eight Immortals' Book Against Licentiousness, Ba Xianweng jieyin pian* 八仙翁戒淫篇, 1989/90).

Narrative morality books are a firm part of the Mingzheng Tang’s publishing programme, although one type, the spirit-travelogue, seems to be losing some of its attraction. In spite or maybe because of their popularity these *youji* had always been regarded with some suspicion by purists. They tended to blur the line between moralistic and entertainment literature. Yongbi openly tried to make his *youji* as entertaining as possible, even discussing with his immortal teacher Nezha new ways to attract the reader’s attention. Mingbi, by contrast, obviously never felt very comfortable with the genre and expressed his concern that the novel-like structure of *youji* may mislead readers into regarding them as entertaining fiction.\(^{44}\) Since the *youji* fashion in general seems to have largely run its course, it is quite possible that in the near future no more travelogues will be written in the Mingzheng Tang.

\[^{44}\text{See, for example, } Penglai xiandao youji, pp.4, 202.\]
6.2.2.4 Prescriptive Morality Books

This category is not as easy to define as the others since it is defined not by a specific literary form, but by the intent of the books belonging to it. It includes works that primarily intend to prescribe specific courses of action, rather than tell stories or analyse religious concepts. As by definition all shanshu have a normative aspect, the differentiation of this subtype from the others is a matter more of emphasis than of absolute difference. The following examples will make it clearer what constitutes the specificity of the prescriptive type.

The most clear-cut example of a prescriptive shanshu are the The Sagely Thearch Wenheng’s Statutes of Merit and Demerit (Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü 文衡聖帝功過律), revealed by Mingbi in two volumes from 1985 to 1986. The Statutes are a detailed catalogue of do’s and don’ts in the shape of a ledger of merit and demerit. It is believed to represent the “celestial statutes” (tianlü) which the deities apply in their judgment of human conduct. As such, the Statutes are complemented by the penal codes enacted in purgatory which were revealed shortly after the completion of the Statutes under the title Regulations of the Underworld for Dealing with Sins (Difu zhizui tiaoli 地府治罪條例). Together, these two books of otherworldly laws have served to systematize and standardize the Mingzheng Tang’s practices and beliefs pertaining to the assignment of merit and demerit and give positive expression to the fairness and predictability of Heaven and its emissaries. Interestingly, although they were revealed by spirit-writing, these are not original works, but are largely based on an early Republican period shanshu
called Sacred Canon of the Celestial Statutes (Tianlù shengdian 天律聖典). This case leads one to wonder how many “new” revelations may actually be merely reworkings of older morality books; an answer to this question may emerge when we begin to have a better understanding of the huge corpus of nineteenth and early twentieth century shanshu literature.

Other prescriptive morality books are collections of more or less detailed injunctions concerning a certain type of behaviour or directed a specific group of persons. Resolving Confusion and Changing Vulgar Customs (Kaimi yisu 開迷易俗, channelled by Yongbi and Moxianzi in 1980) is a collection of short essays by the Mysterious Woman of the Nine Heavens (Jiutian Xuannü) on a number of popular religious customs and the stance a righteous phoenix disciple should take towards them. While these admonitions concern a certain kind of behaviour, all the remaining books save one in the prescriptive category are catalogues of moral conduct compiled for the benefit of specific social groups. The very first morality book written by high-school teacher Mingbi was a little volume of moral lessons for children which for their benefit was equipped with national phonetic characters beside the main text (Awakening to Enlightened Orthodoxy, Mingzheng qimeng 明正啟蒙, 1982). To complement this primer, Mingbi later wrote the similarly structured Guidance for Life (Shenghuo zhinan 生活指南, 1983/84). Two more books of practical instruction on how to live a moral life, both also channelled by Mingbi, are the Instructions in the Way of

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45 This work was revealed in the early 1920’s by a group of Tongshan She affiliated spirit-writing cults in Sichuan. This dating is, however, disputed. Sakai Tadao believes it to have been written in the 1870’s [Sakai 1985:486]. I have explained my arguments for the later date in a recent publication [Clart 1995:112-113].

46 Wang Zhiyu thinks that these primers are an innovation by the Mingzheng Tang, nothing like them ever having been spirit-written before [1996:109].
Woman (Xun fudao 訓婦道, 1989) and the Family Letters from the August Mother (Huangmu jiashu 皇母家書, 1988/89). The former, ascribed to the female deity He Xiangu 何仙姑, consists of a series of detailed discussions of and instructions on the proper moral conduct of women in modern Taiwanese society. The latter contains forty "letters" from the Venerable Mother to her children, i.e., humanity. They centre upon defining codes of conduct for thirty-seven different professions, ranging from judicial personnel, journalists, geomancers, and doctors to butchers, doufu sellers, and electricians and give us fascinating insights into concepts of public morality applied to different areas of social life.

The final title in this category is prescriptive in quite a different sense: it is a slim volume containing 160 herbal prescriptions for various ailments revealed by a deified physician, Perfected Man Sun (Sun Zhenren 孫真人) (Marvellous Prescriptions for Longevity and Rescue in Emergencies, Shoushi jiujji miaofang 壽世救濟妙方, 1980/81). Although somewhat exceptional among the Mingzheng Tang's shanshu, the use of the planchette for the revelation of miraculous and not so miraculous cures has a long tradition; as we have seen, an outbreak of bubonic plague in late nineteenth century Guangdong caused a flurry of spirit-writing activity devoted to the revelation of effective cures. In Taiwan, the use of the planchette for the writing of medical prescriptions has been and still is common. In the Mingzheng Tang's ritual practice, efficacious herbal remedies are revealed from time to time by the gods at their discretion. Through Mingbi (who is after all a pharmacist by training) various gods have on different occasions revealed

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47 On this work see Clart 1997.
48 On this practice see the researches of Yoshimoto Shōji [1993], especially chapters 4 and 5.
herbal remedies for diabetes,\textsuperscript{49} kidney and bladder stones,\textsuperscript{50} and glaucoma,\textsuperscript{51} and frequently will also recommend already existing traditional medicines for specific conditions. However, a recent proposal by one of the Hall’s deputy chairmen to have the medical deity Hua Tuo 華 陀 conduct regular medical séances in the Mingzheng Tang has not received an enthusiastic reception from the gods.\textsuperscript{52}

6.3 Miscellaneous Publications and General Trends in the Mingzheng Tang’s Publishing Programme

There are a number of publications that because of their heterogeneous nature do not fit easily into any of the above categories. In the current publishing programme these are mainly two series published irregularly by the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society: the \textit{Records Explaining Meanings and Expounding the Way} (\textit{Shiyi chandao lu} 釋義 闡道 錄) and the \textit{Imperial Instructions of the Venerable Mother} (\textit{Laomu yixun 老母 懿 訓}). The former contain transcripts of generally interesting questions and answers from the Hall’s “charitable” séances. The first volume of this series was published in 1986 and since then one volume was published roughly every year. The series has now reached volume 11 (1996). The latter are collections of the short texts written by the Venerable Mother during her séances on the first and fifteenth days of every moon. Appearing for the first time in 1985, books in the series are published about every two years. The most recent volume is No.8 (1996).

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Shiyi chandao lu} VI:11.
\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Shiyi chandao lu} VI:14.
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Shiyi chandao lu} VI:17-18.
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Luanyou} 582:2.
In earlier phases of the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society's development its publishing programme used to contain many more heterogeneous elements in its publishing programme. Especially during its cooperation with the Huide Gong and the Shengxian Tang, the Magazine Society saw itself as a mouthpiece for all of Taiwan's phoenix halls and the pages of the Phoenix Friend were filled with revelatory texts from many cults all over the island. The Society also occasionally published books written in other phoenix halls and reprinted older traditional shanshu and scriptures. This continued for a while after the establishment of the Mingzheng Tang and until the mid-1980s we find the occasional reprint and even some original publications of non-Mingzheng Tang shanshu in the Society's programme. With the increasing age and declining health of the Hall's chairman Mr. Zhang*, however, contacts with other phoenix halls slowly diminished and the Mingzheng Tang began to turn more and more in upon itself. This is reflected in the pages of the Phoenix Friend that nowadays carry only and exclusively spirit-written texts produced at the Mingzheng Tang. The only outside contributions come from a small number of dedicated essayists who publish their contemplations on things religious in Taiwanese society in a number of phoenix hall magazines without maintaining a firm attachment to any of them. When in 1991 it was proposed that the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society should publish a book-length collection of the essays of one such contributor, Mr. Lin Meitian 林美田, the Benevolent Master Guan refused. The reason given was that as this was no spirit-written book composed by divine mandate, its publication in the renowned Phoenix Friend would "not be appropriate"; furthermore, it would be very difficult to determine the merit amount for the printing of such a book by a human
Considering that in the 1970s the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society had no qualms about publishing morality books by human authors, the 1991 view that the Society should devote itself solely to the publication of spirit-written and celestially mandated books is indicative of the progressive narrowing of its objectives. While it had always been closely allied with a particular phoenix hall, the Society had formerly at least aspired to be a forum for all “phoenix friends” in Taiwan. By the late 1980s it has finally become the exclusive mouthpiece of one and only one phoenix hall with which it has entered into a close symbiotic relationship that makes other outside sources of support superfluous.

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53 Luanyou 533:4-5. Lin Meitian quickly found another publisher happy to print his books. The Taoyuan phoenix hall Xingshan Tang 行善堂 is publishing his essays in a book series called Teacher Lin’s Admonitions to Goodness (Lin laoshi quanshan xilie 林老師勤善系列). By 1994, the fifth volume of this series had appeared.

54 These included, for example, the Liaofan sixun 了凡四訓 by the Ming dynasty ledger author Yuan Huang, a chronology of divine birthdays and other annual festivals entitled Sanjiao shengdan qianqiu lu 三教聖誕千秋錄 by a Shengxian Tang cooperator writing under the pen-name Zhuiyunyan 追雲燕 (“Swallow Chasing the Clouds”), a directory of Taiwanese temples (Taiwan simiao quanji 台灣寺廟全集), and the Huanxing mijin 喚醒迷信, a slim volume of moralistic essays and poems by a Mr. Wu Longju 吳龍駒. The latter case in particular had close parallels to the proposed book of essays by Lin Meitian.
CHAPTER 7: PHOENIX HALLS' RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

Where do phoenix halls fit into the complex landscape of Chinese religious traditions? Are they Daoist? Confucian? Buddhist? Are they popular religious cults? Are they part of the popular sectarian tradition? Or are they a religious tradition in its own right?

7.1 Self-Definition

The emic view that can be distilled from the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang's writings\(^1\) aligns phoenix halls with the Confucian tradition. An early programmatic essay spirit-written by Yongbi gives the following definition of the Shengxian Tang and the tradition it represents:

That this hall is called a "phoenix hall" means that it adheres to the Confucian tradition and the teachings of the gods. Therefore it is called "Divine Teachings of the Confucian Tradition" (Ruzong Shenjiao 儒宗神教). Because it is a sacred place that has received a mandate from Heaven to transform living beings, save the world, deliver the masses, and admonish people to do good, the following name was bestowed upon it: "Taizhong Hall of Sages and Worthies, Phoenix Hall under the Direct Administration of Southern Heaven 台中南天直轄鸞堂聖賢堂."

Our teachings have a long history, being China's orthodox teachings of the Sages. Setting up a sand-tray and using a peach branch as a pen, we use the gods' numinosity to wield the phoenix and expound the teachings. We write poetry and prose to warn the human mind to keep the three relationships and the five constant virtues, to obey the four bonds and the eight virtues, to reform heresies and heterodox doctrines, to extirpate heterodox teachings, to break superstition and return to the correct Way. Thus the phoenix school wields the phoenix

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\(^1\) And that therefore is strictly speaking applicable only to the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang!
to promote widely the Way and virtue of Confucius and Mencius, calling up the spirit of our people, lovingly protecting the nation, exhorting the masses to abandon evil and follow the good. To help out where the government’s efforts at establishing order and peace do not reach is the only main objective of this hall.2

This definition was carried over into the newly founded Mingzheng Tang and was reaffirmed in a 1980 revelation by Yongbi:

The Phoenix School (Luanmen 螺門) is also called School of the Sages (Shengmen 聖門), Confucian School (Rumen 儒門), or halls of the Sages (shengtang 聖堂), or phoenix halls. The Phoenix School carries on [the work of] Heaven in response the cyclical movement [of the ages]. Taking Confucianism as its tradition and establishing its teachings by the gods, it wields the phoenix to arouse the human mind to abandon evil and follow the good, to reform heterodoxy, to extirpate superstition, and to return to the correct Way. Therefore the Phoenix School’s teachings expound the true principles of the Celestial Way to enlighten the human mind, so that [humans] may rectify themselves, establish virtue, do good, cultivate themselves, save others, transform vulgar habits, change the customs, and create a wholesome and happy world.

Thus, all rituals of the Phoenix School are derived from the Confucian teaching of rites. Entering the Phoenix School as a disciple under the phoenix is just like enrolling in a school (xuetang 學堂) as a student; [the student] has to honour the teachers and respect the Way. Honouring the teachers means honouring and respecting the sages and gods as teachers, obeying their instructions, studying the teaching of rites, researching the sagely instructions and taking them as examples of virtue in one’s personal cultivation. Respecting the Way means respecting the principles of the Way of the sages and emphasizing morality so that one’s conduct does not swerve from its prescribed track and one’s mind is correct and without heterodoxy.3

To be a phoenix disciple is for many Mingzheng Tang members a way to participate in the most prestigious of China’s “great traditions,” that of Confucianism, and it is with pride that they refer to their religious system as

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2 Shengxian zhenli 1:3.
3 Dahan tiansheng (Luanyou 267:9). This definition was reiterated in very similar phrases two years later by Zhengbi (Luanyou 324:19).
"Divine Teachings of the Confucian Tradition" (Ruzong Shenjiao).\textsuperscript{4} Confucianism is viewed as incorporating the essence of the orthodox Chinese religious tradition which is under threat from the ever increasing Western influence in modern Taiwanese society. Thus the Mingzheng Tang's championing of the "Confucian tradition" carries with it a strong overtone of cultural nationalism and revivalism, a feature common to much of the modern morality book literature. The emphasis upon the Mingzheng Tang's Confucian aspects is not without foundation. We have seen that Taiwanese phoenix halls developed out of gentry and literati dominated cult groups that naturally were imbued with that class's worldview. The earliest attempts to define a common set of teachings and liturgical procedures for Taiwanese phoenix halls used the Confucian label in its name (Ruzong Shenjiao) and called its manual of rites \textit{Liturgy for the Confucian School} (Rumen kefan 儒門科範). The \textit{Rumen kefan}'s rituals follow the model of the rites performed in the Confucius temple very closely, requiring a complex array of liturgical personnel and including a "three-fold offering" (sanxian li 三獻禮) of wine, three offerings of incense (san shang xiang 三上香), the reading of a prayer text (zhuwen 祝文), and the performance of the "three kneelings and nine kowtows". By comparison, the Mingzheng Tang's rituals are much simplified, but they preserve the basic liturgical elements in functionally

\textsuperscript{4} Jordan & Overmyer report that phoenix halls are frequently referred to as the "Confucian Religion" (Rujiao 儒教, Kong Jiao 孔教) [1986:79,149]; it was also as "Rujiao" that they were first introduced to me by a Taiwanese friend.

An interesting parallel to the Taiwanese assignation of phoenix halls to "Confucianism" are the Republican period spirit-writing cults in Sichuan province which called themselves "Confucian shrines" (Rutan 儒壇). David C. Graham who tells us about these groups is not very sympathetic towards their claims. He writes: "The Confucian religion is often called the Ju Chiao, and thus the Ju T'an borrowed the prestige of the literati or the Confucian scholars" [1967:103]. In truth, however "[w]hile there are officials and scholars in the Ru T'an, this religion is very different from the K'ong Giao or Confucian religion. In many ways the Ru T'an resembles Buddhism and Taoism" [1935:487]. After decades of suppression, this Sichuanese Rujiao seems to have been experiencing a modest revival in recent years (cf. Yu Yi 1996).
equivalent positions: the “three kneelings and nine kowtows”, the prayer text, the three offerings of incense, and the “threefold offering”, even though in the latter case the wine has been replaced by vegetables, fruits, and “longevity peaches”. The Confucian flair surrounding these rites is strengthened by the phoenix disciples’ ritual dress (lifu 禮服) which is modelled after the “long gown” (changpao 長袍) of the traditional scholar.

In terms of liturgical practice, we can therefore find elements of continuity between the Mingzheng Tang and the Confucian ritual tradition. In the phoenix disciples’ view this adherence to the Confucian rites is matched in the sphere of doctrine by their Hall’s championing of the “Confucian” catalogue of virtues, summarized in groups such as the “eight virtues”, the “three relationships”, the “four bonds”, the “five constant virtues”, and the “four obediences”. An intellectual historian may point out that this “Confucian morality” has long become a generalized Chinese civil morality, advocated by Daoists and Buddhists as much as by Confucians. After having for a long time utilized categories such as “Daoism” and “Confucianism” as hazy catch-all terms, scholars nowadays have become much more circumspect in using these big labels. Categories such as “Confucianism” tend to get defined more and more narrowly and often to be avoided altogether. Such precision may represent an advance in our understanding of Chinese intellectual history, but I would argue that it cannot properly be applied to the evaluation of emic religious categorizations. The fact of the matter is that the now much-criticized fuzzy categories of “Daoism” and “Confucianism” were not just dreamed up by scholars, but reflect folk conceptualizations prevalent in Chinese society. Thus, while from the viewpoint of the intellectual historian and the philosopher it may be questionable to interpret the “eight virtues”,

5 Cf. also Luantang shengdian, p.23.
virtues" as specifically Confucian, in the folk view these bade 八德 are the quintessence of "Confucian ethics" (Rujia lunli 儒家倫理), of the "Way of Confucius and Mencius" (Kong-Meng zhi dao 孔孟之道).

The Mingzheng Tang's claim to Confucian ancestry is more than just an ideological pronouncement and an argument can be made that at least those phoenix halls claiming allegiance to the "Ruzong Shenjiao" represent a kind of "folk Confucianism", a religious popularization of the Confucian Great Tradition. On the other hand, however, the Mingzheng Tang like all phoenix halls maintains an open attitude towards all religions. Its motto "yi Ru wei zong 以儒為宗," which I translated as "adhering to the Confucian tradition," literally means "to take Confucianism as its guiding line or principle." This does not exclude other religions and indeed the Mingzheng Tang’s shanshu are characterized by their affirmation of the underlying unity of the Five Religions (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam). The great doctrinal summa of the Mingzheng Tang, the Tiandao aoyi, for example draws its inspiration at least as much from the Daodejing 道德經 as from the Doctrine of the Mean 中庸 and from the Great Learning 大學. Quite apart from an openly synthetic attitude in the doctrinal realm, the Mingzheng Tang’s ritual structures show strong influences from religious traditions other than "Confucianism". The first to be mentioned here is, of course, spirit-writing as such whose strong connections to the Daoist tradition have not been obliterated by the mythical ascription of its invention to Confucius. Most of the mantras used by the Mingzheng Tang in its rituals are drawn from Daoist works such as the Daodejing 道德經 and the Weiji 周易.

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7 Indeed, the Shengxian Tang’s chairman, Mr. Zheng*, nowadays argues that phoenix halls are really a part of the Daoist tradition and has distanced himself from the Confucianizing efforts of the proponents of the Ruzong Shenjiao. The Daoist Association of the Republic of China supports this view by assigning them to Daoism’s “Branch of the Way of Accumulating
scriptures, the mantra chanted in preparation for the deity's descent in a spirit-writing séance, and most of the "precious appellations" (baogao 寶 詩) used for the Hall's deities are unambiguously of Daoist provenance. As I have argued elsewhere the conception of "scripture" underlying the Mingzheng Tang's revelations of scriptural texts is ultimately Daoist in nature. So is, of course, the ultimate aim of phoenix hall cultivation, posthumous immortalhood. The concept of attaining immortalhood through the accumulation of merit rather than through esoteric alchemical procedures has been a recognized path to salvation within various school of Daoism since at least the Song dynasty. Buddhist influence abounds in the Hall's life-releasing assemblies and in its scripture chanting practices which have been shaped by training obtained from orthodox Buddhist nuns on the one hand and an ordained monk heading a Longhua Pai 龍華派 vegetarian hall on the other. The syncretic multifocality of the Hall's ritual system is perhaps exemplified in the "spring and autumn sacrifices" introduced in 1988: their name borrowed from the vernal and autumnal sacrifices to Confucius, they have come to include ancestral sacrifices, shanshu presentation ceremonies, bushel veneration, numinous healing séances, and a full-scale Buddhist pudu ceremony.

The Mingzheng Tang's "Confucianism" is therefore just one facet of the rich religious mosaic that makes up this phoenix hall -- but it is a defining

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8 Many of these ritual texts are identical to those found in an apparently Quanzhen Daoist ritual manual, the Taishang xuanmen risong 太上玄門日誦.
10 An overview of the role of good works and merit accumulation in the Daoist tradition is given in Li Gang 1994.
facet. It is that part of its heritage that its members choose to emphasize as a mark of their religion’s individuality vis-à-vis the many religious alternatives available in modern Taiwanese society. Its Confucian rituals and the Confucian message of its *shanshu* define the Mingzheng Tang as part of a recognizably distinct religious tradition and give it the secure autonomy that allows it to freely interact with and borrow from competing traditions.

7.2 Differentiation from the Yiguan Dao

We have seen that in the public mind phoenix halls are easily confused with Buddha Halls of the Yiguan Dao, as both practise spirit-writing and use very similar ceremonial dress. As the historical outline has shown, the Yiguan Dao and Taiwanese phoenix halls derive from historically separate religious traditions that began to interact with each other on the Chinese mainland in the nineteenth century. The impact of this development did not reach Taiwan until after its retrocession to China in 1945. As we have seen, there developed a lively interaction between the Yiguan Dao and Taiwanese phoenix halls, sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile. The Shengxian Tang at first tried to develop and strengthen phoenix hall doctrine against the maternist competition, but the Mingzheng Tang eventually adopted some ideas, most importantly the mythic complex of the Venerable Mother as a personification of the Dao. What changes has the incorporation of Mother worship brought about in the system of religious belief and practice of the Mingzheng Tang? Does it mark a significant move away from the Ruzong Shenjao tradition that the Mingzheng Tang still claims to be a part of?
The effects of the adoption of Mother worship on the Mingzheng Tang can be summarized in three points. First, and most obviously, the focus of worship has shifted away somewhat from Guan Sheng Dijun to the Venerable Mother as the highest deity. This, however, does not seem to have seriously affected Guan Sheng Dijun’s authority. As the Jade Thearch, he is the holder of all administrative authority in the heavens and conducts the affairs of the celestial government largely without intervention by the Venerable Mother. If we phrase it in terms of the “Imperial Metaphor” that is sometimes being used as an explanatory model for the Chinese popular religious pantheon, the Jade Thearch plays a role similar to the earthly emperor of traditional China, while the Venerable Mother may be compared to the Empress Dowager:¹¹ her authority is largely informal, but always deferred to. If we look at one instance of exercise of divine authority in the Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy, namely, the authorization of the writing of morality books, we find that most books are formally authorized by the Jade Thearch. Even those written by the Venerable Mother’s decree (yizhi 颁旨) are usually also endorsed by a mandate of the Jade Thearch.¹²

Second, Venerable Mother mythology supplies a stronger and more convincing eschatological framework for the phoenix disciple’s efforts at personal cultivation than the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang’s originally quite traditional cosmology was able to offer. The maternist concept of a paradise

¹¹ This comparison was put forth by Zheng Zhiming [1984b: 107].
¹² The near equality of the Jade Thearch and the Venerable Mother is also expressed in the Mingzheng Tang’s written memorials, some of which are to be passed upwards from one level of the celestial bureaucracy to the next to be finally presented to the Jade Thearch and the Venerable Mother simultaneously. The fact that the Jade Thearch does not pass a memorial on to a higher ranking Venerable Mother, but receives it at the same time and at the same level as she is an expression of their factual, if not formal, equality.
where one is truly removed from samsara, and lives in eternal bliss was and
is one of the Yiguan Dao’s strong selling points, and an area of doctrine that
was not strongly developed among traditional phoenix halls. The Wumiao
Mingzheng Tang has adopted this paradise, which it calls the Heaven of the
Limitless (Wuji Tian), as the ultimate aim of its cultivation.

Third, worship of the Venerable Mother introduces an emotional
element into phoenix halls that the Five Benevolent Masters are not as apt in
providing. While Guan Sheng Dijun and his colleagues are virtuous and
righteous deities, they are also stern and somewhat forbidding. The Venerable
Mother, however, is full of motherly feelings for her offspring, depicted as
awaiting her children’s return with tears in her eyes at the gates of the Jasper
Pool. She thus gives a new, additional meaning to cultivation. Cultivation in
a traditional phoenix hall setting is a patient process of self-improvement and
purification, involving the exercise of discipline, will power, and systematic
practice and study, leading upwards in stages. It is the spiritual version of the
examination candidate’s struggle for office in Imperial China. Cultivation in a
maternist context, by contrast, is clothed in the touching imagery of
homecoming, of long-lost children returning to their home and to their
compassionate and loving mother. This supplies a new and motivating angle
on the otherwise perhaps slightly intimidating task of cultivating the Way.

The difference is also expressed in the terms of address and self-
denotation used by phoenix disciple when talking to the Benevolent Masters
on the one hand, and the Venerable Mother on the other hand. As described
above, the Benevolent Masters are addressed as “merciful teachers”, and the
phoenix disciple refers to him- or herself as “student” or “disciple”. When
addressing Laomu, the phoenix disciple will call her “mother” (muniang 母娘), while referring to him or herself as “child” (haizi 孩子).

Having charted the main elements adopted by the Mingzheng Tang from the Yiguan Dao, the next question to ask is: In what way does the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang’s Mother worship differ from that of the maternist sects? There are three crucial characteristics of Yiguan Dao Mother worship which the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang significantly has not adopted: millenarianism, salvationism, and exclusivity.

First, millenarianism: In Yiguan Dao doctrine, return to the Venerable Mother is a matter of some urgency, since the world has entered its final stage, the era of the White Yang. At the end of this era a great cosmic cataclysm will occur, destroying the world and all humans. This millenarian framework was not adopted by the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang. There is no notion of a secular world doomed to perish in the foreseeable future. Indeed, the outward-directed efforts of phoenix halls, such as the dissemination of morality books, aim at the reform of society, at building a better world, at creating the Confucian utopia of the “Great Harmony” (datong 大同). There does exist in the Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy’ belief system a Buddhist inspired view of the world as illusory and full of suffering; and it is the chief aim of the phoenix disciple to remove him or herself from the world of red dust. But this transcendent ideal is not informed by any millenarian perspective, but by the conviction that it is part of humanity’s role in the cosmic trinity he forms with Heaven and Earth to go beyond its

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earthbound existence and aspire to higher forms of existence.

Second, salvationism: the Venerable Mother offers Yiguan Dao members a special saving grace—the conferral of the three treasures (*sanbao 三寶*) at the time of initiation. This gift is supposed to open up the initiates' inborn, but blocked capacity for cultivation. “Completing the Way” (*chengdao 成道*) without first having “obtained the Way” (*dedao 得道*) in the form of the three treasures, is virtually impossible in the sect’s view.14 The belief system of the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang puts greater faith in humanity’s innate capacity for goodness and self-improvement. The Venerable Mother does not confer any secret methods on her children in the phoenix hall; like all the deities revealing there through the planchette, she simply acts as a teacher and guide for the “students of the phoenix”. As human beings, they are endowed by Heaven in their natures with everything they need to get to the Venerable Mother’s paradise. They are therefore not in need of any further mystical dispensation. The Venerable Mother and the other gods teach them how to realize their potential, but the disciples still have to go the whole way to paradise “on their own steam”.

Third, exclusivity: from the Yiguan Dao’s salvationist doctrine follows that no one who has not been initiated into the sect, i.e. has not received the “three treasures”, is able to attain the Mother’s paradise in Principle Heaven. This exclusivism is also not shared by the Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy. Indeed, the most common criticism directed by the Mingzheng Tang’s deities against the Yiguan Dao concerns its claim of a salvationist monopoly. The necessity of the “three treasures” for access to the Mother’s paradise is

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14 On this soteriology of the Yiguan Dao, see Wang Guangci 1985.
consistently rejected, and ultimate release from samsara tied exclusively to merit accumulation. Cultivation here is the only key to salvation, and all human beings are endowed by Heaven with the capacity for cultivation. It follows that all human beings can with appropriate efforts attain the Mother’s paradise, whether they are phoenix disciples or not. The advantage that phoenix disciples have over ordinary mortals is that of cultivating themselves in a highly conducive environment, under the instruction and guidance of the gods, including the Venerable Mother herself. Being a phoenix disciple helps in realizing the Way, but it is not a precondition.

An aspect closely related to the questions of salvationism and exclusivity, is the Yiguan Dao’s conception of a patriarchal line along which its secret teachings have been passed on for ages. The authentication conferred by this line of transmission is very important to the Yiguan Dao, and a matter of great elaboration. As described above, the Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy does not accept the necessity of a secret teaching, since everything human beings need for their salvation is embedded in their own natures. Consequently, the characteristic sectarian preoccupation with lines of patriarchs is completely absent in our phoenix hall.

In conclusion, we can say that even though the adoption of the Eternal Mother cult from the Unity Sect has added some new elements to the system of religious belief and practice of our phoenix hall, it has not significantly altered this system’s premises. The Venerable Mother has been incorporated on the phoenix hall’s terms and has become a phoenix hall deity, albeit one with certain special characteristics in comparison to the other members of the Mingzheng Tang’s pantheon.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The initial cognitive interest guiding this study was to investigate the religious context in which morality books are produced. How are they produced? Why? What do morality books mean to those who assist in their writing? To those who pay for their printing? To those who read them? To the religious groups who make the dissemination of these texts their main concern? The in-depth study of a modern Taiwanese spirit-writing cult has answered these questions; in addition, it has resulted in a detailed portrait of a type of religious organization whose distinctiveness in terms of doctrine, rituals, and historical lineage had previously not been well understood. I would like to briefly summarize these findings, addressing first the issues concerning morality books and then the particular place of phoenix halls on the Taiwanese religious landscape.

The writing of morality books by means of fuluan is the central ritual activity of the Mingzheng Tang; it is what defines it as a phoenix hall (luantang). These books fulfill an external and an internal function. Externally they are directed towards society, preaching the need for moral reform in order to cure the ills of the present age which is believed to be in a process of moral decay, caused by the social and cultural effects of modernization. The production and dissemination of shanshu is the key expression of the Mingzheng Tang's mission to "proclaim transformation on behalf of Heaven" (daitian xuanhua). Internally these spirit-written morality books are to aid the cult membership in their personal cultivation. Cultivation for a phoenix disciple consists primarily in a process of moral purification. Human nature is seen as heaven-endowed and therefore
originally good; the purity of this original goodness, however, is sullied by the various impure emotions and desires attaching themselves to it when it is caught in a human body within the world of forms. Cultivation is the process of stripping away these impure accretions to one's original nature which have accumulated over many existences. Once they have been removed, the original nature will shine forth in its proper brilliance; freed from all worldly bonds, the original or "numinous" nature will then ascend to a higher level of existence beyond the world of forms and of birth and death, ultimately to be reunited with the Dao from which it first sprang forth. The particular method advocated by phoenix hall for achieving this objective is the cultivation of moral goodness in one's daily life. The first function of morality books is to point out this need and to define what constitutes moral goodness for the benefit of the multitudes trapped within worldly confusion. Within the phoenix hall, they function as the gods' "textbooks" in their instruction of their disciples. A phoenix hall is frequently compared to a school where the gods are the teachers and the phoenix disciples the students; the descent of a deity in a spirit-writing séance is thus like a lecture given to the assembled congregation, and the resulting morality books are collections of such lectures to be used by the disciples for review and more in-depth study. This, however, is not the only way that morality books assist the phoenix disciple in his or her moral cultivation. They also figure prominently in the cultivational practices revolving around the concept of "merit". Merit is a key term in the Mingzheng Tang's model of cultivation. Merit and demerit are quantifiable results of moral and immoral actions, speech, and thoughts; their balance is carried as karma from one existence to the next. As teachers the Mingzheng Tang's gods do not merely guide and instruct their disciples in their moral cultivation, but also assess their relative
success in this endeavour, assigning merits and demerits for the student’s every advance and failure. Merit, however, is not just a kind of passive reward granted by the teacher for the student’s moral success, but as karma is an active force in itself counteracting the effects of demerits. Moral action creates merit, and merit in turn clears away the “karmic obstructions” (yezhang) clouding one’s numinous nature, thus facilitating further moral action. Here the writing and dissemination of morality books comes in as an opportunity for merit creation. As we have seen, morality books are the most highly valued means of accumulating merit because of their (postulated) broad impact all across society and the incalculable amount of “consecutive merit” they produce by their transformative effectiveness. Besides giving the disciples the direct moral instruction and guidance of the gods, the Mingzheng Tang’s morality books thus also act as virtually inexhaustible sources of merit which can be tapped by attending the book-writing séances and sponsoring the printing of these texts. While the Mingzheng Tang offers a number of other merit creating opportunities (such as the sponsoring of “bushels”, building projects, new god images, life releasing and dharma assemblies), morality books are without doubt its principal line of “merit products”. For their production and marketing the Hall maintains in the shape of the Phoenix Friend Magazine Association a specialized apparatus staffed with professional, full-time personnel. The existence of this institution makes a publishing programme possible that far exceeds the capabilities of traditional style village based phoenix halls. However, not only does it enable, it also necessitates a high level of productivity. With no local community to support it, the Mingzheng Tang depends entirely on donations given to it by its members and outside believers; a large part of this income comes from the money given for the printing of morality books and the
Phoenix Friend magazine. Without the continuous production of new shanshu to attract merit money the Magazine Society could not generate enough income to cover the considerable costs incurred by its publishing concern and by the activities of the Mingzheng Tang. Thus the high morality book output of new style phoenix halls such as the Mingzheng Tang is conditioned as much by economic as by religious factors. To the Western observer, accustomed to thinking in antagonistic terms about “God” and “Mammon”, this close intertwining of religious and economic concerns appears suspicious at first sight. However, viewed from a religious economy perspective such as that developed by Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, every religion’s primary function is “to create, maintain, and exchange supernaturally based general compensators”, a compensator being a substitute (such as a belief) for something not attainable in this life (such as immortality).¹ This describes very well what the Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy is engaged in. The compensator it sells is merit, which it creates through activities such as morality book printing, releasing living beings, charities etc., maintains through a belief system that correlates merit with supernatural rewards, and which it exchanges for money and good deeds. The merit sold by the Mingzheng Tang also possesses a quality that allows us to refine Stark’s and Bainbridge’s model. The latter posits the existence of two different kinds of compensators: general, truly religious, compensators which can be redeemed only in the afterlife, and specific, magical compensators which bring benefits in this life. While Stark and Bainbridge’s model interprets religious exchange as a kind of barter trade where you buy either one or the other of these two different products, the Mingzheng Tang has progressed into a “religious money economy”: merit is basically a

¹ Stark & Bainbridge 1985:172.
compensatorial currency which can be put to use for both "general" and "specific" purposes, i.e., for salvation in the afterlife and worldly blessings in this life. Phoenix disciples and other members of the Hall's core circle of adherents usually subscribe fully to the Hall's belief system and attend its ritual activities on a regular basis as part of a religious regimen that they expect will lead them to posthumous salvation. These core adherents invest their time and money in the creation of merit for both "general" and "specific" purposes. By contrast, individuals from the outer two circles of the Mingzheng Tang's adherents are less committed to the Hall's programme of moral cultivation and use the merit-making opportunities offered by it principally for "specific" purposes, for example, to help them pass examinations, to heal diseases, to correct an inauspicious turn of destiny, or to free ancestors from purgatory. To them, the Mingzheng Tang is one provider of ritual services among many on the Taiwanese religious marketplace. It differentiates itself from its competitors by its particular method of solving its clients' problems, namely, letting them create merit for themselves through the sponsoring of the cult's books. Of course, the Mingzheng Tang also offers other problem-solving methods, such as the use of the planchette as an oracle for practical purposes (jishi), for numinous healing (lingliao), or for the writing of charms. These, however, are not unique to the Mingzheng Tang; similar services are offered by fortune-tellers, Daoist practitioners, and tang-ki. For the Mingzheng Tang, these services are clearly of secondary importance, as ultimately, they draw their legitimacy from the Hall's reputation for being closely connected with the heavenly authorities and thus able and authorized to mediate between it and the human petitioner. This reputation, in turn, is based on its ability to write and disseminate shanshu, each of which has to be specifically mandated by Heaven and is thus proof of
the continued high esteem in which Heaven holds the Hall. In sum, the Hall’s morality books are central to its self-definition as a phoenix hall, to its reputation as a mediator of numinous power, to its divinely guided and supervised programme of moral cultivation, and to its economic viability as a voluntary religious association lacking the support of a territorially based community.

Beyond its specific concern with the ritual context of morality book writing, publishing, and sponsoring as exemplified by the Mingzheng Tang, the present study has also afforded an opportunity to investigate phoenix halls in general as a distinct religious tradition on the island of Taiwan. It has been shown that this tradition has its roots in a nineteenth century revitalist spirit-writing movement on the Chinese mainland that carried over to Taiwan in the late 1800’s. These early cults were founded and run by members of the local elite concerned about the moral, social and political decay of the society they lived in. Following the injunction of the Book of Changes, they tried to “establish the teaching by the way of the gods” (yi shendao she jiao 以神道設教). Not surprisingly, the gods’ teachings turned out to be very sympathetic to the convictions of the Confucian-educated class of lower degree-holders that controlled the late nineteenth century Taiwanese phoenix halls. Their revelations reaffirmed a conservative view of the proper social order defined by the Confucian “teaching of names” (mingjiao 名教); their gods were the orthodox, moral, office-holding deities approved or at least not opposed by the state-cult of the late Qing dynasty; their rituals were assembled from liturgical elements culled from the rites performed in Confucian temples, academies, and official public lecturing ceremonies. From the beginning, however, high-minded zeal for the moral reformation of a
crumbling social order was only one factor in the rapid spread of phoenix halls all over the Taiwan. More practical applications of the planchette as an oracle and for healing purposes also figured prominently in the early gentry-dominated cults. This function found its most high profile application in the anti-opium movement of the early Japanese period when phoenix halls offered divine assistance to addicts wishing to break the opium habit. This more practical usefulness of the planchette brought phoenix halls large numbers of supporters with less of a vested interest in the Confucian morality and social teachings propounded by their gods. Together with the decline of the gentry during the Japanese period, this led to a gradual shift of control in these cults to local merchants. By the post-war period this transition had been completed and a meeting of the board directors of a post-1945 phoenix hall such as the Hui-de Gong in Caotun could easily be confused for a session of the local Chamber of Commerce. With the shift in the social basis of phoenix halls came a greater doctrinal openness and diversity. A particularly strong influence on post-war phoenix halls was exerted by sectarian societies crossing over from the mainland. Many of these, such as the Yiguan Dao, the Tongshan She, and the Daoyuan, used the planchette in their ritual proceedings and thus shared an important characteristic with the local phoenix halls. These sects also had their roots in the nineteenth century spirit-writing movement, but were products of that part of the movement that fused conservative revivalist spirit-writing with the sectarian concerns of the Xiantian Dao tradition. Thus, they brought with them a body of doctrines and liturgies quite different from that of their Taiwanese phoenix hall cousins. The reactions of the latter to the newcomers, in particular to the Yiguan Dao as the most successful among them, varied. Some phoenix halls were converted lock, stock, and barrel to Yiguan Dao Buddha halls. Some
selectively adopted themes from the new sects and integrated them with the Taiwanese phoenix hall heritage; the Cihui Tang network of spirit-writing cults is the product of such a fusion. Most phoenix halls, however, took a cautious attitude towards the planchette-using maternist sects. As we have seen, in the early 1970's the Shengxian Tang tried actively to develop a doctrinal framework capable of competing with the Yiguan Dao. On a higher level, attempts to standardize and unify phoenix hall belief and practice were made in two abortive efforts to establish an island-wide association of spirit-writing cults. In its weak position after its secession from the Shengxian Tang, the Mingzheng Tang eventually came to develop a more accommodating attitude. It first entered into a formal alliance with the self-consciously Confucian Yellow Thearch Religion, before it reoriented itself in the late 1970's and began to incorporate Venerable Mother mythology and soteriology. Throughout all of these changes, however, it preserved its basic character as a phoenix hall, characterized by an emphasis on gradual moral cultivation by means of merit accumulation, the establishment of a teacher-disciple relationship between gods and humans, a strong emphasis on the production and dissemination of spirit-written morality books, and a Confucian inspired liturgical framework.

Finally, a word on the Mingzheng Tang as a "new style phoenix hall". As we have seen, these halls started to appear in the late 1960's and early 1970's with the Shengxian Tang as one of the pioneers. Their religious agenda differed from that of traditional local-based phoenix halls in that they paid much more attention to doctrinal and mythological development than the latter. A chief cause for this development was the different audience targeted by the new halls. They did not have territorial catchment areas from which
they could draw their resources and support, but catered to the spiritual needs of a largely urban based audience. To this audience a new style phoenix hall such as the Shengxian Tang offered a highly synthetic belief system that reworked, organized and systematized key elements of popular religious practice and belief and fused them with a simplified version of the “Great Tradition” summarized under the title “Way of Heaven” (*tiandaow*. The Mingzheng Tang continued this effort which probably found its clearest expression so far in the system constructed by the *Tiandaot*. It integrates China’s Great and Little Traditions into a coherent whole that offers a viable religious system to the traditional-minded city-dweller. With this contribution, new style phoenix halls have carved out for themselves a niche in the rapidly modernizing and urbanizing society of Taiwan. Their ready access to divine authority by means of the planchette gives them a considerable flexibility in the adaptation of their doctrines to the needs of this society. Some of this flexibility we have seen exercised in the Mingzheng Tang’s development which was characterized by a number of shifts in doctrine and practice, each of which was legitimized by revelation through the planchette. This control of an ongoing adaptive process of revelation will likely guarantee the Mingzheng Tang and other new style phoenix halls a secure place on the Taiwanese religious landscape for the foreseeable future.

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2 I have developed this argument more fully in a recent article. See Clart 1995/96.
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APPENDIX 1: TRANSLATION OF THE MYSTERIOUS MEANING OF THE HEAVENLY WAY (TIANDAO AOYI 天道奥義)

The Tiandao aoyi is one of the best known and most highly regarded books of the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang. It was supposedly written by the Venerable Mother of the Limitless herself (through the mediumship of the Mingzheng Tang’s chairman, Moxianzi) from 19 February 1981 to 9 January 1982 and has frequently been reprinted since, both by the Mingzheng Tang and by other religious groups. It enjoys a certain popularity in Yiguan Dao circles and copies can be found on the bookshelves of many of the sect’s “Buddha halls”, inside and outside of Taiwan. The main body of the work consists of twenty-four chapters, framed by the Venerable Mother’s and the Jade Emperor’s decrees authorizing its writing, a list of punishments and rewards to be applied to specified kinds of good and bad conduct during its writing, a preface by the Venerable Mother, and a postface by the medium Moxianzi. It is an ambitious attempt to reformulate a view of the cosmos and of humanity’s role in it based on the canonical works of China’s classical philosophy. Scattered throughout the Tiandao aoyi we find quotes from and references to the Classic of the Way and Its Virtue, the Doctrine of the Mean, the Book of Changes, the Book of Documents, the Analects, the Zhuangzi, the Mencius, the Great Learning, the Spring and Autumn Annals of Mr. Lü, and the Huainanzi.¹

Each chapter was written in one séance. On each occasion the Mother’s arrival was heralded by the commander of her bodyguard, Yue Wumu Wang, commanding all present to receive her with reverence. The Mother then

¹ For an analysis of the Tiandao aoyi see Zheng Zhiming 1984a.
used to give a short greeting to all assembled humans and deities and proceeded to write the chapter of the day. I have omitted these introductory passages from my translation, as well as the prefaces and similar supplementary materials in the book, so as not to detract from the line of philosophical reasoning developed in the main body of the work. Another point to be made about the following translation is that it aims to stay as close as possible to the Chinese original; I hope that the resulting gains in exactitude may make up for the unavoidable losses in literary elegance.

TIANDAO AOYI 天道奥義

The Mysterious Meaning of the Heavenly Way

CHAPTER 1: Heaven

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: When [primordial] chaos was first opened, light and clear matter-energy floated upwards to form Heaven. The sun, moon and stars were arrayed in its space and there was nothing that was not covered and not contained by Heaven. Therefore, Heaven is also called the Great Circle 大圈. The planet Earth is one of the stars. When humans view Heaven from Earth, what they see is what is enveloped by the body of Heaven, viz. the natural sky. Heaven is the abode of the gods and immortals, and this is why we speak of the “Heavenly Halls 天堂” or the “Heavenly Kingdom 天國”. The refined essence of Heaven congealed to form the sun, the moon, and stars. As soon as [these] objects were completed, they assumed their functions.
Heaven has thirteen layers. These thirteen layers are further subdivided into thirty-six Heavens. The Heaven outside [these] Heavens is called "the Limitless 無極". The Heaven within [these] Heavens is called the "Great Ultimate 太極". Thus the "Limitless" gave birth to the "Great Ultimate", the "Great Ultimate" gave birth to the Two Patterns 兩儀 [of yin and yang]. The Two Patterns gave birth to the "Four Images 四象". Therefore it is Heaven that can give birth to all things and also can nurture all things.

That what is outside the Six Directions 六合 is called the "Limitless". The Six Directions are Above, Below, East, South, West, and North, i.e., Heaven, Earth, and the four points of the compass. The "Great Ultimate" is the state before Heaven and Earth were divided, when primordial matter-energy was undifferentiated and united; [therefore it is also called] the Great Beginning 太初 and the Great Oneness 太一. The Two Patterns are [the same as] Earth and Heaven. The "Four Images" is another term for [the phases] Metal, Wood, Water, and Fire. Metal, Wood, Water, and Fire owe their existence to Heaven and Earth.

Heaven is divided into Eastern, Western, Southern, Northern, and Central Heaven. All are located within the thirteen-layered Heaven. Although each has [its own] heavenly gate, it is only through opening the gate of Southern Heaven that a road connects directly with the profane world. The sages, Buddhas, immortals, and gods all come and go through [this] gate of Southern Heaven. The remaining three great gates of Eastern, Western, and Northern Heaven are all kept closed and do not come in contact with the profane world. Therefore the Three Pure Ones 三清 and the Five Venerable Ones 五老, the Golden Immortals of the Great Monad 太乙金仙, and the Ancient Golden Immortals 古老金仙 whose spirit transcends the Six

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Directions and who gather matter-energy in the Three Realms [of Heaven, Earth, and Man] all roam freely in the domain of Heaven. Generally, these heavenly spirits are succinctly referred to as “Heaven”, as in the sayings “August Heaven and Royal Earth 皇天后土” or “Heaven knows and Earth knows 天知地知”. Since Heaven [also] has the meaning of “nature”, we have terms like “Heaven-like 天然”, “mandate of Heaven 天命”, “heavenly nature 天性”, and “the mind of Heaven 天心”.

The spirits of humans have all descended from Heaven and been born into the profane world. Therefore, after death, they should return to Heaven which is their home. But alas! having been born into the world of many colours, most humans are led astray by fame, profit, alcohol, debauchery, wealth, and temper. They are even more urged on by greed and desires and there is no evil they do not commit. Willingly they fall into the sea of suffering and are unable to pull themselves out. Eventually they forget that Heaven is the home they [should] return to, and fall down into purgatory. This is not due to any lack of benevolence in the mind of Heaven; rather, the people of the world willingly bring about their own downfall. This is best summed up in the saying: “Those who comply with Heaven flourish, those who offend against Heaven perish (順天者昌，逆天者亡也).”

The “Mysterious Arch” 玄穹 and the “Azure One” 彼蒼 are terms for High Heaven. Thus it is Heaven that rules the universe and all things, who transforms and nurtures all living beings, giving birth ceaselessly. [Therefore] it is said: “The movements of Heaven are constant and regular, [and the

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4 Emendating zhi 知 (to know) for he 和 (harmony). This refers to a well known story about the Han scholar Yang Zhen 杨震: on being offered a bribe with the assurance that nobody will know, he is said to have refused with the words: “Heaven knows, earth knows, I know, you know -- how can you say that nobody knows?” See Yang Zhen’s biography in the History of the Later Han-Dynasty (Houhan shu 後漢書).
noble person] continuously draws strength from them (天行健，自强不息).

Heaven is wonderful and mysterious and cannot be understood. It has the greatest power. Heaven is just, pure, and supremely good. Everything takes Heaven as its model.

CHAPTER 2: The Way

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: In the beginning of time, before Heaven and Earth existed, everywhere was Great Emptiness 太虚. Great Emptiness means that it was empty without any material objects. In this emptiness and non-being, from chaos a seed was born. This seed was like a powerful force, yet it had no form and no firm body. Neither had it sound or smell, yet it existed eternally. Vast and unilluminated, not dividing day and night, it flowed in the universe without the least hindrance. This [seed] is the Venerable Mother who created Heaven, Earth, and all things. Therefore it is called: “The Way”.

As the Way has no form and no substance, it is indistinct [and difficult to perceive]. It seems as if there was an image inside; it also seems as if there was an object. It also seems that there is an essence. Its essence is completely perfected, at its centre lies trustworthiness. From of old until today, by means of this [essence] one can perceive how all things are transformed and being born relying on it. The Way is silent and still, not hot, and not cold. Heaven cannot cover it with its canopy, Earth cannot contain it. Looking at its smallness, one says that it has nothing inside it; looking at its greatness, one

5 Quote from the Book of Changes, Qian hexagram.
says that it has nothing outside it.\textsuperscript{6} It fills [everything] within the Four Seas, but also contains [everything] outside. In coldness it is not cold; in heat it is not hot. These are [the qualities of] the substance of the Way.

The Way gives produces One, One produces Two, Two produce Three, Three produce all things. From there on they develop ever further; kinds and categories [become] manifold. This Way was born before Heaven and Earth, yet it does not become old; it is older than the highest antiquity, yet it does not age. In all eternity it does not change its substance. It is able to suitably employ all things. When birds attain it, they are able to fly. When fish attain it, they are able to swim. When beasts attain it, they are able to walk. If humans attain it, they can be born and live. It gives life to all things and brings all matters to completion. Humans all use it, yet they cannot see its form. Therefore the Way is one. Transmitting it to later generations, Laozi said "Embracing the primordial, preserving the one". Confucius says "My way is bound together by the One".\textsuperscript{7} Therefore all things arise from the One.

Thus, the Way is so high that we cannot observe it; it is so deep that we cannot measure it. Even though the Way is very clearly manifested, we have no way to describe it [in a] name. Looking at it, it is very broad and big, but we have no means of describing its broadness. The Way is independent and immutable. The ten-thousand things cannot employ it as a servant. Heaven and Earth, \textit{yin} and \textit{yang}, the four seasons, the sun and moon, stars and cloud ether, birds and beasts, all living beings take their life from it without it being diminished [thereby]. [Conversely], if everything was united with it, it would

\textsuperscript{6} A quote from the \textit{Lù shì chúnqiu} (chapter Xiaxian).

\textsuperscript{7} A passage from the \textit{Analects} (book IV) often quoted by sectarians. The Yiguan Dao actually derives its very name from it and the interpretation given to the passage in the present context is rather similar to that found in Yiguan Dao writings, namely, that Confucius is here referring to the mysterious oneness or unity characterizing the Dao. My translation reflects the passage's interpretation as intended by the author of the \textit{Tiandao aoyi}. This is not necessarily the same as that intended by the author of the \textit{Analects}. 

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not increase. This is the secret mystery of the Way, and its brilliance and
greatness.

The understanding of the Way [is given to] intelligent and wise
humans who can investigate right into the deepest places of the universe,
who know things ordinary people do not know. What other people cannot
attain, the intelligent cultivator of the Way can attain. This is what is meant
by the phrase “investigating [and thereby] knowing the Ultimate 察審知極”.
“Investigating 察審” means going through the disorderly and complicated
phenomena and investigating right or wrong, crooked or straight. “Knowing
the Ultimate 知極” means going through the deep places of the universe and
understanding many principles. If the head of a state uses the principle of
“investigating and knowing the ultimate”, then the nation will submit. If
those in government use this way, then the people will not be confused and
be obedient. When those above are humble and those below are calm and
sincere, then the “Way” attains its [proper] straightness. If one is humble,
then there is no self. If one is calm, then there are no material things [one
desires]. If there is no self, there is no selfishness. If there are no material
things, there are no passions. Only then can one progress on the Way.
Trustworthiness is sincerity; if one is sincere, there are no desires. If those
above can thus establish themselves on the Way, they can determine the
people’s fate, i.e., institute a teaching for the people [to follow]. Being without
contending is non-interference. If non-interference is sincerely employed by
the those in high positions, then everything and everybody will sense their
sincerity and respond to it. If non-interference is what those in the highest
places steadfastly maintain, the realm where “Heaven and Humanity become
one 天人合一” can be reached.

Therefore the “Way” is the principle, the path, and the road. Those in
government should give everyone of the people that which they deserve according to their status. If natural justice reigns, the people will not argue. If when giving, [things] are given to those who according to their status should receive them, then everything will be peaceful and settled by itself. This is the first principle of the Way. The orbits of the moon and stars in the sky, the revolutions the Earth, all have their fixed paths from which they never diverge. In the world, airplanes also have their fixed air corridors through which they travel; the ships on the oceans also have their fixed sea routes. When driving a car, one has to drive on the right side according to traffic rules. If not, i.e., if one drives in the wrong lane, it will be dangerous and an accident may occur. Pedestrians also have to keep to the sidewalk; if they do not, it will be dangerous and accidents may occur. Therefore acting in accordance with the Way is safe, acting against the Way is dangerous. These are the practical implications of the "Way".

The Way is one and eternally immutable. To attain the fundamental substance of the Way, one has to start out from the few to understand the many. To attain the wonderful aspect of things, one has to exercise uprightness so as to correct the irregular. Then in the past one can know [everything] up to highest antiquity, in the future [everything] without limit. All who cultivate the Way have to embrace the Way, i.e., its fundamental substance, and keep the laws of the Way, i.e., its methods. If this is done, the world can return to oneness.

The "Way" is the most profound and mysterious aspect of all things. Good people regard it as a precious treasure, admiring it with all their heart, only fearing they might lose it, not daring to leave it even for a short moment, because what can be left is not the [true] Way.\textsuperscript{8} People who are not

\textsuperscript{8} A quote from the \textit{Doctrine of the Mean}, chapter 1.
good, though they do not yet understand the principle of the Way, can still make peace for themselves and determine their fate, if they can act in accordance with the Way. For this reason the "Way" is the most precious thing in the world. Therefore those who respect the Way can attain it, if they seek it with a steadfast mind; if those who have offended against the Way [turn back and] seek it, they also can avoid punishment.

CHAPTER 3: The Tradition of the Way

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: The Way of Heaven means the Principle of Heaven. When the Way of Heaven was about to be transmitted in the world, High Heaven first sent down and gave birth to the Yellow Emperor, the sagely ruler Xuanyuan 黃帝. The Yellow Emperor battled Yuwang and vanquished the wizard Chiyou. He unified the empire and founded the Middle Kingdom. During a life of more than 300 years he cultivated the Way of Heaven for more than 100 years and attained the Way; at Dinghu he mounted a dragon and ascended to Heaven in broad daylight.

The Yellow Emperor passed the throne and the tradition of the Way on to his sagely grandson Zhuanxu. Instructing him, he said: "The Great Circle is above, the Great Square below. If you can emulate them, you will be father and mother to the people." The Great Circle is Heaven, the Great Square Earth. If one emulates Heaven and Earth, one can put the people in order.

If we trace back the Tradition of the Way, we find that it always has had

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9Lü shih chunqiu, "Xuyi".
its [legitimate] source. Ever since the Yellow Emperor Xuanyuan attained the Celestial Way and ascended to Heaven, the Tradition of the Way was continually passed on down to the Emperor Yao, who passed it on to the Emperor Shun. Shun passed it on to the Emperor Yu. Yu passed it on to King Tang. King Tang passed it on to King Wen. King Wen passed it on to the Duke of Zhou. The Duke of Zhou passed it on to Laozi. Laozi passed it on to Confucius. Confucius passed it on to Zengzi. Zengzi passed it on to Zisi. Zisi passed it on to Mencius. From Mencius onwards it was continually passed on in one line until today. In the period from the Yellow Emperor to Emperor Yao the true explication of the mind-method of the Heavenly Way was [formulated in] the four-character phrase: “Sincerely holding fast the mean”. From Emperor Shun onwards the true explication of the mind-method of the Heavenly Way was [formulated in] the sixteen-character phrase: “The mind of man is restless,—prone to err; its affinity for the right way is small. Be discriminating, be undivided, that you may sincerely hold fast the Mean”. Therefore, later generations called this sixteen-character phrase the “sixteen-character true explication of the mind-method of the Heavenly Way”. Thus China’s traditional culture continues the tradition of the Heavenly Way.

The “Way” flows and moves; all changes and transformations of the universe are expressions of the “Way”. The fundamental substance of the “Way” cannot be seen, heard, or touched, yet it was born before Heaven and is the ruler of everything. Because the Way is supreme and omnipotent, humans should aspire to it.

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11 Ibid.
The tradition of the Heavenly Way was sent down from the Limitless and transmitted to the world. Also, Heaven gave birth to sages in order to expand the Way. [These sages] were sent down and born in response to the cosmic movement. At the time when the tradition of the Way was passed on from the Yellow Emperor Xuanyuan to Yao, Shun, and Yu, human nature was fundamentally good, the Way was carried out naturally, and order was achieved by non-interference. By the time of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, humanity did not know [any more] a firm virtuous nature; it had lost its original face. As a result the tradition of the Way had become corrupted and human minds were not the same as of old. Sages appeared one after the other to spread the Way, revealing the true principle of the Heavenly Way to transform humans, pointing out the location of the true self and the method of regaining it by harmonious cultivation, but alas! [all to no avail]. In the chaotic Spring-and Autumn period, when the feudal lords were fighting each other, and human minds gradually slipped away into [ever greater] wickedness, there was Confucius travelling through the feudatory states, promoting the human way; [later there was] Mencius advocating and acting out benevolence and righteousness. These were sages sent down into the world by High Heaven on a mission to spread the Way and transform humans.

The tradition of the Heavenly Way has been transmitted to the present day; now the Way has fallen to the Phoenix School which uses the teaching of the gods to transform humans. By means of the flying phoenix they awaken the human mind and direct it toward goodness. Alas that the intelligence of humanity should pursue a civilization of science, discarding the true principle of the Heavenly Way and not cultivating it, acting in a deceitful and wicked manner, indulging in perversity, and thus bringing about the
downfall of the way of the world, the perversion of human minds, the frequent occurrence of great disasters, and great suffering among the people. High Heaven, having examined this situation, widely opened the gate of general salvation to save [humans] from these great disasters. Sages, Buddhas, immortals, and deities incessantly descended to propound the teaching, admonish the world, and deliver the multitudes. If only one is willing to cultivate the Way, with a humble heart advancing in deep earnestness, one can by oneself attain the mystery of the Heavenly Way. [If one employs] loyalty, forgiveness, and perfect benevolence, one can become a sage or an immortal. Therefore [the saying goes]: “What is decreed by Heaven is called human nature. Following one’s nature is called the Way. Cultivating the Way is called the teaching 天命之謂性，率性之謂道，修道之謂教.”

Thus, the “Way” is in one’s mind; a single good thought is the heavenly halls, a single evil thought is purgatory.

CHAPTER 4: Innate Knowledge and Innate Ability

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: The Heavenly Way is the highest source. “Innate knowledge of the good and innate ability to do good (良知、良能)” are products of the Way. When the Way moved, it produced qian 乾 and kun 坤, i.e., pure yang and pure yin. Innate knowledge shares in the nature of qian, innate ability shares in the nature of kun. Innate knowledge is still, innate ability is moving. Therefore those who want to cultivate the Way of Heaven, must first cultivate innate knowledge and innate ability.

Innate knowledge: it is still like standing water; its brilliance can illumine things. Only when it is affected by "matter-energy", like the blowing of the wind or the movement of water, it gradually arrives at a confused and turbid condition. Innate knowledge is still without movement; when it is affected, it penetrates the phenomena of the world. But innate knowledge is not [like] dry wood and cold ashes; in its stillness there is also movement, but even though it moves, it seems as if it did not move. Thus it is said that "non-interference 無為" is the movement in the middle of stillness, while "nothing is left undone 無不為" refers to the stillness in the middle of movement.

Innate ability: Innate ability moves in many ways. When it has not yet been affected from the outside, its movements are straight and correct, and innate knowledge rises up together with it. The light emanating from the subtle movements of innate ability does not shine far; its moving power is small. Great movement is the great manifestation of innate ability. They who cultivate the Heavenly Way to this stage indeed are profoundly wise and not of this world. They are heroes who can move Heaven and earth, ghosts and deities.

Innate knowledge belongs to "form 相", innate ability to "function 用". The highest development of knowledge and ability in cultivating the Heavenly Way lies in their application. Because their application and their nature are not identical, their development may also be different. The outer manifestation of innate knowledge is spiritual insight, also called clear perception. Because there is nothing it does not illumine, by means of it one can differentiate good and evil. Therefore innate knowledge is form. As function, innate ability's scope is extremely broad. Doing good and expelling evil belong to innate ability. Every time one meets with doubt or distress, it
seems that there is something wriggling in the mind; this is innate ability. If it is used towards parents, it is filial piety. If it is used towards one’s country, it is loyalty. If it is used towards friends, it is trustworthiness. There is no area where it cannot be used. To establish Humanity between Heaven and Earth is the function of innate ability.

The basic quality of innate knowledge is “recognition 識”, the basic quality of innate ability is “force 力”. The knowledge spoken of in Posterior Heaven, as in “knowledge and action”, is merely knowing, a “knowledge” obtained through the sense organs. The “knowledge” in innate knowledge can be termed “recognition”. This refers to the inner penetration of the root aperture, which is no longer bonded to the material sphere. This “inner understanding of the root aperture 根窩內通” is the same as innate knowledge. To break the five sense organs and return to the mysterious sameness 玄同, this depends on innate knowledge.

The basic quality of movement is force. Innate ability is similar to dynamism, its force is very great. This kind of dynamism fills the universe; it is the moving force of all activity in the universe. For example, the nine planets surely rely on centrifugal and centripetal forces in their revolutions around the sun. But why are there centrifugal and centripetal forces? Within each, of course, there is a moving force, and this force is innate ability. Vast correct matter-energy is a manifestation of innate ability.

Innate ability precedes innate knowledge. First there must be the movement of innate ability, and then innate knowledge can manifest itself. The manifestation of innate knowledge is stimulated by innate ability. All birth and growing in the universe are [due to] innate ability. Innate knowledge and innate ability are both important. If one only knows innate knowledge without innate ability, it is like losing a wheel off a two-wheeled
vehicle: one cannot go far that way. Innate knowledge is differentiating good and evil; innate ability is doing good and shunning evil. Differentiating good and evil depends on insight 明, doing good and doing away with evil depends on rectification 格. Thus the effort of knowledge and ability depends on insight and rectification. Only if there is innate ability, one can succeed; and in success innate ability is contained. Innate ability is [thus] more important than innate knowledge.

Innate ability is everywhere. All animals, plants, and minerals contain this capacity. Without innate ability they could not have come into being. It is through their possession of innate ability that things have come into being. Innate knowledge is a kind of clear perception that arises when perchance one encounters a problem. Clear perception originally is temporary in nature. For example, when one sees one's parents, one knows filial piety. Filial piety is innate knowledge, but the practice of filial piety is innate ability. Without innate knowledge, one cannot fulfill filial piety. Originally, knowledge and ability are not separated. But there are some people in whom innate knowledge suddenly appears; they know that they [should] be filial and respectful to their parents. But if ultimately they are not filial and respectful to their parents, because their innate ability is not sufficient, then it is not filiality at all.

Human nature 性 is innate knowledge. Life endowment 命 is innate ability. [From the phrase] “What Heaven endows is called human nature 天命之謂性” [we can see that] life endowment is more important than human nature, and also that “ability” is more important than “knowledge”. One good thought lets one manifest one's nature; one good deed lets one manifest one's life endowment. “Nature and life force” [thus] are [the same as] “innate knowledge and innate ability”. Innate knowledge and innate ability together
issue forth from the Way of Heaven. In their original state the 10,000
differentiations are returned to one root. [When they attain] their knowledge,
the one root scatters into 10,000 differentiations, which eventually all return
to the one. Innate knowledge and innate ability cannot be seen, they are
present subconsciously. Innate knowledge and innate ability are the outward
expression of the Way. The Way cannot be seen, but its outward expression
are innate knowledge and innate ability.

They who cultivate the Way of Heaven have to call up innate ability.
Cultivating innate knowledge starts from lessening selfish desires. When
there are no selfish desires, innate knowledge will appear by itself. Innate
ability of course also has to avoid selfish desires, but innate ability cannot be
approached merely by lessening selfishness and reducing desires. Innate
ability is that which is there originally; speaking of it, it comes. Innate
knowledge is still, innate ability is moving. For humans to be able to brave
dangers and to withstand difficulties, to face perils and to accept fate, they of
course have to rely on the clear differentiations of innate knowledge, but
really it is through the stimulation of innate ability that they accomplish it.
Thus, we must bring about innate knowledge, and we even more have to
raise innate ability. Innate ability is the living quality which lets the universe
exist. If humans can call up innate ability, they can go straight ahead without
hindrance. Why should they worry that they cannot cultivate the Way of
Heaven to completion?

Thus, "when Heaven is about to confer a great office on any man, it
first exercises his mind with suffering, and his sinews and bones with toil. It
exposes his body to hunger, and confounds his undertakings. It stimulates his
mind, hardens his nature, and supplies his incompetencies."\(^{13}\) In this way

\(^{13}\) A truncated quote from the *Mengzi*. My translation follows that of Legge [1982, vol.2:447].
High Heaven encourages the opening up of innate knowledge and innate ability. The rise of innate ability is an expression of intention and will. Therefore disciples of the Heavenly Way must establish their will, only then will innate ability arise.

CHAPTER 5: The Way and Humanity

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: The Way was born before Heaven and Earth; it is ineffable and omnipresent. As Humanity was born from the Way, [it is said that] “the Way gave birth to it and Virtue reared it (道生之，德育之)”\(^{14}\). Everything was born from the Way. Because Humanity was born from the Way, it possesses the roots of the Way.

Humanity comes from Heaven and can return to Heaven. Where one comes from, one can by oneself return to. If one wants to return to the place of origin, one must cultivate the Way of Heaven. The Way of Heaven is a bridge between Heaven and Humanity. Humanity and the Way are of the same substance. The Way is good and therefore human nature is good. Humanity and the Way possess the same capabilities. What the Way can do, Humanity can also do. Due to these three identities, humans can unite and become one with the Way. When they have united and become one, there is virtually no distance between the Way and Humanity. Therefore it is said: The path may not be left for an instant. If it could be left, it would not be the path (道也者，不可須臾離也，離者非道也。).\(^{15}\)

Between the Way and Humanity there is a boundary sphere. This


\(^{15}\) A quote from the \textit{Doctrine of the Mean}. My translation follows that of Legge [1982, vol.2:384].

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sphere is another sort of life. For example: Between Heaven and Earth there naturally exists a boundary, the sage is different from the ordinary person, the good person is different from the bad person; their lives are different, so their conditions are also different. Therefore, the disciple of the Heavenly Way cultivates the boundary between the Way and Humanity. When he has cultivated to the point that there is no boundary anymore, he has attained and perfected the Way.

Spheres can be roughly divided into form-possessing and formless ones. Form and formlessness alternate in a sort of undulating movement, that is they are contradictory. The contradiction humans see while situated within contradiction naturally is not the true sphere. The true sphere is Great Self-So-Ness. Great Self-So-Ness is where nothing is not so, which is [the same as] the mysterious sameness.16 They who have achieved it cannot either be drawn into friendship or repelled, cannot be benefited, cannot be harmed, cannot either be raised or humbled.17 Friendship, alienation, benefits, harm, nobility and lowliness -- they have no existence whatsoever. In the end all things are made equal in mysterious sameness.18

[The product] of harmoniously blended matter-energy is Humanity. Humanity possesses the nature of Heaven and Earth. The Way is the honoured one in the spiritual realm, Humanity is the greatest in the material realm. The Way dwells in the highest sphere, Humanity dwells in the material sphere. Humanity cannot avoid disturbance by material things and is influenced by them. Material things include clothes, food, accommodation,

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16 Xuantong, a term used in the Laozi for the mystical state of non-differentiation reached by the adept of the Dao (cf. chapter 56). Alternative translations of the term are, among others, "mysterious levelling" (Waley 1958:210) and "l'Identité mystérieuse" (Houang & Leyris 1979:131).
17 From the Laozi, chapter 56 (translation by Waley 1958:210).
18 Here the "equalization of things" (qiwu 等物), a term from the Zhuangzi (chapter 2) is equated with the Laozi term xuantong.
behaviour, education, music etc. These [facts of] life all influence one’s physiology and by themselves may produce many lusts and desires. The body is for Humanity a cage that locks its life up within this physical body. The body is an iron curtain. One can also say that it is a refuge for sin and wickedness. He who cultivates the Way therefore does not overly cherish this physical body. The so-called ascetic does not deliberately despise his body, but uses ascetic practice to lessen the lusts of the flesh.

Those who cultivate the Heavenly Way must not be enclosed by the phenomenal world. The phenomenal world is all illusory. Illusory means false. They also must not be confused by distant spheres; distant spheres are seductive and thus false. They are not enclosed by the phenomenal world and not seduced by distant spheres, but dwell in the transcendent sphere. They do not reckon future nor present. Contented and composed, allowing themselves to be natural, they can achieve the true sphere. The true sphere is an unchanging sphere; it also is the Way of Heaven.

Between the Way and Humanity there is originally no great distance. The Way is always with us, that is why we are not aware of it. Whenever a good thought arises, it is the Way. Whenever an evil thought arises, it is demonic [in nature]. Because good thoughts are difficult to generate and evil thoughts arise easily, there exists the saying “the way is a foot high, while the demon is ten feet of size (道高一尺，魔高一丈)”. Good thoughts are yang in nature; clear and light they rise upwards. Evil thoughts are yin in nature; turbid and heavy they sink downwards. That which rises upwards are the heavenly halls. That which sinks downwards is purgatory. Heaven and purgatory are contained within a turn of thought.

It is said that those who cultivate the Heavenly Way cultivate themselves to the point [where they achieve] immortality. This refers to the
spiritual nature, not to the body of flesh, because the body of flesh cannot be immortal. Even if it lives for 300 or 500 years, in the end it will still perish. Also, what happiness is there in immortality within this world? Only the eternal brilliance of the spiritual nature is happiness. Those being born and reborn do not live; those who are not born, live forever. That in the universe which is not born is eternal. Therefore the Way of immortality is being able to attain eternity.

If one wants to cultivate [oneself] to the point of union and oneness with the Way, one must cultivate entry into the sphere of transformations. Why are worldly people unable to be transformed? Because they are obstructed by selfishness and desires. Selfishness is directed towards the "self", desires towards "material things". Only when self and material things have been broken can one be transformed. How can we break self and material things? In emptiness there is no self; in stillness there are no material things. Only when one is empty, can one be still. Only when one is still, can one be empty. Emptiness and stillness are one. They are an important task for the disciple of the Heavenly Way.

If one wants to practise emptiness and stillness, there are several practical exercises to get started. First, one has to establish one's faith in the Heavenly Way; in this way one gains a point of rest and can unite one's spirit. Second, one sets up a daily schedule to be practised every day. It must include reading of sacred scriptures, prayer, reflection, and quietness. Third, one pledges to save and deliver people. By this one arouses one's inner innate knowledge and ability; if one applies oneself to this [programme] with unceasing diligence one will quite naturally advance in the Way. This is the key to the cultivation of the Heavenly Way. Even if they who cultivate the Heavenly Way only take their own immortalhood as their aim in
cultivation, they still must first save and deliver others. This is what is meant by [the concept of] “sageliness within and kingliness without 内圣外王". Certainly, when one can save others, one can then become an immortal. One does not need to dwell in deep seclusion in an old monastery and one does not have to have to hide in the mountain forests. One [only] has to know that “the Way is close by, yet [people] seek it in the distance (道在邇, 而求諸遠)".

In antiquity, those to whom the mind-method of cultivating the Way was transmitted were all emperors and kings, and those who cultivated the Way also were emperors and kings. He who binds together Heaven, Earth, and Humanity is called king. Therefore great virtue is a prerequisite for high position. “He who maintains the ultimate of Heaven and Earth, is on a par with Heaven and Earth (守天地之極，與天地俱見)”. “The ultimate of Heaven and Earth” means the highest true principle of the universe, “on a par with Heaven and Earth” means “ranking as one with Heaven and Earth 天地參”. Nowadays, the Heavenly Way has descended to the common people. If only one advances in deep earnestness with an empty mind, one can by one’s own powers achieve the mystery of the Heavenly Way. Everyone can cultivate it, everyone can attain it. The Heavenly Way is not partial, it helps all who are virtuous. Everyone who possesses virtue, can cultivate [the Way].

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19 This is based on a traditional interpretation of the character wang 王 (“king”): three horizontal lines, representing Heaven, Earth and Humanity, are linked by one central vertical line (cf. the quote from the Shuowen 説文 in Zhongwen Da Cidian 中文大辞典 21295).

20 The latter phrase refers to a passage in the Doctrine of the Mean where it is said of the person of utmost sincerity that “he may with Heaven and Earth form a ternion” [Legge 1982, vol. 1:416].
CHAPTER 6: Cultivating the Way of Heaven

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: The Heavenly Way is most precious; it has its fixed constant path and true principle. Like the moon revolving around the sun, like the orbits of the stars, everything has its fixed constant path which is unchanging. A secular example is the train which follows the rail track and cannot leave them. If it does, an accident occurs and people are harmed. Therefore, the Way is most precious and everybody must cultivate it.

A person's life in this world passes in the twinkling of an eye. There is much trouble and suffering in the world, and not until after death does one know where one comes from and where one should return to. Therefore, cultivating the Heavenly Way is cultivating the Way of freeing oneself. Freeing oneself from trouble, freeing oneself from life and death.

Worldly people all rush to the phenomenal [world]. They only care about the happiness that is before their eyes, but do not think of the problems after death. This is because they think that death is the end of human existence, like a lamp going out when its oil is used up. Thus they all seek the enjoyments of the flesh body. How very sad! Because of this they do not know the benefit of cultivating the Heavenly Way, [which is] that even though the human body dies, the ability and substance of the Way do not perish, and thus the person's death is not extinction. The universe consists in the vast flowing of the one Way; it never rests, but flows on in a torrent. Humans float and sink in this vast flow. They are subject to the cycle of karmic retribution, i.e., the changes and transformations of waxing and waning and of fullness and emptiness. For ever and ever they are unable to free themselves from this misery. This is [what is called] fatal calamity 災劫 . In
the recent past science has flourished, emphasizing materialism and disregarding the principle of the transformations of the universe. [Science] only investigates knowledge on the physical level and has no high and far thinking. Because of this, social customs are deteriorating day by day. Wars become more and more numerous, and ever more cruel. High Heaven has the virtue of loving living beings, how can it endure to send down calamities? Indeed, the great calamities are produced by humans themselves; in the final analysis they bring it upon themselves. This is very sad.

Ordinary people all like to pursue happiness. There are two kinds of happiness: one is spiritual happiness, the other is material happiness. Of the people of today, nobody knows the happiness of cultivating the Heavenly Way; they only know that they want to pursue material happiness, which is nothing else but [pleasant] sounds, debauchery, wealth, and possessions. “[Pleasant] sounds” mean music and songs pleasing to the ear. “Debauchery” means beautiful women. “Wealth” means money. “Possessions” mean jewels and precious goods. If music, sex, sights, wealth, and possessions are employed for good purposes, they are all right; if they are employed for evil purposes, they become the “four robbers”. Among [the forces] harming people’s numinous nature, none are worse than these. The desirous thoughts held by humans are not innate, but acquired. However, are rich people happy? Are powerful people happy? No, in their spirit they are extremely disturbed and restless, they suffer as if they were sitting on a carpet of needles. This due to the suffering caused by the four robbers of music, sex, wealth, and possessions which are created by money and power. These four robbers day and night without rest use all sorts of methods to harm your body. By themselves they produce vexation, grief, pain, and wrath; the result is death. Therefore, would you not like to escape
from the vast flow of suffering and distress? Would you not like to pursue happiness? Never falling into suffering, distress, grief, and pain? To achieve the above three important aims, you have to cultivate the Heavenly Way, because the Heavenly Way contains the mystery of not being reborn and not perishing. Those who cultivate the Way pursue this beneficial mystery. When they achieve it, they can escape from life, aging, disease, death and all other sorts of vexation and distress.

Cultivating the Way causes a person with one leap to rise out of this decrepit, withered, and ruined life, enduring hardships and encouraging himself, with enthusiasm advancing skilfully; [for this to come about] there must needs be some inner moving power. What is this moving power? It consists in:

1. Awakening 警醒: Human life is not endless. One does not know when one will have to leave this world. In the remaining time one has to prepare everything. It is like the wandering son returning home: he must settle many outside affairs [and think about] what he needs on the journey. Everything must be prepared, so that he will not be laughed at by relatives and friends on his return home.

2. Remorse 懺悔: Humans have all made mistakes. If only you repent, Heaven can forgive your sins. If you can repent, you can advance [on the Way]. If you cannot repent, it is [like] concealing the disease and avoiding the doctor: in the end a serious disease will break out which cannot be healed with drugs, and you will fall forever into purgatory.

3. Courage 魄力: Good and evil are opposed to each other. If you want to cultivate the Way, evil demons will definitely come. It is said: “The way is a foot high, while the demon is ten feet of size”. You have to have great courage and a fearless spirit, then you can break the shackles of the evil
demon, and open a great road of new life.

The Heavenly Way as such is non-interference, utmost sincerity, utmost goodness, the golden mean, and the limitless.

Non-interference 無為: As a form of the Way, non-interference is the ultimate Way.

Utmost sincerity 至誠: The result of preaching the Way. The book *The Doctrine of the Mean of the Four Books* discusses [this concept] in great detail.

Utmost goodness 至善: In terms of the merit and virtue of goodness, attaining utmost goodness is attaining the utmost Way.

The golden mean 中庸: The middle 中 is the great root of the world. The "mean" 中庸 means function 用, i.e., the substance and the function of the Way.

The Limitless 無極: In terms of the movements of the Way, the Limitless gave birth to the Supreme Ultimate, the Supreme Ultimate gave birth to the Two Patterns, the Two Patterns gave birth to the Four Images.


The exercise of nature: “Exhausting principle and nature to arrive at destiny (窮理盡性，以至於命)”.21 The practice of nature is an important exercise in cultivating the Way. “If one can derive comprehension from sincerity, it is due to one’s nature 自誠明謂之性”;22 this refers to sudden enlightenment.

One word and one realizes the Way. [The capacity for] sudden enlightenment is mostly innate. Upon hearing one [apposite] word, those with the right disposition are greatly enlightened and directly penetrate Heaven. Of course, this is a shortcut [to enlightenment] and cannot be pursued with effort.

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21 A quote from the *Book of Changes* ("Shuo gua", 1). Cf. Legge’s translation [1899:422].
[Ordinary people] can only use “fasting of the mind 心齋” as an exercise of nature. This sort of exercise uses stillness and helps in cultivation and nourishing.

The exercise of instruction: “To derive sincerity from comprehension is due to instruction 自明誠謂之教”.23 If one uses a method of cultivating and nourishing one can regain numinous brightness 顚明.24 Numinous brightness is the brilliance of the Way. The shining of numinous brightness marks one’s advance in the Way. Cultivating the Way always is cultivating brightness; its most important aspect lies in lessening selfishness and reducing desires. Darkness and weakness in human nature are [manifestations of] the demonic Way and lead into purgatory.

The exercise of concentration: “Next is he who arrives at concentration (其次至曲).”25 Concentration 曲 means embracing the one. When the spirit is concentrated on one spot, one can attain stillness and repose. The exercise of concentration is easy to practise. Wordly people all do not know the use of embracing the one; they really should give attention to the practice of concentration. If nature, instruction, and concentration can be completely cultivated, everybody can attain the realm of “sincerity”.

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24 The Chinese term for which I use “brightness” here, 明 明, shares the English term’s ambiguity in referring both to “light” and to “intelligence”, or “comprehension”. The term “numinous brightness” (明 明) refers to both semantic complexes simultaneously.

25 Another quote from the Doctrine of the Mean, chapter 23. “Next” means next to the innately sincere person, mentioned in the preceding passages of the Doctrine. The meaning of the character qu in this passage is one of the trickier problems faced by exegetes over the centuries, because its usual meanings do not fit very well into this context (cf. the translation and discussion by Legge 1982, vol.1:417). For my translation I have simply followed the present text’s understanding and definition of the term.

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CHAPTER 7: All Teachings Return to the [One] Tradition

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: The ruler of the universe is called the "Way". All teachings returning to the one tradition means that they return to the Way. The "tradition" means the Way, or the One. All teachings returning to the one line thus means they are made into one. Therefore, all teachings have to return to the one tradition, because this tradition is absolute. [It can be] compared to the great ocean into which all streams, rivers, brooks, and creeks must flow. This is meant by the saying: "[All things] under Heaven return to the same point, though by different paths; they arrive at the same end, though a hundred anxious schemes [may have been used] (天下一致而百慮，殊途而同歸)."

The [central] "tradition" is the highest standard, i.e., the "Heavenly Way". Everything that accords with this standard is a correct teaching; otherwise it is not a correct teaching. For this reason, everybody must return to the central tradition, i.e., the Heavenly Way.

However, those who return to the Heavenly Way must start their cultivation from the "Way of Humanity" and the "Way of Earth"; only afterwards can they begin to cultivate the "Way of Heaven".

The Way of Humanity is anthropocentric. Its main idea is to exclusively cultivate oneself to act as a human being. The emphasis is on "overcoming the self", i.e., self-purification. This is the basic method of cultivation; only after self-purification can one continue on to advance to higher levels. Self-purification is "making bright bright virtue 明 明". Bright virtue is "numinous brightness 靈 明". Numinous brightness is

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26 A modified quote from the "Great Appendix" (section II, 5) of the Book of Changes. Cf. Legge's translation [1899:389].
What is “bright virtue” like? It is good thoughts, good words, good deeds; when everything is good, it is bright virtue. Thus, good thoughts, good words, and good deeds result in “benevolence 仁”.

The “Way” is the fundamental substance of the universe. It cannot be seen or touched, so how do we prove [its existence]? “Virtue” is the Way’s outer expression. Cultivating virtue is [the same as] cultivating the “Way”. Therefore all who have great virtue will obtain the Way. If only one cultivates the Way of Humanity, one will be able to attain the Way of Heaven.

As to the Way of Earth: devoting oneself to society is fostering the Way of Earth. The main idea of the Way of Earth is “love without distinction 兼愛”. Human relations have to rely on the power of “love”; it is love that holds human groups together. [The character for] “benevolence” [means literally] “two humans”, i.e., I and the other. In coexisting with others, I [should] take love as [my] standard. This is [what is meant by the saying] “to extend one’s self to reach others 推己以及人”.

Love without distinction is the basic force in manifesting the Way of Earth. If they who cultivate the Way hope for “communication between humans and deities 人與神通”, they must first concentrate on overcoming their selves. They only have to arouse their innate ability, then they can make their spirit shining and great. Love without distinction means that one does not divide time and space, but unites them in love. One must have a spirit possessed of “vast correct matter-energy 浩然正氣”, then one can attain the “union of Heaven and Humanity”. The union of Heaven and Humanity is the highest stage. How do Heaven and Humanity unite? This has to do with love without distinction. The spirits of all those who sacrificed themselves
for society or country are filling the space between Heaven and Earth, and so they naturally can communicate with the deities. Therefore, to do good deeds is the highest virtue, and self-sacrifice is the shortcut to ascent and transformation.

All who cultivate the Way [should] establish great merit. By means of merit one can cancel one’s sins. When one’s sins are expunged, then the “spirit can be shining and great 精神光大”. This is the “shortcut 捷 徑” in cultivating the “Heavenly Way”.

As for the Heavenly Way: They who ascend and are transformed can attain the union of Heaven and Humanity. [Then] Heaven is also Humanity, Humanity is also Heaven, Humanity is also divine, Humanity and the universe become one. Therefore the “Heavenly Way” is the highest stage [in cultivation].

Divinity is also a stage [in cultivation]. If everybody pledges to steadfastly cultivate [themselves] with goodness, they can all attain this stage. The practice of the Heavenly Way consists in ascending and being transformed; the practice of ascending and being transformed lies in non-interference. [Practise] non-interference and nothing is left undone.

The practice of non-interference lies in forgetting self and material things. This is the source of utmost sincerity. This is what is [meant by the saying]: the person of utmost sincerity embraces the One; he embraces the One and does not move; he centres exclusively on the One (至誠者抱一，抱一不動，專於一也).

The Way of Humanity, the Way of Earth, the Way of Heaven all revert to the Way. That which does not revert to the Way has no foundation, like the floating clouds in the sky of which nobody knows where they are headed. Thus [the phrase] “all teachings revert to the central tradition” means that
they return to the One, to the “Heavenly Way”.

About cultivating the “Heavenly Way” one has to know the following:
1. The mind must be pure and undefiled, i.e., good.
2. Faith must be united, not divided, i.e., firm. Faith in the “Heavenly Way” must be pious and sincere. But piety and sincerity do not come by themselves. One must use the following exercises:
   1. Knowing the Way 認識道: What is it that is called the True Way? One must differentiate clearly, and under no circumstances walk small [side] roads, but keep to the orthodox Way of shining brightness. One has to know that the “Way” has descended among humans, but that the “demon” is also among humans. One must not associate with the demon; once one has associated with it, one will not escape from its hands for the rest of one’s life.
   2. Being vegetarian 齋戒: Do not eat meat or drink alcohol, do not take on sundry duties. Increase your spiritual strength through your lifestyle.
   3. Reintegrate yourself into the Heavenly Way 歸宗天道: Unify your spirit, purify your mind, make firm your faith.
   4. Reflect 反省: Every evening reflect upon your errors, strengthen your efforts for overcoming the self.

When one is sincere to the utmost, one can communicate with deities. Thus one has to be sincere, because “only when one is sincere, can there be numinosity 誠則靈”. Wordly people mostly pray for blessings to the deities, but blessings cannot be prayed for. Blessings come with cultivation. If you accumulate much merit, blessings will come by themselves. If you do not accumulate merit, you will have no blessings. Usually worldly people do not understand [the importance of] “accumulating merit” and do not know of [the importance of] a “sincere intention and a correct mind”. They only can pray for blessings in front of the gods. How could blessings come in this way?
Therefore they who cultivate the Way must have a new knowledge, [must understand] “that blessings are created by yourself and that praying to gods with empty words is useless (稲由自造，空口求神必無效果)”. Hence they who cultivate the Heavenly Way must be diligent in cultivating themselves and accumulating merit. Cultivating oneself is directed inwards, merit is directed outwards. When inside and outside are both cultivated, the Heavenly Way can naturally be attained.

CHAPTER 8: Escaping from Life and Death

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: Escaping from Life and Death is [the result] of the dual cultivation of nature and destiny. The Way by itself is empty; it is the root of the universe. The universe was born out of emptiness and non-being. Non-being can give birth to being, being returns to non-being. The Way is the beginning of nameless Heaven and Earth. In the beginning Heaven and Earth were empty. From out of emptiness and non-being the universe was born. Thus “the Way is the mother of the 10,000 things 道是萬物之母”. However, if that which has form is born from the formless, from where were Heaven and Earth born? It is said: there were the Great Invisible 太易, the Great Beginning 太初, the Great Inception 太始, and the Great Matter 太素. The Great Invisible is [the state] when energy-matter had not yet appeared. The Great Beginning is the beginning of energy-matter. The Great Inception is the beginning of form. The Great Matter is the beginning of substance. What I call “matter-energy” is what is today known as the “atom”.

27 Laozi, chapter 1.
The Way produces the one, the one the two, the two the three, the three produce the 10,000 things. This is how the universe came into being, its origin is in emptiness and non-being. Originally the universe was empty. This emptiness is the true substance of the universe. This emptiness was not true emptiness. It contained within it an immutable real substance. People of the world today have only carried their research to the atom, but where does the atom come from? If you investigate its origin, there must be a fundamental substance; this is called the "Way".

If the universe is empty, then the human body of course is also empty. Being empty it is a false body. The people of the world are to be pitied: they take the false for true and thus cause themselves much distress. When a person dies, he becomes a ghost and a spirit. The ghost is merely refined matter-energy; the spirit is made the roaming soul. After death, the body of flesh decomposes, yet the refined matter-energy is not scattered, but condenses as a ghost. If during his lifetime [the deceased] had acted with great virtue and had become at one with Heaven and Earth, then after death his soul transcends and roams freely in the universe, without limitation in time or space. The human body is a false construct of the four phases earth, water, fire, and wind. As it is false and not true, how could the human body attain truth in its transformations? Since it is not true, why must one hasten to commit [so] many sins?

Therefore, [even though] it has the matter-energy of life and the appearance of form, it is completely illusory. The beginning of the creation of things lies in the transformations of yin and yang, which are called birth and death. When one thoroughly understands the movements of the cosmos, because of its mutability one calls form transformation and illusion.

The universe is empty, human life is illusory. Since they are empty
and illusory, why should one so firmly hold on to material desires? But why is it that Humanity cannot escape from birth and death? Because the human body is a body of flesh and is subject to the influence of the sense organs. When emotions and desires are overflowing, bright virtue is darkened, and one falls into the hands of the demon. Humanity must escape from the hands of the demon, only then can it attain salvation. How can one escape? One must diligently cultivate the Heavenly Way, then one can attain salvation and escape. But whether or not one attains salvation still depends on oneself. Even though one may pray for help, one must still exert oneself. Heaven helps them who help themselves. If one does not help oneself and relies solely on Heaven's help, then Heaven also will not be willing to help [such] a lazy person.

If one realizes that human life is illusory, but [still] is not able to escape, the reason lies in “oneself”. It is because [that] person does not start from the basic method of “selflessness 無我”. One has to know that Humanity is the centre of the universe. It is Humanity that wants to know the universe. It is also Humanity that wants to escape from human life. The body is the depository of Humanity; one is human only with a body. In the following I will expound the cultivation of the Way of Heaven as a way to escape from birth and death.

1. Purifying thought 澄清思想

All who want to cultivate the Heavenly Way in order to escape, must first purify and order their own thinking. They must have correct knowledge about the universe and human life. This is a fundamental question. If you do not understand the universe and human life, you cannot talk about the Way of escaping from birth and death. If you want to know about the universe and
human life -I have talked about it above. Only by going deeply into it, can you talk about the Way.

Those who do not purify and order their thinking are stupid and confused. They do not know the value of life; they drift along with the current, ultimately letting themselves drown in the floods. Therefore they who want to escape life and death by cultivating the Heavenly Way must first purify their thinking and completely sweep out all muddled thoughts. At this point there arises the question of the direction into which one should aim one's purification. Without a direction one cannot purify one's thinking. Therefore they who seek release must first have a direction, i.e., they must have faith in the Heavenly Way. Rooted in this faith they can then put in order their own thinking.

The thoughts of many disciples of the Way are muddled, their spirit and powers are not focussed; in this manner they not only will not reach release, but even some lessening of their suffering is difficult to obtain. It is basically easy to purify one's thinking, but it is very difficult within secular society. Since secular society is very confused, of course, one cannot purify one's thinking. If one cannot purify one's thinking, there is no way to go about [attaining] release from life and death. Thus they who want to seek release must first purify their thinking, which means having no false, depraved, greedy or desirous thoughts.

2. Regulating one’s bodily functions 調整生理
Why must one regulate the functions of one’s body? Because one’s physiology may impact on one’s psyche; this is why the disciples of the Way must regulate their physical functions. When one suffers from a physical illness, it may disorder one’s psyche. For example: Those suffering from liver diseases
are often violent; those suffering from lung diseases are often melancholy; those suffering from stomach diseases are often listless. Whenever a part of one's physique is defective it will create psychological problems. A healthy body is therefore very important. To have a healthy body one must "exercise regularly, sleep enough, rest appropriately and eat wholesome food". Then the body will be healthy and one can engage in cultivating the Way.

3. Concentrating one's matter-energy, making it soft 專氣致柔

Within the human body there exists something called "matter-energy". As long as matter-energy persists, one lives; as soon as it is used up, one dies. Matter-energy is kinetic energy; sometimes it is also called "electricity". Not only humans rely on electricity, but so do the stars. [All] activity in the universe is based on matter-energy; without matter-energy the universe perishes. To sum up: Within the human body there is something flowing; it is the kinetic energy of life, called matter-energy.

The disciple of the Way has to pay attention to "matter-energy". When matter-energy moves, the emotions are stirred. The so-called seven emotions and six desires and all other thoughts are aroused by matter-energy. Humans' "original nature 本性" is pure. Following the movement of matter-energy, it becomes turbulent. Matter-energy is like the wind: when the wind blows, the water moves. Therefore the disciple of the Way must first control matter-energy. Mastering matter-energy does not imply shutting it up. Shut-up matter-energy easily leads to a matter-energy blockage. Mastering matter-energy also does not mean channelling it; channelling just accomplishes the directing of matter-energy's activity. Why does one have to control matter-energy? Matter-energy as such is firmly related to a person's life. The disciple

28 Laozi, chapter 10.
of the Way, however, does not overly pay attention to life. How much attention the disciple of the Way pays to matter-energy, can be measured by matter-energy's power of influence. When cultivating one's nature, nature is like the sea, matter-energy is like the wind. If one wants to make the sea's surface calm, there first must be no wind. This is where controlling matter-energy is important.

No matter whether in action or repose, sitting or lying down, you always have to keep matter-energy in mind. Keeping it in mind does not mean speaking to yourself about it. It means paying attention in your mind. If only you watch over it, matter-energy does not dare move recklessly. Who is it that watches? It is the spirit, which is innate knowledge, which is the nature. Sometimes matter-energy and spirit are struggling and matter-energy prevails. In that case one is filled with desirous thoughts and falls into the way of the demon. While one is meditating, one's matter-energy is very calm and still. If as soon as one leaves meditation, one's matter-energy [starts again to] float, then this way of mastering matter-energy has no effect. Therefore one must always guard matter-energy and control it perpetually. There has to be matter-energy, but it must not be allowed to be unrestrained. If it is unrestrained, it will be reckless and all [sorts of] evil demons will come into being.

No matter whether in action or repose, sitting or lying down, you must [maintain] calm. To make matter-energy calm, one must not [act] too fast or too excitedly. If one is too fast, one will be anxious. If one is too excited, one will be worried. Breathing should be even and orderly. If one breathes in smaller draughts and a little more slowly, it will not be too fast. Walking in the street, one's pace should not be too hasty, otherwise matter-energy might float up. When working, one's movements also should be measured, then
matter-energy will be calm. All who master their matter-energy are relatively slow in speech and movement and this is a good thing. Just look at people whose matter-energy is coarse: their breathing sounds are loud. The matter-energy of such persons surely is floating and thus they are irascible and violent. Therefore the most important factor in maintaining calmness is slowness, slowness, and again slowness. They who master their matter-energy cause it to be calm and stable in order to make their breathing soft and fine, like that of an infant. When matter-energy moves, the multitude of thoughts moves; when matter-energy is mastered, thoughts are cut off; when thoughts are cut off, all phenomena are still.

The method of cultivating matter-energy control: Sit straight on a chair without crossing the legs. The back and the face should be straight, so that the nose and the navel form a line. The arms are hanging down, the hands are folded and rest on the thighs. The chair should have a backrest on which the back should lean to avoid shaking. Before meditation, one must not eat too much and one must not eat stimulating foods like garlic and peppers. One must not drink tea or coffee to avoid heating of the intestines. Beginners may feel very restless while meditating, or feel that their chest is blocked up, or experience that the more they try to stop thoughts, the more thoughts arise. In that case they must first unify their thoughts, which purpose is accomplished by reciting “Venerable Mother of the Limitless, Highest Honoured One, Heavenly Mother 天母至尊無極老母” until one’s thoughts are unified; then one should gradually cease reciting. Pay attention to breathing and let it happen naturally, until you forget matter-energy and thoughts do not move anymore. This is the method of mastering matter energy and arriving at softness.

You [should] practise this early every morning. You may decide on the
duration yourself. It is very helpful in cultivation and nurturing. After long and constant practice matter-energy will become stable by itself. Once it is stable, thoughts will not arise. When thoughts do not arise, desires are cut off. When selfish desires are cut off, innate knowledge becomes manifest.

4. Carrying the soul 載魂魄

Carrying the soul means preserving the spirit. The Way of preserving the spirit consists in "embracing the One 抱一". Embracing the One means "thinking of the One 念於一, reflecting upon the One 思於一, returning everything to the One 一切歸一". This is different from the concept of mastering matter-energy. The concept of mastering matter-energy is based in matter-energy, while the concept of preserving the spirit rests in the spirit. At last one must [let] it turn back and shine. When sight is directed inwards, one can stop numinous brightness from seeping outside.

The practice of mastering matter-energy consists in stillness, the practice of preserving the spirit consists in restraining. The spirit can leak out at any place and at any time. The spirit can direct matter-energy, matter-energy can harm the spirit. The movements of matter-energy can be steered by the spirit: if it steers upwards, [matter-energy] moves upwards; if it steers downwards, [matter-energy] moves downwards, flowing always in accordance with the intentions of the spirit. When matter-energy floats, thoughts move. Moving thoughts harm the spirit, [but] only the spirit is the ruler. The disciple of the Way must be good at preserving the spirit. Preserving the spirit is not difficult. Its most important [component] is cutting off thoughts. When thoughts are cut off, the spirit does not move. When the spirit does not move, it is preserved. Matter-energy and spirit are intimately related. One must give more attention [to both] - this is the outline of the dual cultivation
of nature and life-force.

5. Sitting and forgetting 坐忘

Sitting and forgetting means forgetting material things and the self. Only after one was successful in mastering matter-energy and preserving the spirit, can one sit and forget. Otherwise one will not accomplish sitting and forgetting. Sitting and forgetting is non-interference. Practise non-interference and nothing is left undone. "Not having being" is non-interference. Not having being is not true non-being. If it was true non-being, how could there even be [the negation of] being? Sitting and forgetting [means] not paying attention to matter-energy or spirit, not paying attention to written words, putting aside everything, forgetting even oneself - this is sitting and forgetting.

After sitting and forgetting one can by oneself transcend the world of forms, caught no more in the cage of Posterior Heaven. The world of forms is illusory. Everybody who seeks in the midst of illusion will not avoid perishing. Perishing is suicide, falling into purgatory without awakening. Being without desires is sitting and forgetting. Having desires is [being caught in] a rivalry of sounds and sights; sounds and sights are sufficient to throw the nature in disorder; when the nature is in disorder, one is confused. When one is confused, one loses truth. The difference between having and not having desires is greater than that between Heaven and Earth. Those cultivating the Way should know by themselves which to choose.

6. Release 解脱

How can one escape from birth and death through sitting and forgetting? If "originally there was no birth and no death", how can one
escape it? Humans are subject to birth and death because they are surrounded by "being". When one attains to the sphere of "non-being", birth and death both vanish, and naturally one does not need to escape. The escape sought by the disciple of the Way is not the elixir of [bodily] immortality; instead it means thorough destruction of this world of forms, or one can say destruction of the "body" of form. The highest thing to be hoped for is "bodilessness", but [this] bodilessness is not true bodilessness. The only way is to return from the false body to the true body; this true body naturally has no birth or death.

Humanity originally is illusion, birth and death also are illusions. How did it come about that humans possess a body? Through the bondage of the sense organs. The sense organs arise from movements of matter-energy. If matter-energy does not move, the 10,000 phenomena are all still.

Today I establish a teaching for all living beings allowing them to realize in their lives the Great Way. Once they have awakened to the Way, there is no more birth and death. Who confuses them? They confuse themselves. If they do not confuse themselves, they immediately escape. If the 10,000 transformations do not move in the mind, how could one merely escape from birth and death?

CHAPTER 9: What is meant by "Cultivating the Way"?

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: The "Way" as such cannot be seen, heard or touched, yet it was born before Heaven and Earth and is the ruler of everything that exists. Therefore the Way is supreme and omnipotent. The "Way" is like the water of a river: day and night it flows
without cease. All transformations of the universe are manifestations of the "Way". The fundamental substance of the universe thus is the "Way". Everything takes its life from the "Way". The Way was born before Heaven and Earth; before Heaven and Earth there already existed the "Way". The Way is the maternal body of the universe and everything in existence. The Way produces the human body, the human body returns to the Way. Therefore, if people cultivate the Way, they attain the "Way" and ascend to Heaven, i.e., become deities and will never again be like human beings with a flesh body. The "Way" is the ruler of everything in existence. Cultivating the Way is believing in the ruler of the universe. Everybody can cultivate the Way, whereupon they can return to their origin and ascend to Heaven. Thus, everybody should aspire to the Way, and [indeed] must cultivate the Way, because humans, if they can enter the Heavenly Way, can get whatever they seek and punishment for sins can be avoided. Entering the Heavenly Way means that Heaven and Humanity [become] one body, that they become one. For this reason, the "Way" is the most precious thing in the world, it is the mother of the world.

However, how should one cultivate the Way? One cannot be separated from the Way for even a moment; if one could, it would not be the Way. Life is the "Way", to live well one's daily life is cultivating the Way. Life is very complex; it is not completely good, but also has very bad aspects. Therefore one must be careful and practise [the Way] in particular [in] those areas of one’s life hidden from public view. That is to say that sin and evil all evolve from little things. The disciple of the Way must be careful about many little things, so demons and ghosts may not gain entry.

In cultivating the Way one must put the "Way" into practice. The Way has [its] virtue, i.e., "morality". How do we explain this? The "Way" cannot be
seen, but it is just to the utmost and upright to the utmost. “Virtue” is the outer expression of the “Way”. Thus it is said: All great virtue issues forth from the Way. Way and virtue originally were one; the Way is invisible; virtue is visible. Thus cultivating the Way is cultivating virtue. What is called virtue? Propriety, righteousness, modesty, and the sense of shame are virtues. Filiality, brotherliness, loyalty, and trustworthiness are also virtues. They must be put into practice; with empty talk one cannot cultivate virtue. If one wants to seek the Way in order to attain eternal life and ascend high to Heaven, one must practise “morality”. Be vegetarian and purify the mouth, lessen the sin of killing, burn incense and recite scriptures, do many good deeds. These are the way of self-cultivation. To cultivate the Way, however, one must practice them forcefully; one must greatly establish merit, and propagate the orthodox Way. Cultivating a portion of virtue advances one a portion of the Way. Only with the most virtuous conduct can one advance on the Way. Therefore cultivating virtue is also cultivating the Way.

The disciple of the Way has to cultivate “sageliness within” and “kingliness without”. Below I will expound these two concepts separately to enlighten [you] disciples.

“Sageliness within” consists in overcoming self. First one [has to] overcome one’s self so that one is clean and not half a selfish desire remains. Selfishness means being held by self; desire means being held by material things. Only when material things and self have both been forgotten, can one “manifest the pure and embrace simplicity’.29 One should start this practice by arriving at innate knowledge. Humanity originally possesses innate knowledge. Unfortunately it is obscured by material desires. One only needs to remove selfish desires and innate knowledge will appear by itself.

29 Laozi, chapter 19.
This is what is called “fulfilling one’s nature "性". Innate knowledge is the nature. To recover one’s original nature is arriving at innate knowledge. Therefore, consciousness, uprightness of the mind, cultivation of the self all belong to the way of inner sageliness, which is [also called] cultivating inner rewards.

"Kingliness without” consists in saving the world and sacrificing one’s own advantage to help others. Thus it is the spirit of love without distinctions. The “outer king” is able to advance on the Way because he raises innate ability. Innate ability is the kinetic energy of the universe. This kind of kinetic energy is great and constant to the utmost. As vast correct matter-energy it fills the universe. In every instance when personal advantage is sacrificed to help others this innate ability manifests itself. The greater the sacrifice, the greater necessarily the manifestation of innate ability. Simply expressed, it involves creating merit by giving alms, rescuing from distress, and taking delight in helping; it is [the same as] creating outer merit.

Innate knowledge and innate ability originally are one. In repose it is called innate knowledge, in action innate ability. The disciple of the Way must cultivate both repose and action, i.e., look after both inner sageliness and outer kingliness. For this reason, stopping desires is the first step in cultivating the Way. When desires are cleared [out], one can manifest innate knowledge. Desires arise from material things. Therefore the disciples of the Way needs a mind devoid of greed and desire, then they can stay aloof from material things. This is also the exercise of inner sageliness. In practising merit to fulfill one’s wishes, to give wealth away as alms - these are exercises of outer kingliness.

In order to enlighten [you] disciples who cultivate the Way, today I will especially recount as an example how 5,000 years ago the Yellow Emperor
inquired about the Way,

Example: “Cultivating the Way is like sowing a field”

Long ago the Yellow Emperor Xuanyuan, having pacified the empire, performed the great ceremonial of the *feng* and *shan* rites 封禅大典. The *feng* and *shan* rites are sacrifices to Heaven, represented by Mount Tai 泰山, and to Earth, represented by Mount Liangfu 梁父山. Only an emperor with extraordinary achievements may perform the *feng* and *shan* rites.

At the time there lived on Mount Tai a scholar who was cultivating the Way. His name is unknown but the stage which he had attained in his cultivation was very high and profound. His method of cultivating the Way was completely innerwordly and thus very suitable to the needs of ordinary people. The Yellow Emperor knew of this man, [so] when he had completed the great ceremonial of the *feng* and *shan* rites, he went to visit this disciple of the Way. But although he looked all over [the mountain], he could not find him and thereupon descended and returned west.

One day at noon on the journey back, the Yellow Emperor was resting in the shade of a roadside tree. The carriages and horses of his retinue were very numerous [and so] the common people did not dare draw near. There was only one white-haired old man who continued to weed his field, not even raising the head or turning his gaze, as if he was not aware that a large body of chariots and horses was passing by, and as if he did not know that the emperor was resting [over there]. To protect the emperor’s safety the guards had to clear the surroundings of the imperial halting-place of idle onlookers. The Yellow Emperor had battled Yuwang and put Chiyou to death, so of course many people harboured hate for him and he had to take every precaution. As for the old peasant working his field, of course he had to be
urged to remove himself. Yet the old peasant did not pay the least attention, he was unrestrained and unheeding. The soldiers [became] very discourteous and decided to drive him away by force.

The old peasant said: “Looking for me everywhere and now that I am here, wanting to drive me away - that is very strange.”

He then shouldered his hoe and walked slowly away. The soldiers, aware that the Yellow Emperor was inquiring about the Way, immediately reported the words of this old peasant to [the Yellow Emperor’s minister] Fenghou 風后, who right way set out after the old peasant. Because he had not walked very far yet, he soon caught up with him.

“Old gentleman, the soldiers were very impolite, I ask your forgiveness. My emperor was looking for you a long time. As we have encountered you today, would it be possible for you to meet with him?”

The old peasant stopped and laughed, saying: “I know that the Yellow Emperor was looking for me. I could not bear to disappoint him and so today I specifically came to meet with him.”

Fenghou was very moved. Thereupon they went together to the imperial halting-place. By that time the Yellow Emperor had already been informed and was just preparing to receive [the visitor] in person. When Fenghou arrived together with the old peasant, the emperor personally received them outside of his tent.

The emperor apologized to the old peasant, saying “The soldiers were impolite, I ask your forgiveness.”

Very politely the old peasant replied, “Glory and disgrace do not move my heart. How could I take ordinary courtesy seriously?”

“Although I possess the empire, I aspire to the Way. At the occasion of these feng and shan sacrifices, I searched everywhere in the empire for a
scholar who has the Way to help me open my mind for instruction. I wish the gentleman would teach me.” In this manner the Yellow Emperor very respectfully rose from his mat and asked for instruction.

The old peasant said: “I heard it said that the year before last your majesty climbed Mount Kongtong, not a thousand miles [from here], to visit Guangchengzi. Guangchengzi is a scholar who has attained the Way. I think the venerable immortal Guangcheng surely had precious views [to offer]. As for myself, I am simply a rustic who daily works his fields for a living. Really, I do not understand anything about the Way.”

The emperor bowed twice and said: “The venerable immortal Guangcheng lectured on nourishing life, of which embracing the spirit is the essential meaning. You are the scholar of the East who has attained the Way. Your fame is great. Surely you must have even higher advice [to give].”

The old peasant said: “Cultivating the Way is not principally for attaining one’s own salvation, but for delivering the world. Your majesty occupies the highest position. Even though you may save [many] people from water and fire, your merit will be even greater if you can reestablish a tradition of the Way for 10,000 generations. I am just a rustic peasant; my powers are weak, my virtue is thin. Yet now that the times are changing, human hearts are becoming corrupt. It is not by the strength of one man [alone] that salvation can be brought about. I would like your majesty to make a great pledge, namely, to rejoice in delivering the living beings of 10,000 generations.”

The emperor said, “At the time of Yuwang the empire was plagued by calamities. Chiyou was even more cruel. By the assistance of Heaven I managed to pacify [the empire]. Today the realm is peaceful, the people are content with their lives. I aspire to the Way and would like to leave to later
generations a model for cultivating the Way. Yet for long I could not attain its subtle essentials. I beg you not to be sparing with your pearls [of wisdom] and to explain in detail the method of cultivating the Way."

The old peasant rose from his mat, bowed, and said "Cultivating the Way is like cultivating a field. I am a peasant. I awakened to the Way by cultivating my fields. May I dare to talk disrespectfully to the enlightened king?"

The emperor also rose from his mat and bowed twice. (The ancients used to sit on mats. Standing up from one's mat was an expression of respect).

The old peasant said, "Cultivating a field has to be divided into several stages. In the first stage one "puts the field in order". One first selects a satisfactory piece of land, puts it in order, weeds it, turns over the soil, makes it proper and orderly, so that not one weed remains. The first step in cultivating the Way should be like this. The field of the mind should be a piece of a fertile land; it is very important that it must not be shallow. Root out selfish desires in your mind. The smallest selfish desire is an obstruction. Selfish desires are demonic and must be kept at a distance. Clear out all your former bad habits and arouse a new spirit, only then can you make progress."

The emperor asked, "How does one know that it is a fertile mind-field? Why do we need a fertile field?"

The old peasant answered, "The foundation of the mind-field must be thick. If it is thick, the roots can go deep and are not easily pulled up. In some soils there is a lot of sand and little stones; this is similar to the many confused thoughts of the mind. [From such soil] of course not much can be harvested. Only if it is deep and thick, can the Great Way be carried out; on a shallow and thin [foundation] little can be accomplished."

The emperor said, "Why do ordinary people not know that they have
to pay attention to the mind-field?"

The old peasant said, "Ordinary people seek quick results, but get very little. In cultivating the Way one has to use practical effort, and not rely on luck. There are many "outer ways" in the world. Their teachings easily move people. Since the Great Way is unpretentious, ordinary people do not pay much attention to it."

The emperor said, "Let me ask about the second stage in cultivating the field?"

The old peasant said, "The second stage is selecting the seeds. Only if you select a kernel of the best seed and put it in the ground, will you have a good harvest in the future."

The emperor asked, "What are the seeds for cultivating the Way?"

The old peasant said, "The seed for cultivating the Way is your faith in the orthodox Way. There are many factions of the Dao in the world; it is very important which one one takes as the orthodox Way."

The emperor said, "Nowadays there are many teachings about, some outer-wordly, some inner-worldly, some practising inner merit, some outer merit. There is such a variety that one does not know which to follow."

The old peasant said, "Since the Great Way has been closed for several thousand years already, it is inevitable that there are many sects. But there is only one true Way which can be cultivated in one's life. Virtuous conduct in [daily] life is an expression of the Way of Humanity. Thus, cultivating virtue is cultivating the Way. In cultivating one must not use any magic devices. Magic in the end always leads to heterodoxy."

The emperor said, "If it really is as you say, then cultivating the Way is very easy and becoming a deity also is not difficult."

The old peasant said, "Hearing it, it seems easy, but in practice it is not
such an easy matter. Let us take “faith” as an example: if you want to do this well, there are many difficulties [to be overcome]. True faith is firm and unmoveable. If one believes that this is a mountain, then it is a mountain. If one believes that this is water, then it is water. Faith determines everything; just by faith one can attain the Way. The instructions of the sages all base themselves on daily life. Life is the Way; apart from life there is no true Way.”

The emperor said: “The lives of many bad people are corrupt. Is this also an expression of the Way?”

The old peasant said: “A corrupt life is sin. It also is demonic. It is not life any more. Life nourishes humans, sin harms them. Therefore it is called demonic.”

The emperor said, “If the universe and everything all issued forth from the Way, why did [the Way] give birth to sin?”

The old peasant said, “In the transformations of Posterior Heaven everything depends on the transformations of yin and yang. Yin is turbid and heavy, yang clear and light. The turbid and heavy flows as sin, the clear and light as harmony and goodness. The transformations of the universe are waxing and waning, alternately rising and sinking. The universe as such is still and unmoving, without good or bad. The revolutions of Posterior Heaven appear with yin and yang; it is then that there first appears the differentiation of good and bad. The demon was born from the evil customs of Posterior Heaven. It is like pressing out bean oil. There will aways [remain] some leftovers. In the same way, good and bad are opposites. If there is good, there is bad; good and bad follow each other.”

The emperor asked, “Can one never get rid of the demon?”

The old peasant replied, “In the world of yin and yang it is unavoidable
that there should be antagonistic phenomena; this antagonism only vanishes in the sphere of primordial chaos. Otherwise good and bad are inseparable. [But] by increasing good karma, the demon will decrease by itself.”

The emperor asked, “The Way created life, but why did it create death and cause humans to suffer the sorrow of being separated [from loved ones] in life and in death?”

The old peasant said, “If life had no place where it came from, death would not have a place to go to. The whole universe [would be] without birth or death. Birth and death are merely phenomena of waxing and waning. Death is a change to new life. There is no true death. Why be sorrowful?”

The emperor said, “To select a seed is not easy. One needs the guidance of sages, otherwise where does one [find] the seed to select?”

The old peasant said, “One only has to maintain a regular conduct of life and not walk on confused paths, then one is not far from the Way.”

The emperor said, “Let me ask about the third stage in cultivating the field.”

The old peasant said, “The third step in cultivating the field is irrigation. Without irrigation the seeds will wither away. In cultivating the Way irrigation is [also] necessary.”

The emperor asked, “What is irrigation in the cultivation of the Way?”

The old peasant answered, “Everybody has a mind that is directed towards the Way. This mind is the sprout [that develops out] of the seed. If one is so unfortunate as not to understand [the need] to irrigate, it will wither in the ground. The irrigation in cultivating the Way is penetration of the numinious. Most religions use the method of prayer; one should pray every morning and evening. Prayer is like sweet dew. A prayer is like a shower of sweet dew.”
The emperor said, "May I dare inquire about the fourth stage in cultivating the field?"

The old peasant replied, "The fourth stage is banking [the field] up with earth. The cultivation of the Way also needs banking up. If you do not do this, then the roots will be exposed and [the plant] will easily be shaken. Reading scriptures, listening to the Way, reflecting, are all nourishing exercises. Nourishing is extremely important, and the disciple of the Way should [practise] it much. If there rarely is success in cultivating the Way, it is because [the disciples] do not know [the importance of] nourishing. Only constant nourishing enables growth. Many scholars who cultivate the Way are highly enthusiastic for a while, but quickly become discouraged. They [become] cold like icy frost. How could there be success under these circumstances?"

The emperor said, "[In cultivating the field] the eventual flourishing [of the plant] is the ultimate hope. In cultivating the Way it is ascent to Heaven. If one does not cultivate based on one's [daily] life, how can one ascend to Heaven?"

The old peasant said, "Ascending to Heaven means ascending and being transformed 昇化. There are several kinds of ascension and transformation:
1. Ascension and transformation due to destiny pursuant to one's karmic affinity 隨緣昇化;
2. Ascension and transformation on escaping from the body 脫體昇化;
3. Ascension and transformation in one's original appearance 本相昇化;
The meaning of these four categories is as follows:
'Ascension and transformation pursuant to one's karmic affinity': Those
cultivating the Way understand the meaning of life and death; they know where they come from, and where they will return to. Furthermore they control their mind and spirit. Life and death are nothing but stages within transformation. If one arrives at such a sphere, one can ascend and be transformed according to one’s karmic affinity.

‘Ascension and transformation on escaping from the body’: It is like the autumn cicada throwing off its skin. It dies at its own discretion. Its coming and leaving are self-determined. It is what is called dying without disease.

‘Ascension and transformation in one’s original appearance’: This means leaving with one’s body of flesh, i.e., ascending in broad daylight. This is rather difficult, but for the person who has accomplished it, flying and ascending is an easy matter.

‘Ascension and transformation in metamorphosis’: This means ascension and transformation having adopted a different appearance, like that of a bird, or of a dragon or tiger. This also is a marvellous method of ascension and transformation.”

The emperor asked, “How does one attain ascension and transformation? What is its method?”

The old peasant answered, “Ascension and transformation have no method. If there was a method, it would be magic and thus far removed from the orthodox Way. Humans come from emptiness and non-being, so naturally they return to emptiness and non-being. The 10,000 phenomena are all illusory transformations. Wordly people enter the path of confusion because they take the false for true.”

The emperor said, “How can one escape from the path of confusion?”

The old peasant replied, “Once you know that it is a path of confusion, you are not confused anymore! Wordly people are greatly influenced by the
body of flesh and never can pull themselves away from it. The body of flesh must not be deficient, yet neither must humans overly cherish it, otherwise they become infatuated. In that case they are held fast and cannot achieve ascension and transformation.”

The emperor said, “I have heard many ways, [but concerning] entering the Heavenly Way from the Way of Humanity, I was first instructed by you. Because I am entangled in the affairs of the state, I cannot tarry outside for long. When today I heard your words, my mind was suddenly opened. You truly are the sage of the East. I enfeoff you as the Lord of Eastern Florescence 東華君.”

Thus, the old peasant was enfeoffed as the Lord of Eastern Florescence, i.e., Master Wood, Imperial Lord of the Eastern Florescence 東華帝君木公. Cultivating the Way is like cultivating a field: if you sow melons, you will get melons; if you sow beans, you will get beans. If only you plough and weed, you will reap. The flourishing [of the plants] is a natural transformation and cannot be forced. The Lord of the Eastern Florescence is an ancient immortal. His way of teaching [emphasizes] starting from simple things, [but] truly has lofty insights. I wish that all disciples of the Way in the world will investigate it thoroughly.

CHAPTER 10: Life

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: Where does human life come from? Life has descended from Heaven. Thus it is called “decree of Heaven 天命”. The decree of Heaven applies to the numinous body 靈體. This numinous body is very subtle, therefore it is also called “numinous
brightness”. Numen is brilliant. It illumines even the obscurest, nothing is
removed from it. Therefore, if one wants to seek the numinous brightness of
life, one must cultivate the “Heavenly Way”.

Heaven endows everybody with equal life; there is no difference
between ample and shallow [life endowment]. The differences in success are
due to “cultivation 修 持”, and other reasons. The quality of one’s life
depends completely on each person’s cultivation. If one is good at cultivation,
then one’s life quality is superb. If one cannot cultivate oneself, then one
throws life away like manure.

Human life’s [endowment] without exception has numinous
brightness, it just differs in its capacity for cultivation. If one can cultivate
one’s life, one [can] attain the sphere of ascension and transformation, and
attain the union of Heaven and Humanity. This union [comes about] when
the life power fills the universe. In the universe there is a most fundamental
thing, which fills it and is the element which gave birth to Heaven and Earth;
it is called the “Way”. If one can cultivate until one ascends and becomes
transformed, one can accomplish the Way and join with Heaven and Earth.

However, how must one cultivate oneself in order to attain even
“numinous brightness”? First you have to make your mind pure. When the
mind is clear it is like drawing open a curtain, so that inside and outside can
naturally communicate. If only the “Way” enters into and stays in your mind,
your life will forever be shining and bright. Therefore, having life, all
humans must cultivate the Way. How does one make the human heart
pure? Not by empty talk, but by rendering respectful obedience to the
following Way of the Six Purities 六 純 道:

1. Pure thoughts 純 念 -- Make your intentions sincere and your mind correct;
expunge perverse and evil thoughts.
2. Pure conduct 純行 -- [Let your] conduct be pure, expunge depraved conduct.

3. Pure faith 純信 -- Concentrate and unify your faith; expunge confused thinking.

4. Pure will 純志 -- Make your will firm; expunge all incorrect inclinations.

5. Pure affairs 純業 -- Go about your affairs circumspectly; expunge demonic seductions.

6. Pure preserving 純守 -- Embrace the spirit in stillness; expunge the various confusions.

If one really can render respectful obedience to the Six Purities, one will naturally be pure and the Way will draw near. "The Heavenly Way knows no favouritism, it is always with the good (天道無親，常與善人)",30 i.e., the Way is close to whoever is good. In the eyes of the Way there are no differences in wealth or status, there is only good or bad. [The Way] rewards goodness and punishes wickedness. The disciple of the Way must believe this doctrine. This is the "Heavenly Way", and it never fails [in its differentiation of good and bad].

How do you know whether the Way dwells in your mind? When the Way dwells in your mind, your spirit is very energetic, you feel very happy in your heart, your ambitions are very lofty, your faith is very firm.

There are two roads in the world. One is the road of life, which leads to the home of eternal life. However, this road is very narrow and rugged, but it will certainly lead to spring-like bliss. The other is the road of death, which leads to annihilation. This one is very broad, even, and happy, but in the end there is darkness and eternal suffering. Ordinary people all like to walk the broad road; viewed superficially it seems joyful, so everybody is willing to walk it. The scholar who cultivates the Way walks the narrow road. Viewed

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30 Laozi, chapter 79.
superficially, his life seems very inhibited, very hard, but his life endowment is limitless. The delights of the body of flesh belong to the demon and cause humans to die. If you disciples understand the roads of life and death, then you should be determined to cultivate the Way.

How should huans' life endowment be cultivated so as to be able to advance on the Way? Humanity has the Three Treasures 三寶 of essence 精, matter-energy 氣, and spirit 神. These are the same as life endowment. One should start by cultivating these Three Treasures; if one can cultivate to the point that [one can] store essence 蓄精, nourish matter-energy 養氣, and make firm the spirit 定神, then wisdom will open vastly, and one will be able to distinguish right and wrong; one will be full of energy, and the body will be healthy. One can spontaneously advance on the Way.

Essence is a great treasure of the human body. It is the original fluid of Way-cultivation 修道之原液. If a person does not know how to store essence, essence is lost and [in consequence] the body weakens and the vital spirits are scattered and thrown into confusion. How can the Way then be cultivated to completion? Matter-energy also is a great treasure of the human body. Without matter-energy, humans perish. It is said that with three inches of matter-energy one can attain longevity. Those who understand principle will not dare hurt their matter-energy by talking too much; when they sleep at night, they do not dare to open their mouths so as not to leak matter-energy; and they are good at nourishing strong matter-energy. Spirit is also a great treasure of the human body. When the spirit is firm, it will not be scattered and disordered. It can control matter-energy, so that one may not lose one's composure.

If essence, matter-energy, and spirit are cultivated completely and there are no desirous thoughts, one can penetrate the mystery 通玄. Mystery is a
term for the unified body of Heaven and Humanity. Penetrating the mystery completely depends on “firmness 定”. Its [process] is [described by such phrases as] “firmness appears only after knowledge ceases 知止而后有定”31 and “arriving at the empty ultimate, preserving stillness and sincerity (致虚極，守靜篤)”.32 It is also [alluded to in the passage] “the gate of the mysterious mother is called the root of Heaven and Earth (玄牝之門，是謂天地根也).”33

CHAPTER 11: The Way of Penetrating the Mystery

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: They who cultivate the Way must first know about “penetrating the mystery 通玄”. What is penetration? It means reaching everywhere. What is the mystery? It means [something] secret and distant. If you investigate its ultimate location, it is the Gate of All Marvels 衆妙之門. The Gate of All Marvels is the root of Heaven and Earth. In other words, it is the “Heavenly Way”. Penetrating the mystery is the highest aim in cultivating the Way. If the scholar of who cultivates the Way can attain this stage, he can fulfill the Way.

But there are many obstacles on the way of penetrating the mystery. Only after breaking through these obstacles can one penetrate the mystery. There are the following obstacles:

1. The obstacle of self 我障: It is a great obstacle if one does not get rid of self. That humans have selfish minds is due to the existence of self. Only without self can one be natural, otherwise one will always be obstinate about

31 The Great Learning, paragraph 2.
32 Laozi, chapter 16.
33 Laozi, chapter 6.
something. With obstinacy comes clinging [to material things, views etc.]. Thus we speak of “obstinate clinging 固執”.34

2. The obstacle of material things 物障: Material things are forms. Once one falls for forms, one commits the error of forming attachments and thus cannot be natural. If one cannot be natural, one [becomes] entangled by material things and loses one’s original nature.

3. The obstacle of knowledge 知障: Gold and jade are only reluctantly donated, soil and stones are easily given up (金玉難捐，土石易捨). This is [a fact] of human psychology. When the scholar who cultivates the Way encounters subtle talk and clever actions, he is careful not to get attached to them. He may practise them, but he must not get attached to them. There exists no medicine to heal an inner disease. Under no circumstances “obtain the fish and then forget about the fish-trap” 切勿得魚忘筌. Therefore they who cultivate the Way must have no attachments, otherwise they cannot be transformed.

It is not easy to break the three obstacles of self, material things, and knowledge, but it is not impossible. [For this purpose] one must employ the methods of “stillness 靜” and “motion 動”.

“Stillness”: Agitation is the refuge of all sins; all distress and transgressions have their origin in restlessness and confusion. The demon also enters the human mind in unrest. Therefore one needs stillness. Only in stillness is there wisdom. When one is still, one is clear; when one is clear, one is not defiled by even a single particle of dust. The selfish desires of Humanity also arise in the midst of commotion. If one can arrive at stillness,

34 The term guzhi is here used as “attachment” in a negative sense. In a discourse so strongly indebted to the Doctrine of the Mean this comes as something of a surprise, because in this canonical work guzhi is used in a thoroughly positive context. It is there said of the sincere person that he chooses the good and “firmly holds it fast” [Legge 1982, vol.1:413].
selfish desires will by themselves not arise.

"Motion": Stillness does not mean being like dry wood or dead ashes. In the midst of stillness there is motion. Only with motion there is life. Life is "capability 能". "Capability" is "force 力". It is by this force that the universe can move, without it, it would perish. When cultivating the Way one unavoidably encounters demons. For beheading demons one should use the force of motion; they cannot be defeated by ordinary peaceable exercises.

Therefore, the function of stillness is that of arriving at innate knowledge, i.e., making bright bright virtue. The function of motion lies in arousing innate ability. When innate ability appears, it is [as] vast matter-energy filling the universe. This is the most important condition for the union of Heaven and Humanity; it also is the way of penetrating the mystery.

If cultivating the Way [consists in] unobstructed penetration, then how can one penetrate? By ascension and transformation. That whereby one can be transformed is the breaking of obstacles. Worldly people today suffer from the fetters of [vices targeted] by the Eight Prohibitions 八戒 35: "Debauchery 色, alcohol 酒, profit 利, fame 名, anger 怒, fear 懼, music 樂, and desires 慾". These are hard to break. The true self lies hidden within lust and cannot reach the light. Hence the disciples of the Way lessen selfishness and lust and abandon self and material things. Only then the mists lift and they see the blue sky; over 10,000 miles there is the azure empty space, in a light breeze and with an unclouded moon. Then they can reach the stage of "penetrating the mystery". Penetration of the mystery is subtle and marvellous, it is the highest form of ascension and transformation.

But the Way of "penetrating the mystery" completely relies on firmness. Only when one is firm 定, can one be "still" 靜. Only when one is

35 Literally: the "eight prohibitions" (bajie 八戒).
still, can one have “peace of mind” 安. Only when one has peace of mind, can one “deliberate” 慮. Only when one deliberates, can one have “attainment” 得. Thus, if one works hard to cultivate firmness, one cannot only clear away the obstacles, but also destroy the eight vices. When one is not fettered by the eight vices, purifies the mind and lessens lust, the true self can appear and reach the light. One can then naturally “penetrate the mystery”.

All who intend to cultivate the Heavenly Way must first diminish selfish desires so as to daily advance towards the light. Also they have to reflect upon their own transgressions and repent; this is the exercise of advancing [on the Way]. Afterwards one can cultivate “firmness” to arrive at “penetrating the mystery”. Here I will recount an example to enlighten the disciples of the Way: a story about cultivating “firmness” to break the “eight vices” and acquire “penetration of the mystery”.

Example: By cultivating “firmness” and exposing the eight vices, the Eight Sages 八賢 could finally attain penetration of the mystery.

Long ago the Yellow Emperor journeyed west, climbed the Kunlun Mountains 嵩山, and arrived at the Mysterious Garden 玄圃. This was a place where in antiquity the immortals gathered. Long before the Yellow Emperor, immortals used to gather in this place. The Yellow Emperor specifically visited this place to look for the holy traces of the immortals’ cultivation of the Way.

The Mysterious Garden is on top Cloud Red Peak 雲霞峰 of the Kunlun Mountains, their highest peak which is difficult to climb. When immortals come, they travel on clouds, flying in the space, [so] of course [for them] it is not a difficult journey. [But] the Yellow Emperor at that time had
not yet achieved the Way, so for him climbing the mountain was not without difficulty. But as he was the Son of Heaven, the head of state, he had the mountains opened and paths put through; so even though it took a long time, he got through. There are no buildings in the Mysterious Garden. Its [most] extraordinary feature is a broad even terrace of about two square li between the peaks. On the four sides it is surrounded by mountain ridges; dark green pines and blue cedars grow in abundant greenery. All sorts of beautiful birds fly and sing above and below. The terrace is covered with soft, fine grass like a cushion. At its northern end there grows a towering great tree, probably several tens of thousands of years old, of which there does not exist another [example] anywhere else.

The Yellow Emperor gazed [at the scenery] for a long time and then turning his head said to Bochang: “This is a place were deities and immortals gather.”

Bochang asked: “If this is really so, how do the immortals enjoy themselves?”

The emperor answered, “What among humans is called enjoyment all belongs to the realm of illusion. [Magic tricks like] raising a hundred-storeyed building, ethereal music and beautiful music girls [simply] by pointing to the ground, wanting something and getting it [right away] - all this is illusory. As for the immortals, they do not drink nor eat; they ride on the wind. Why should they care about human enjoyments?”

The Yellow Emperor, sunk into deep thought, walked to the great tree and was awe-struck by it.

“This is the divine tree of life. Why did it descend into the human world?”

Bochang asked, “What is the function of the divine tree of life?”
“I will tell you its use.” The emperor walked once round the tree, very happy and content.

Placing a cushion on the ground, the emperor sat down. The Eight Sages also sat down around him. With great happiness in his heart the emperor then explained the meaning of the divine tree.

“This divine tree is the tree of life. It never dies. When Heaven and Earth were first opened, a seed was sown from which was born the divine tree. It opened five-coloured rare blossoms and grew five-coloured fruits of life. Whoever gets to eat a fruit of life, will never die.”

Fenghou asked, “How often does this tree blossom?”

The emperor said, “Once in five hundred years; it also bears fruit once in five hundred years.”

Fenghou said, “We are not lucky in coming [here] today; it is not yet the time for it to bear fruit.” The Eight Sages could not but sigh!

The emperor said, “I once heard an old immortal say, ‘The tree of life can open its blossoms anytime; no need to sigh!’”

The Eight Sages on hearing this were beside themselves with joy, and begged the Yellow Emperor to make the divine tree open blossoms and bear fruits. If they all could eat a fruit of life, they would never die.

The emperor said, “The tree of life flowers once in five hundred years. Therefore once in five hundred years a king rises in the world; it is he who gets to eat the fruit of life. [But] why can it also blossom at any time? This needs explaining.”

Fenghou urgently wanted to know this explanation and said, “Let me ask the emperor to explain it in detail.”

The emperor said, “Everybody wants to eat the fruits of life; how unfortunate that no one can keep the Eight Prohibitions of life.”

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Fenghou said, "Whatever prohibition it is, we are willing to keep it, if only we get to eat the fruits of life."

The emperor said, "The first prohibition concerns debauchery, the second alcohol, the third profit, the fourth fame, the fifth anger, the sixth fear, the seventh music, the eighth desires. If you can break these eight vices, you get to eat the fruits of life."

The eight Sages together said, "We will keep the Eight Prohibitions absolutely; please have the tree of life blossom."

The emperor said, "This is easily said, but I fear the eight of you will not be able to do it. Let us go home soon."

But having seen the tree of life, how could they be willing to return home? They kept imploring the emperor again and again to manifest his powers so as to let them eat the fruits of life.

The emperor said, "I greatly sympathize with your zeal. However the flowering of the tree of life cannot be altered by just any person. One must keep the Eight Prohibitions. Let us test you." He commanded the Eight Sages to sit down and tested them in the Eight Prohibitions.

1. On the plain of the Mysterious Garden towers and pavilions rose up; cloud-like beautiful women sang and danced elegantly. The Eight Sages kept the prohibition without being moved.

2. There suddenly appeared fine meat dishes and delicious liquors. Their hungry stomachs rumbled. Some were moved by the vice of alcohol.

3. On the pavilions and terraces, gold, silver, and treasures were heaped up, but the minds of the Eight Sages were not yet moved.

4. In another surrounding, a high official was seated high on a precious seat and enjoyed the cheers of the people, clothed in glory. The minds of the Eight Sages still were not moved.
5. When they were strolling about, suddenly a man swore at them, heaping abuse on them. The Eight Sages could not endure it and argued with him, [thus] being moved by the fifth vice.

6. South of the Mysterious Garden there is the Gate of Southern Heaven. [The ridge] is only a foot [wide]; the abyss is 10,000 feet deep. Only he who fearlessly crosses this point can ascend the mountain. Only three of the Eight Sages crossed; five did not dare to.

7. In a new area, the towers and pavilions were all made from gold and silver; agate covered the ground. Beautiful music and seductive dances were performed. It truly was a place of the immortals. As the Eight Sages had strong karmic roots, they were not moved.

8. They arrived at a secluded mountain where all sounds were hushed. The Eight Sages sat upright, yet confused thoughts kept floating up like ripples on an ocean, going up and down, and thus the eighth prohibition was broken.

The emperor said, “I just [have to] to test you a little and you break the prohibitions right away.” Keeping the Eight Prohibitions is not easy. [So] the Eight Sages did not get to eat the fruits of life. But having already seen the tree of life, how could they lightly pass [this opportunity] by. They asked the emperor to [be allowed to] remain a while in the Mysterious Garden and intensify their cultivation. They [simply] had to attain firm observance of the Eight Prohibitions. The emperor sympathized with the sincere minds of the Eight Sages, permitted them to stay for a while, and made them cultivate the great method of “penetrating the mystery”.

“Vast and dark, according with the majesty of Heaven, being of the same matter-energy as Heaven (茫茫昧昧，因天之威，與玄通氣)”\(^\text{36}\) — this is the profound meaning of cultivating “firmness” to “penetrate the

\(^{36}\) A quote from the *Huainanzi*, chapter “Miucheng xun”.

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mystery”, which the Yellow Emperor taught to the Eight Sages. The chaotic
primordium of the Great Way is what is called vast and dark. Heaven
originally is the manifested transformation of human affairs. From human
affairs one penetrates Heaven and then the Mystery. The Mystery is a
comprehensive term for the unified body of Heaven and Humanity. The
mysterious mother is the venerable ancestor who opened the universe.
Therefore it is said, “The gate of the mysterious mother is called the root of
Heaven and Earth.” This is what the Yellow Emperor called “penetrating the
mystery”. The great method of penetrating the mystery solely depends on
“firmness”. The Eight Sages remained in the Mysterious Garden and
arduously practised firmness. After eight days they succeeded. When they
were tested again, their minds were not moved at all.

The tree of life immediately opened blossoms, brilliantly colourful and
loaded with fruits. The emperor picked the fruits of life and distributed them
among the Eight Sages who thereupon attained the Way of immortality. Very
happy they left the Mysterious Garden and returned east.

The tree of life grows in the Mysterious Garden where one cannot go. It
only blossoms once in five hundred years, and not everybody can get to eat its
fruits. These fruits of life are hard to seek.

[But actually] everybody has a tree of life. It lives in your mind. If only
you keep the Eight Prohibitions, i.e., those against “debauchery, alcohol,
profit, fame, anger, fear, sounds, and desires”, then you can penetrate the
mystery, and the tree of life will by itself blossom and bear fruit. The
Heavenly Way is the tree of life. All who return to the Heavenly Way can
attain eternal life.
CHAPTER 12: Mind and Nature

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: What is called mind? It is the controlling power of transformations. The fundamental substance of the mind originally was completely without being. [One has to be] constantly without desires to observe its subtleness. This "subtleness" is the controlling power of transformations, i.e., it is the mind. The mind has no location, i.e., it is not inside nor outside. It is merely a controlling power of transformations.

The controlling power is where the transformations issue from; [itself] it does not change. Thus the mind gives birth, but is not born. Therefore it is called "subtle". The universe is engaged in limitless transformations which all originate in the mind. And yet the mind is formless and without location. If one points out the form of the mind or its location, it is not the [true] mind. Because mind descended from Heaven, it is called "Heavenly mind".

What is called the nature? "What is decreed by Heaven is called the nature". The nature is the root of everything in existence. It evolved from the self-so-ness of the Limitless. Self-so-ness is the appearance of the chaotic primordium. This appearance of the chaotic primordium is the Great Invisible, the universe of the True Void. Movement started slowly in the midst of this True Void and subsequently the first seed was born - the "nature of the original spirit". This first seed was the Limitless, hence the "Way". Since it descended from Heaven, it is called "Heavenly Way". Yet if it is called "Way", why is it also called "nature"? The nature is the inactive state the Limitless, life its active state; in reality they are "one". Life rests naturally in the middle of the nature. The nature rests naturally in the middle of life.

37 Doctrine of the Mean, chapter 1.
Nature and life cannot be divided. They are the foundations of the universe, and also the main road of human life.

Thus the highest cultivation of the Heavenly Way depends on mind and the nature. The nature is the original spirit as such. Before it moves, mind is the controlling power. At the moment when movement is about to begin, the controlling power's movement takes place in the nature. The nature is revealed in the mind. Mind and nature bind together human life. [Thus] we can see their importance.

However, how should one set about the Way of mind and nature [which serves] to cultivate and nourish the Heavenly Way? Roughly it can be divided into the two categories of "Prior Heaven 先 天" and "Posterior Heaven 後 天". In Posterior Heaven, [people] worship deities, encourage goodness and correct their transgressions. In Prior Heaven they cultivate and nourish mind and nature. They hope to attain to the highest sphere, that of "inner sageliness" and "outer kingliness".

Thus, "mind and nature" are the highest exercise in cultivating the Heavenly Way.

By one good thought one "rectifies one's mind 正 心". If the whole mind is rectified, one "fulfills one's nature 盡 性".

Having one good thought and [thereby] rectifying the mind is very easy. Goodness is the "Heavenly Halls 天 堂"; a good thought lets one ascend to the Heavenly Halls. Evil is purgatory 地 獄; one evil thought lets one fall into purgatory. One [must] pay attention to the uprightness of the whole mind, [i.e., the state where] the mind is right at every moment. If it is like that, then one fulfills one's nature. One only has to start exercising with good thoughts. One day - one good thought. Two days - two good thoughts [and so on]. [If one practises this over] a long time, one naturally attains correctness of
the whole mind. [That means] there is nothing that is not good in the mind, and [one can] fulfill [one’s] nature. This is a short-cut in cultivating the “Heavenly Way”, entering the sacred and transcending the profane.

If one wants to seek fulfillment of one’s nature, one must start out by rectifying one’s mind, as this is something everybody can strive for. It is easy to do. Mind and nature originally are one. The movement of nature is mind; if the mind is correct, one returns to one’s nature.

Cultivating mind and nature is really easy. The following is its method:

1. Being watchful while one is alone: Being cautious of one’s private actions and words -- in the Way of rectifying the mind, being watchful of oneself is very important. Movements of the mind originally cannot be seen or heard by others. What is manifest is the movement of the mind. Movement always provokes a response. A certain action seems very complex, yet it is simply made up of numberless “mind movements”.

2. Blocking the senses: The senses are the roots of desires: sight, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, sexuality, and ideas. Blocking means not letting them be unrestrained. These seven roots are indispensable for human life, but they must be appropriate, and not be allowed to lose their straightness.

3. Closing the gate: The gateways through which desires pass are: ears, eyes, mouth, nose, body, lust, and intention; these are the seven gates. They do have their function and must not be discarded out of prejudice. But since desirous thoughts enter through these seven gates, one must block them. Blocking does not mean discarding and not using them. It [just] means

38 These are the Buddhist “six kinds of dust” (liuchen 六塵) plus sexuality (xing 性).
blocking their evil and practising their good [aspects].

Thus, the nature comes from the decree of Heaven; it is the root of the universe. They who cultivate the Heavenly Way "must end where they originally began", i.e., return to their origin. When the exercise of nature is complete, one returns to the Way. Returning to the Way is the union of Heaven and Humanity. [The adept then] holds the whole universe in his grasp; it is this that is called "holding the Great Form". Mind originally is a ripple born in the sea of the nature. Mind and nature are one body. The 10,000 transformations originate in the mind; it is the controlling power of the transformations of the universe. Nature is the body, mind its function. Completeness of body and function is the result of the cultivation of the Way. Therefore cultivation of the Heavenly Way depends on mind and nature.

CHAPTER 13: The Preciousness of the Way

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: The Way was born before Heaven and Earth; before Heaven and Earth, there already existed the Way. The Way is neither born nor dies; it existed ever since highest antiquity. It revolves eternally and never rests. It therefore is the origin and ruler of all beings, the mother of the world. From this we can realize the "preciousness of the way".

Confucius once described this preciousness when he said, "If in the

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39 The three maxims enumerated here are taken from the Doctrine of the Mean, chapter 1 (#1) and the Laozi, chapter 56 (#2 and 3) respectively.
40 A quote from the "Great Appendix", second part, of the Book of Changes.
41 Laozi, chapter 35.
morning I hear the Way, it is all right if I die in the evening (朝聞道，夕死可矣). Thus he described the preciousness of the Way, but one does not [really] die in the evening, when one has heard the Way in the morning. If really one was to die in the evening after having heard the Way in the morning, who would still dare listen to the Way?

What is called the Way? It seems very mysterious and subtle, but in fact the so-called “Way” is the meaning of the universe and human life. If you understand the meaning of the universe and human life, you have attained the Way. Worldly people do not think that it is that easy to attain the Way; [they think] that there are many mysteries. The mysterious is something that contains many problems and that one does not understand, but as soon as you have understood, there is no more mystery.

Why do humans live? Why do they wear clothes? Why do they eat? Clothes and food are for the preservation [of one’s physical body], but humans definitely do not live for food and clothes. So what do they live for? They live for the “Way”. Therefore worldly people certainly must “listen to the Way”. The most important reason for “listening to the Way” is that “human life drifts in the outside and everybody has to return home”. Where is our home? Where must everybody return in the end? They who listen to the Way obtain a final resting-place. Otherwise they will be drifting forever, will never have a home; is not that [just] too sad? So where does one return at the very end? One “returns to truth and reverts to simplicity”; one goes back to the Heavenly Halls of the Limitless, the home that gave birth to one’s original spirit. If one does not listen to the Way, how could one return? If I listen to the Way, I will understand my identity and also understand the origin of all transformations. Then the 10,000 transformations will not move

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42 Analects, chapter 4.
my mind. This is the "preciousness of the Way".

But what is the "Way"? Confucius says, "It is the One which binds my Way together".43 What is this "One"? It is the Way which was born before Heaven and Earth, which existed before Heaven and Earth. Everything comes from the "One" and in the end returns to the One. Where do we come from? Where do we return to in the end? The 10,000 phenomena of the universe seem very complicated, in fact they are very simple. One has to know that "Heaven is pure by means of the One; Earth takes shape by means of the One; spirit is numinous by means of the One (天得一以清，地得一以凝，神得一以靈)".44 From this we can know that the "One" means that the Way's preciousness lies in its Oneness.

Confucius said, "It is the One which binds my Way together". The disciples of the Confucian school did not understand his meaning and came to ask Zengzi. Zengzi said, "The Way of the Master is simply loyalty and forgiveness (夫子之道，忠恕而已)".45 The character for loyalty is made up of the characters for "centre 中" and for "mind 心", the character for forgiveness consists of the characters for "like, according 如" and "mind 心". The "centred mind" refers to the rectified mind. Drive away selfish desires and revive the fundamental substance of its original luminosity. "According to one's mind" means "following one's mind". "Following mind" means "becoming calm" so as to achieve naturalness. The 10,000 transformations originate in the mind and keep a hold on the mind. This the Way of all-pervading unity 一貫之道.

Making one's intentions sincere and rectifying one's mind are the fundamental exercises in cultivating the Way; of the two, rectifying the mind

43 Analects, chapter 4.
44 Laozi, chapter 39.
45 Analects, chapter 4.
is the most important. If a person has an rectified mind, his mind is not moved. If the mind is not moved, there is great firmness. In firmness one can naturally regain one's nature. Following the mind means following what the mind desires. Material things and self are both forgotten, one reaches a state of naturalness. From rectifying one's mind one proceeds to following it; this is the exercise of nourishing the mind; it is also the Way of all-pervading unity. [This Way] is united by "mind"; that which unites is the "mind".

Mind is the controlling power of the 10,000 transformations. All transformations of the universe originate from the mind. Mind is not [the universe's] fundamental substance, it is just a controlling power of the transformations. If one can grasp this controlling power, one can grasp the transformations. Therefore the mind is an important subject in cultivating the Way.

From my above explications worldly people can roughly understand the great meaning [of Confucius' saying] "If in the morning I hear the Way, it is all right to die in the evening". They also can understand the "preciousness of the Way". How should one hear the Way? How should one nurture and rectify this mind? This depends on whether or not the disciple of the Way has perseverance and will power.

"Hearing the Way" is understanding it. The Way is not a thing, but a spiritual sphere; once you hear it you know it! Human life does not exceed a few decades, like a sunbeam briefly shining through a crack in the wall, it is over in the twinkling of the eye. After death one falls into samsara and is born and born again with utmost suffering. When one hears the Way, one regains one's nature. When one regains one's nature, one [reaches] understanding! One can then [live] without ever dying.

Hearing the Way is a kind of penetration of the numinous 通霊. [To
accomplish it] one must first discard all selfish views, then one can be receptive. Secondly, one must purify oneself; only then can one penetrate as soon as one is touched [by the Way]. Therefore only one who understands the Way can know its "preciousness".

CHAPTER 14: Advancing on the Heavenly Way

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: Advancing on the Heavenly Way proceeds in six stages: "Resting, becoming firm, becoming still, becoming peaceful, practising deliberation, attaining [the Way]". Next I will explain them one by one:

First stage: Resting 止.

Those who cultivate the Way must not stand still, but cultivate themselves with all effort. Resting means resting in the One. It is said that "all movements under Heaven are subject to the One (天下之動，處於一者也)." Confucius says, "It is the One which binds my Way together". Thus, the highest principle of the universe rests in the One. Worldly people call it "faith" because it is the highest unifying spirit; it really is a great resting-place. The universe is engaged in ceaseless movement; the affairs of the world come streaming along in uninterrupted succession. Humanity is placed in the midst [of all this activity], drifting and revolving, in deep suffering and distress. Therefore one needs a resting-place. Only when one has a place to rest, one can deal with an environment [filled with] confusion, disturbance, suffering, and distress. Resting is not passivity, resting is unifying the spirit. If

46 Book of Changes, "Great Appendix", section 2, chapter 1.
one knows to rest, one can afterwards act the more [vigorously]. The following is the method of the true resting exercise in cultivating the Heavenly Way:

1. Firmly believe in the Heavenly Way, and profess faith in the Heavenly Way.

2. Render respectful obedience to the discipline of the cultivation of the Way so as to make serious your own [attitude towards] life;

3. Practise embracing the One, do not have confused thoughts, then your spirit can be concentrated and be naturally at rest.

Second stage: Becoming firm

Make your body upright and unmoving, [to the point that] you are unaware when a thunder-clap roars above your head or that you are not startled when Mount Tai collapses before you. Do not be moved by any seduction - these are exercises in “firmness”. They let you see the light of principle and [protect] you from being moved by heretical teachings and wrong words. With great courage one can take on great tasks. “Dignified and reverent; strong in oneself, not being startled when encountering change (莊敬自強，處變不驚)”. This is how to cultivate firmness:

1. Pay attention to food hygiene. Eat more vegetarian food to cleanse your body fluids. Avoid meat so that your body fluids will not [become] heavy and turbid. To make your body functions healthy and wholesome you need to train your body. Strengthen yourself mentally and physically.

2. Keep your matter-energy raised, do not let it sink down, this can help you stay healthy.

3. Practise concentrating matter-energy and regulating breath, making your matter-energy even and stable. If matter-energy does not drift, the body
fluids do not flow up, and mind and thinking naturally settle down.

Third stage: Becoming still 静

Having become firm, one becomes still. Stillness is like standing water. If water is still, it can reflect images. When the human spirit is resting and still, it can by itself illumine the 10,000 things. Out of stillness one can produce wisdom [which enables one] to advance further into the marvellous sphere of spontaneous comprehension. This is how to cultivate stillness:

2. Reduce desires. Desires are [directed towards] external objects. You must not be influenced by external objects.
3. Practise mind-fasting [so as to] unite the body with the mind.

Fourth stage: Becoming peaceful 安

Resting, becoming firm and still all need practical effort. “Becoming peaceful” however [comes] naturally. Naturalness means being at ease. Being at ease means having no [intentional] mind. When Confucius was seventy years of age, he followed the desires of his mind, and then he was at ease. This is its cultivation method:

1. Be natural; do not use affectations; do not imitate; do not act in a forced, unspontaneous manner.
2. Be united with the Mysterious Sameness; break all differentiations; if there are no differentiations, both the nature of things and human nature can be fulfilled.
Fifth stage: Contemplation 慮

The former four stages are all related to stillness; now we get to motion. The highest [level of] cultivation and nourishing in cultivating the Heavenly Way does not emphasize the practice of stillness. Stillness is a phase, not the aim of cultivation. This is how [this phase] is cultivated:

1. Investigate deep and distant matters, following the mind in responding to transformations (鈐深致遠，隨心應化).

2. Probe into the mysterious and hidden reveal the profound mechanisms of the universe (探謎索隱，揭發玄機).

Sixth stage: Attainment 得

Attainment refers to attaining the Way, achieving the stage where Heaven and Humanity are one. The “union of Heaven and Humanity” means that the universe is within me. I am within the universe. I and the universe are one. Sun, moon, and stars, wind, rain, thunder, and lightning, the Great Earth, mountains, and rivers - all are part of me. I am united with Heaven and Earth. I am one with Heaven and Earth. [One who is] like this can return to the blissful Heaven of the Limitless, which is the native place.

Let us now explain the exercises and effects of the six stages in cultivating the Heavenly Way as follows:

Resting - from rest there [arises] form. Form means establishing. The Way forms in the centre.


Stillness - from stillness [arises] understanding. Understanding is

48 ibid.
shining brilliance.

Peace - from peace [arises] motion, which follows its natural course.

Contemplation - from contemplation [arise] changes. [The term] “changes” refers to the immeasurability of yin and yang.

Attainment - from attainment [arises] transformation. Transformation means transcending life and ending death.⁴⁹

CHAPTER 15: Manifesting Purity and Embracing Simplicity to Reject the Demon

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: The disciples of the Way must “manifest purity and embrace simplicity”, then they can accomplish their cultivation of the Heavenly Way. Manifesting purity and embracing simplicity are a shortcut to expunging all confusions. The disciple of the Way needs to know that the Way is a foot high, but the demon ten feet. It is imperative [to know] how to free oneself from suffering, [as] suffering is a demonic trial. Cultivating the Heavenly Way means returning to the blissful world of the Great Way, but while they have not completed their cultivation, it is extremely urgent for the disciples of the Way [to know] how they can save themselves from the present sufferings. The only way to extract yourself from the present suffering, is by manifesting purity and embracing simplicity.

I will now explain “manifesting purity” and “embracing simplicity” separately.

Purity means pure whiteness, not defiled by a single speck of dust,

⁴⁹ This is an attempt to combine the two chains of reasoning contained in chapter 23 of the Doctrine of the Mean and chapter 1 of the Great Learning.
absolutely untarnished. Manifesting purity means that [everything that is] manifested is pure. The purity spoken of here is not genuine pure whiteness; this is merely a metaphor. Manifesting purity means being empty and without existence, like the empty chamber where brightness is born. How can one manifest purity?

1. No self — do not have thoughts of self. If you do, there will arise thoughts of the other. When self and the other are opposed, a selfish mind comes into being, and the demon uses the opportunity to intrude.

2. No distance — do not have thoughts of distance. If you do, there will arise thoughts of closeness. When distance and closeness are opposed, space comes into being, and the demon uses the opportunity to intrude.

3. No earliness — do not have thoughts of earliness. If you do, there will arise thoughts of lateness. When earliness and lateness are opposed, time comes into being, and the demon uses the opportunity to intrude.

4. No familiarity — do not have thoughts of familiarity. If you do, there will arise thoughts of strangeness. When familiarity and strangeness are opposed, love and hate come into being, and the demon uses the opportunity to intrude.

5. No heaviness — do not have thoughts of heaviness. If you do, there will arise thoughts of lightness. When heaviness and lightness are opposed, confusion comes into being, and the demon uses the opportunity to intrude.

6. No highness — do not have thoughts of highness. If you do, there will arise thoughts of lowness. When highness and lowness are

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50 A reference to the *Zhuangzi* where this image expresses the fertility of emptiness and stillness. My translation follows Watson’s [1968:58].
opposed, unevenness comes into being, and the demon uses the opportunity to intrude.

7. No old age 無老 -- do not have thoughts of old age. If you do, there will arise thoughts of youth. When old age and youth are opposed, life and death come into being, and the demon uses the opportunity to intrude.

8. No strength 無強 -- do not have thoughts of strength. If you do, there will arise thoughts of weakness. When strength and weakness are opposed, contention comes into being, and the demon uses the opportunity to intrude.

9. No greatness 無大 -- do not have thoughts of greatness. If you do, there will arise thoughts of smallness. When greatness and smallness are opposed, pedantry comes into being, and the demon uses the opportunity to intrude.

10. No nobleness 無尊 -- do not have thoughts of nobleness. If you do, there will arise thoughts of lowliness. When nobleness and lowliness are opposed, differences in status come into being, and the demon uses the opportunity to intrude.

11. No right 無是 -- do not have thoughts of right. If you do, there will arise thoughts of wrong. When right and wrong are opposed, sin comes into being, and the demon uses the opportunity to intrude.

12. No beauty 無美 -- do not have thoughts of beauty. If you do, there will arise thoughts of ugliness. When beauty and ugliness are opposed, sexual desires come into being, and the demon uses the opportunity to intrude.

Embracing simplicity means having no desires. How can one achieve that state?

1. No greed 無貪 -- in any kind of activity, there only has to be a greedy mind for desirous thoughts to arise. Desires produce obstructions. If there is any alienation, one cannot penetrate far, and the demon uses the opportunity
2. No excessive love — that parents love their children is in their original nature; but to excessively dote upon them is foolish. He who loves excessively has no [concept of] right and wrong and falls into sin, whereupon the demon uses the opportunity to intrude.

3. No anger — anger is a bad thing which easily turns into violence. When one is violent, one offends against the constant rules and violates principle. Thereupon the demon uses the opportunity to intrude.

4. No joy — excessive joy also easily produces desires. Because when one is delighted by something, one inevitably becomes confused. When one is confused, one cannot distinguish truth [anymore], and the demon uses the opportunity to intrude.

5. No sadness — when one is sad, one is dispirited and lacking in courage. The demon uses the opportunity to intrude, and eventually [brings about one’s] downfall.

6. No indolence — when one is indolent, one’s spirits become lax and off guard. [Thus] a hundred diseases arise and the demon uses the opportunity to intrude.

7. No lasciviousness — lasciviousness is the chief of the 10,000 evils. It is urgently necessary to avoid it.

8. No being affected — the origin of desires is mostly in physiological [processes]. Thus we have to watch our sense organs and not allow ourselves to be carelessly affected by the outside [world, because this may] move our minds and the demon will use the opportunity to intrude.

The above items are very effective methods for “manifesting purity, embracing simplicity, and rejecting the demon”. They should be carefully maintained and cultivated, then the Heavenly Way can be accomplished.
From among these prohibitions, I will briefly discuss that concerning differentiations. One wants to do away with differentiations, so as to return to the original purity of self. The greater the differentiations, the greater the suffering (i.e., the demonic trials). Without differentiations, there is no obstinacy; without obstinacy there is no suffering, and thus one can avoid the trials of the demon.

The reasons for the rise of desires are none other than greed, excessive love, anger, joy, sadness, indolence, lasciviousness, and being affected [by outside things]. If you block off these Eight Robbers, then desires can cease. To cut desirous thoughts off at the root, one must “make bright bright virtue”. With bright virtue one understands; it is like holding a sword of wisdom in your hands from which all demons withdraw on their own accord. Being without desires is embracing simplicity, which is [also called] returning to simplicity.

To sum up, the disciples of the Way should “lessen selfishness and diminish desires 少私寡欲”. If only they are without selfishness and desires, they can advance on the Way. How can one cut off selfishness and desires? Laozi says, “Arriving at extreme emptiness, preserving stillness and sincerity”. These are two useful swords. Emptiness means being without selfishness. Stillness means being without desires. What is it like to be completely empty and still? It is expressed in the sayings “an empty chamber gives birth to brightness 虚室生白” and “emptiness is the fasting of the mind 虚者心齋也” -- these are the highest exercises in the cultivation of the Way.

Stillness and emptiness are extremely important, but there is a difference [between them]. Stillness is clear and quiet. If one wants to have it,
then the 10,000 phenomena are all arrayed densely [in your path]. If one wants not to have it, it is accomplished in a moment. In stillness nothing is illuminated, but there is also nothing that is not illuminated. The twelve interdictions listed above serve to manifest purity, the following eight interdictions serve to embrace simplicity; they are all practical exercises in the cultivation of the Way. If one can cultivate oneself skilfully over a long time, the results will come spontaneously.

CHAPTER 16: For Cultivating the Heavenly Way One Must Cultivate

Numen

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: Cultivating the Heavenly Way depends on reaching a [certain] highest sphere. The attainment of this sphere depends on cultivating numen. If one does not cultivate numen, one remains in illusion, and the Heavenly Way cannot be cultivated to completion.

1. What is numen?

Numen 鬧 is the refined matter-energy of Heaven and Earth. This term "matter-energy" is used for something that cannot be described. To express its unfathomable fineness and subtlety, we call it "numen". This numinous matter-energy is the medium which connects Heaven and Humanity; it is extremely fine and subtle; its state cannot be described. If we carefully investigate its origin, [it turns out that] it originally was born from the revolutions of the "Way". As the Way is invisible, this refined matter-energy of course also is invisible. Sometimes it forms light, but the light [itself] is not
numen, it is just a sort of radiation [emitting from] numen. This sort of radiation cannot be seen often, it appears only occasionally. Descending numen is not completely light; therefore it is called “refined matter-energy”.

2. The origin of numen

Numen does not originate from Prior Heaven. Prior Heaven is the “Way”. The revolutions of the Way give birth to numen; numen is a product of the Way. Therefore all who receive numen have the Way. Each person’s endowment with numen is different. Because everybody’s cultivation of the Way is different, so the numen they receive of course is also different. [One’s ability] to penetrate numen depends on one’s cultivation. If you cultivate, numen will come; if you do not, it will not come. Therefore the origin of numen is in yourself, do not seek it anywhere else. Numen cannot be asked for, it must be cultivated.

3. The types of numina

The numina seen in the human world can be divided into many kinds. In fact there is only one numen as such, but there are different functions and accordingly different expressions [of numen].

(1) Sudden inspiration 竣機 -- in a precarious situation, in a crisis of life and death, there may appear a sort of ingenuity which turns the critical situation around. This ingenuity is numen. [...]

(2) Numinous light 靈明 -- sometimes numen emits rays of light, which are therefore called numinous light. [The Chinese term for "numinous light" (lingming) also has] the meaning of "intelligence". This, too, is a sort of numinous light. This kind of light seems to be [like] a shining mirror that can illumine the 10,000 things and reflect every scene. Numinous
light is born out of stillness. Hence they who cultivate the Way must emphasize stillness, as it is the source of intelligence.

3. Numinous stimulation -- everything in the universe is subject to the mechanisms of stimulus and response (ganying). The universe is an electromagnetic field, where without any oversight good stimuli produce good responses and bad stimuli produce bad responses. Beware of the dangers involved in stimulation! Numinous stimulation is communication with the deities; it is not an ordinary relationship of stimulus and response. Only with the greatest cultivation does one obtain numinous stimulation.

4. How to cultivate numen

To cultivate numen one does not necessarily have to withdraw from society; it can be practised in any place, at any time. The steps of cultivating numen are as follows:

(1) Making a vow -- i.e., using great determination. "Vow" refers to a very sincere faith in the Heavenly Way, by which your spirit is unified. Having made a vow, your spirit has a direction and a final resting-place. However, you do not reach the aim, but only set a goal. One first has to set this goal and then one can go forward in this direction. Thus, making a vow is of prime importance in cultivating numen.

(2) Receiving the Way -- all who aspire to the cultivation of numen have to accept the true principle of the "Way". You can become enlightened only by accepting this true principle. Everything in the universe has one principle.

(3) Cleansing the mind -- cleansing this mind by means of what in the trigrams [of the Book of Changes] is called auspiciousness and
inauspiciousness and repentance and regret 害凶恥吝; 53 it means being careful and fearful. Way cultivation has its discipline which is permanently used to cleanse the mind so as to avoid intrusion of the demon. Keep the discipline to purify the mind and do not let even a slight movement arise. The mind will then be naturally shining and will illumine everything.

(4) Opening of obstructions 開障 -- all faults and bad customs are demonic obstructions. The demon is a kind of turbid matter-energy that obstructs innate knowledge and causes a very bad disease. Opening enlightenment means removing this turbid matter-energy. One has to use a certain force to eliminate it. This force is gained by reciting to oneself, “Heavenly numen, Earthly numen, divine numen of the Heavenly Mother, demons withdraw, numinous light is powerful (天靈，地靈，天母神靈，諸魔退位，靈光靈靈)”. If this is recited piously and with a sincere heart, there will naturally arise a certain power which can overcome the demonic obstructions. A scholar who has attained the Way can help those [still] engaged in cultivation by reciting, “Reciting with one mind, the 10,000 numina are gathered in my palm, opening the passes and penetrating the mind, numinous light is powerful (一心在念，萬靈聚掌，開關通竅，靈光靈靈)”. He who recites [this] to assist [others] turns his palms to those in cultivation and recites it with a sincere mind; then there the power will appear naturally.

(5) Viewing the mystery 観妙 -- “Being without desires so as to view its mystery (無慾以觀其妙)”. The mystery is the controlling power of all transformations. When there are no desires, there is understanding. With understanding, numen appears. You have to use the exercise of mind-fasting

53 Refers to the hexagrams function of pointing out right and wrong and thus evoking repentance in humans. See Book of Changes, “Great Appendix”, section 1, chapter 2.
which is divided into four stages: embracing the One, concentrating matter-energy, preserving the spirit, returning to emptiness. Mind-fasting is also one kind of stillness exercise. Its aim is understanding; when one understands, one penetrates.

Cultivating the numen is divided into five stages: Making a vow; receiving the Way; cleansing the mind; opening of obstructions; viewing the mystery. If you can proceed with your cultivation according to these five stages, numinous light will come by itself, like the shadow following the form.

The pure and light rises up, the turbid and heavy sinks down. This an immutable law. Attaining purity and lightness mainly depends on lessening selfishness and diminishing desires. If you do not cultivate numen, how can you [become] pure and light?

**CHAPTER 17: The Road for Cultivating the Heavenly Way**

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: When worldly people discuss the Way, there are many contradictory and confusing opinions. It is like the blind touching the elephant: one says it is something with a long nose, one says it is like a wall, and still another says it is a long tooth; they all refer correctly to the elephant. However, what they discuss is only one spot, not the whole picture. They who investigate the Heavenly Way must have thorough penetration, otherwise they are obstructed and [consequently] a hundred misfortunes arise.

The "Way" is non-interference, utmost sincerity, utmost goodness, and the golden mean.
Non-interference -- in terms of the Way's form, non-interference is the supreme Way.

Utmost sincerity -- its efficacy is discussed in detail in the book The Doctrine of the Mean.

Utmost goodness -- in terms of the Way's merit, resting in utmost goodness is resting in the Way.

The golden mean -- the middle is the great root of the world. The "mean" 童 means "application" 用; thus [the Mean] is the Way's application. In terms of the Way's movements it is the Heavenly Way.

The Doctrine of the Mean is a heavenly book. It says, "When sincerity arises from intelligence, it is due to instruction. But if there is sincerity, there will be intelligence, and if there is intelligence, there will be sincerity (自明誠謂之教，誠則明矣，明則誠矣)."54 Therefore the disciple of the Way has three routes, i.e., the exercises of "nature", "instruction", and "concentration".

1. The exercise of one's nature 性 功: "Fulfilling principle and one's nature to arrive at destiny (窮理盡性，以至於命)."55 The exercise of one's nature is important in cultivating the Heavenly Way. "When intelligence arises from sincerity, it is due to one's nature"56 -- this refers to sudden enlightenment, [such as happens when] hearing one word, one becomes awakened to the Way. Confucius' hearing the Way in the morning also is a kind of sudden enlightenment. [The capacity for] sudden enlightenment is mostly congenital. Those with the "roots of the Way" [only need to hear] one word and are greatly enlightened and directly penetrate Heaven. This of course is fast and convenient, but it cannot be forced.

2. The exercise of instruction 教 功: "When sincerity arises from

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55 Book of Changes, "Remarks on the Trigrams", chapter 1.
56 Doctrine of the Mean, chapter 21.
intelligence, it is due to instruction." [This refers to] using a method of
cultivation and nourishment to recover numinous brightness. "Numinous
brightness" is the splendour of the Way. The gleam of spiritual brightness
[signifies] advancement on the Way. The exercises of cultivating the Way all
[consist in] cultivating brightness, with an emphasis on lessening selfishness
and diminishing desires. If human nature is darkened, one [walks] the way of
the demon and falls into purgatory. For the cultivation of the Way a
discipline has been fixed which should be kept by the disciples of the Way. By
means of this [discipline one can] rectify the mind and expunge selfish
desires. When desires are pure, bright virtue appears. Therefore the exercises
of cultivating the Way depend on "brightness". If one makes bright bright
virtue, one is close to the Heavenly Way.

3. The exercise of concentration 曲功："Next is he who arrives at
concentration."57 Concentration means embracing the One. With a focussed
spirit recite "Venerable Mother of the Limitless, Great Honoured One,
Mother of Heaven". No matter whether you are walking, standing, sitting, or
lying down, recite it whenever you have time, recite it with a concentrated
mind. In the beginning your voice [should be] loud, then becoming ever
lower, until there is no sound and you arrive at stillness. The exercise of
concentration is easy to practise. It is a pity that worldly people do not
understand the use of embracing the One.

By the routes of nature, instruction, and concentration one can reach
the sphere of sincerity. The efficacy of "sincerity" has six stages: "This sincerity
takes shape. From taking shape, it becomes manifest. From being manifest, it
becomes bright. Bright, it affects others. Affecting others, they are changed by
it. Changed by it, they are transformed. It is only he who is possessed of the

57 Cf. above footnote 24.
most complete sincerity that can exist under heaven, who can transform (誠則形，形則著，著則明，明則動，動則變，變則化，惟天下至誠，為能化).”58

1. Form 形: “To advance on the Way 進於道” is the first step of the Way of Humanity. This “form” does not mean “having form” [as opposed to formlessness]. The Way is the chaotic primordium, born before Heaven and Earth, inaudible, invisible, and indistinct. Laozi says of it, “Shape without shape, form without form (無狀之狀，無物之象).”59 [Thereby] we can know the subtleness of the Way; seeking it depends on one’s use of understanding.

2. Manifestation 著: “Virtue enriches the self 德潤身”60 -- this describes the maturing of the Way. The maturing of the Way depends on the changes and transformations of matter-energy and substance. The changes of matter-energy and substance depend upon forceful cultivation and nourishment; only then can one progress in virtue and cultivate merit.

3. Understanding 明: “Comprehension is wide and understanding great 含弘光大”.61 This is an important exercise in cultivating the Way. With understanding one sees through the hidden and subtle, differentiates good and bad, and attains the state where one is not confused [anymore].

4. Motion 動: “The Way is constantly shifting, changing and moving without rest, flowing everywhere through the Six Voids (為道者，履遷，變動不居，周流六虛).”62 The motions of the Way are natural revolutions. When cultivating the Way one must not exclusively utilize the exercise of stillness, but also pay attention to the exercise of motion. It is a very subtle

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58 Doctrine of the Mean, chapter 23. My translation is modified from that of Legge [1982, vol.1:417].
59 Laozi, chapter 14.
60 The Great Learning, chapter 6 (commentary).
61 Book of Changes, kun hexagram.
thing that stillness and motion are complementary.

5. Change 变: Motion brings about change. By change the 10,000 phenomena are spread out in confusion and the present world [came into being]. “The Way is spoken of in wonder at the 10,000 things (道也者，妙萬物而為言者也).” From the changes and transformations of the 10,000 things, one realizes the subtleness of the universe. Change [however] is an illusion. Only non-change is truly real.

6. Transformation 化: Changes lead to transformations. “He who assists Heaven and Earth in their transforming nourishment, ranks as one with them (與天地化育，與天地同参).” This is the stage of union between Heaven and Humanity, also called “ascension and transformation 昇化”. Transformation is also a return to the Way. The Way is the ruler that created the universe and the 10,000 things. Returning to the Way means becoming one with the ruler. This is the stage of transformation, the highest aim of Way cultivation.

Nature, instruction, and concentration are the great routes of cultivating the Heavenly Way. The disciples of the Way should keep to these three routes and make them their standard [of conduct]. If you wholeheartedly aspire [to the Way], you will be delivered from the sea of suffering. You will reach the other shore and ascend to blissfulness. Those who do not know how to cultivate themselves can hardly avoid walking onto a wrong path or falling into an abyss. I hope that all you who live in confusion will quickly awaken!
CHAPTER 18: Rebirth as a Human Being is Difficult to Obtain

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: "Rebirth as a human being and in the eastern land is hard to obtain (人生難得，東土難生)". From this we can know how precious human life is. Since you confused ones [have had the luck to] be born as humans and in the eastern land, lose no time and cultivate [yourselves] towards the Way. You have to know that the sages, Buddhas, immortals, and deities all [have acquired their status] in retribution for accomplished cultivation. This "union of Heaven and Man" is the "highest state of consciousness". The "idea of the Great Harmony" is the most complete "way of living" a human life. It is the hope of the disciple of the Heavenly Way to be good at developing, to be good at cultivating towards the Way, to open up humanity's highest rationality. This also is Humanity's final refuge.

1. The Value of Human Life

"The Way is great, Heaven is great, Earth is great, Humanity is great (道大，天大，地大，人大)". Humanity and the Way, Heaven and Earth together are called the Four Great Ones of the universe. Thus Man's position is very high. Once one has attained rebirth as a human, one has to cultivate the Way, only then can one rank as one with Heaven and Earth. [The Zhuangzi chapter] "Free and Easy Wandering" characterizes the loftiness of the disciple of the Way's countenance in the following manner: "In the northern darkness there is a fish and his name is Kun 鯤. The Kun is so huge I don't know how many thousand li he measures. He changes and becomes a bird whose name is Peng 鷗. The back of the Peng measures I don't know

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63 Slightly modified quote from Laozi, chapter 25.
how many thousand li across and, when he rises up and flies off, his wings are like clouds all over the sky. When the sea begins to move, this bird sets off for the southern darkness, which is the Lake of Heaven.” It also says, “When the Peng journeys to the southern darkness, the waters are roiled for three thousand li. He beats the whirlwind and rises ninety thousand li."\(^{64}\) By means of the bird Peng, this describes the lofty countenance of the disciple of the Way. Hence the disciple of the Way must have the ambition to rise up ninety thousand li like the great Peng. The “Heavenly Pond 天池” is the Heavenly Kingdom; it means attaining the Heavenly Halls of the Limitless Heaven. Rebirth as a human is hard to obtain; since you have got it already, you should understand the value of human life and quickly cultivate the Heavenly Way lest you have received your life for nothing.

Humans alone are the most numinous among the 10,000 beings; this numen has been bestowed by Heaven. Therefore humans are the children of Heaven, and Heaven is the father of Humanity. Thus we have the expressions “son of Heaven 天子” and “Heavenly Father 天父”. As Heaven is the Father and Humanity Heaven’s child, they are of the same body, and thus can [again] become united. This union of Heaven and Humanity [means] that humans can cultivate the Way, attain it, and ascend to Heaven.

2. The Process of Human Life

If a person lives out his life-span from birth to death, there are four stages: “childhood”, “youth”, “old age”, and “death”. Let us explain in detail the general meaning of this four-stage process. The child is innocent and its virtue complete. In youth physical energy is strong, [but] one is attacked by material things and desires. In old age the body is weak, [but] the desires are

\(^{64}\) Zhuangzi, chapter 1. Translation by Burton Watson [1968: 29].
extinguished. Death is returning to one's true abode. The true abode is an eternal sphere without birth or dying. In the process of human life there are also four sufferings: birth, aging, disease, and death. Sakyamuni wanted to escape the four sufferings of "birth, aging, disease, and death"; therefore he left his family and cultivated the Way until he was able to accomplish it and become a Buddha.

3. In Human Life One should Accumulate Rich Virtue

When the great Peng flew to the Far South he needed a great wind to be able to fly [that far]. Large ships need deep water to travel. Humanity needs rich virtue to have great accomplishment in cultivating the Way. If one cultivates the Way with a sincere intention and a rectified mind, establishing much merit, one naturally accumulates rich [virtue]. One has to know how to cultivate virtue in order to advance on the Way.

4. Human Life should Seek Release from Suffering

[...] Since one has attained human life, one should seek release from [its] intolerable suffering. For that purpose one has to break all distress, take things as they come, then one can free oneself. The distress humans suffer mostly arises from being touched by the outside world and thus disturbed in their spirit. Therefore by cultivating the Way one can "settle the spirit, break material desires, and enter the stage where the spirit is pure, still, and happy."

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CHAPTER 19: The Demonic Way

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: The demonic way is a power opposed to the orthodox Way. There is the saying, “the Way is a foot high, but the demon ten feet”. This kind of demonic power specifically obstructs the cultivation of the orthodox Way.

The Great Way originally is even and broad, but the people like to walk small roads. These small roads are close to the demonic way. The demonic way is an illegitimate road. It can be compared to a small alley: although it is a road, it is very narrow and small, and there is no exit at the other end; it a dead-end alley, a road of death. The road of death that has no exit is the demonic way. The demonic way is the way of the left, not the central and orthodox Great Way.

The Great Way shines forth onto the world. Everybody can see it, everybody can cultivate it. The Great Way is very easy to practise, but in your life you must not depart from it for a moment. Being away from it means being not of the Way. Anything obscure and dark is not the orthodox Way, but the demonic way. Therefore the disciples of the Way have to take as their principles “making sincere one’s intentions, rectifying the mind, cultivating oneself, lessening selfishness, and diminishing desires”. This is the shining Great Way. These are also the exercises that build a foundation. Only cultivation in keeping with these exercises lets one enter the realm of the orthodox Way. Otherwise one easily falls into the demonic way.

The demonic way constantly seduces the people. As soon as they fall into the demonic way, they fall into purgatory. Only those enlightened to goodness can transcendently enter the Great Way. If they cultivate with steadfast ambition they can ascend to the Heavenly Kingdom. Purgatory and
Heavenly Kingdom are two spheres; one represents darkness and pain, the other light and happiness. These two spheres exist anytime and anywhere; good and bad are their dividing line. The demonic power of the demonic way is like a black cloud covering which obscures sun and moon. When the black has dispersed, sun and moon shine again.

Even though humans' innate knowledge, i.e., human nature, is temporarily obscured by the demonic power of selfish desires, there will eventually be a time when this power will vanish. It is a crystallization of yin matter-energy and can be compared to the morning mist: when the sun rises in the east, in a short time, the mist vanishes by itself. Everybody has innate knowledge, which like the rising sun can pierce the clouds and mist and emit a strong light. If only one diligently cultivates the orthodox Way with a steadfast will, one will in the end defeat the demonic way and enter into the realm of the shining Great Way. It is said: Heterodoxy will not defeat orthodoxy, the demon will certainly perish in the end.

However, what road should worldly people walk to avoid being harmed by the demonic power? Of course they should walk the majestic Great Way, act in accordance with the sacred instructions of the sages, Buddhas, immortals, and deities, and diligently cultivate the Heavenly Way. Then they can obtain light, and thus avoid being harmed by the demons' power. But they absolutely must not erroneously follow wrong paths, [as they then] will fall into purgatory and bring 10,000 calamities [upon themselves] without [any chance of] return.

There is a saying which goes, “If jade is not cut, it cannot be made into vessels (玉不琢，不成器)”. Similarly, if there are no demonic trials in the cultivation of the Way, one cannot advance on the Way. The disciple of the Way is like uncut jade. Those one who do not backslide when they meet with
a demonic trial are like cut jade that has been made into a vessel. They can by themselves advance on the Way and complete their rewards.

You have to know that in the human world there is a kind of demonic power which is very great. However, heterodoxy does not harm orthodoxy. If only you believe with a steadfast mind in the Way and cultivate it, you will naturally have the strength to be firm and the demons will withdraw by themselves. Humanity has a kind of correct matter-energy whose form is like fire. In a virtuous persons the flames will be several tens of feet high and all demonic forces will retreat from it. The fires of all persons without desires are very strong. All demons belong to yin matter-energy, but even though they may possess very great strength, in the end yin cannot defeat yang. If the mind does not move, all demonic forces are transformed and revert to nothing. Since images are produced by the mind, if the mind does not move, the 10,000 images are isolated and still. This is the highest stage in Way cultivation.

CHAPTER 20: Responsiveness and Refining of the Mind

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: What is the reason for the responsiveness 聲應 between humans and material things, humans and humans, humans and Heaven? It is because Humanity and material things, as well as Humanity and Heaven are of one substance. The 10,000 phenomena in the universe are of one substance. This common substance is one. Since everything is one substance, there is responsiveness between its parts.

What is this common substance? This fundamental substance of the
universe is the “Way”. Everything is born from the “Way”. The “Way” was born before Heaven and Earth; it existed before Heaven and Earth. The “Way” is the maternal substance of everything existent in the universe, therefore everybody must cultivate the Way. The book *Mysterious Meaning of the Heavenly Way* that I am writing today is the true essence of the “Way”. For those who cultivate the Way the most important problem is the question of “refining the mind 練 心”, i.e., how to refine the mind so as to be able to enter the Way.

How does one refine the mind? The mind-monkey 心 猿 and the horse of intentionality 意 馬 are not easy to control. If you want to control this “monkey” and this “horse” you have to fasten a rope around their necks. This rope is the observance of the discipline without transgression. You have to always stay close to the Way and recite the sixteen-character true explication of the Heavenly Way: “The mind of man is restless,--prone to err; its affinity for the right way is small. Be discriminating, be undivided, that you may sincerely hold fast the Mean.”65 This lets your spirit be always concentrated, without being scattered. [In this state] no demon can intrude, and you can naturally return to your original face 本 來 的 面 目. What is the original face? It is the independent, self-determining “true self 真 我”. When humans sin, it is because the “true self” is controlled by demons. Therefore the most important exercise in cultivating the Way is expelling the demons, and letting the mind of the Way shine up greatly.

Responsiveness seems to be like a kind of electromagnetism. No matter how far away, there still is an immediate response. Therefore it is called “numinous stimulation 瑯 感”. A good stimulus brings a good

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response, a bad stimulus brings a bad response. If you want to avoid bad responsiveness, you have to quickly find a refuge and not let the demons intrude into your mind. [Finding a] refuge means taking refuge in the Great Way, i.e., cultivating the Heavenly Way.

Humankind has many failings. For example, the “eyes” [like] to see bright colours, the “ears” [like] to hear joyful sounds, the “mouth” [likes] good tastes. These are all selfish desires. From these desires many sins can develop. These sins slowly encircle your life, and draw you into the abyss, so that you will never again see the light of day. What is the abyss? It is the trap of annihilation, it is purgatory. Of course [there] you will suffer and not ever be reborn. This happens when you have no good “responsiveness” and have not “refined your mind”.

The “numinosity” in numinous stimulation is a sort of “light”, but an invisible light. With light there is brightness, without it there is darkness. In the Great Learning it is said, “Make bright bright virtue”. It is also said [in the Book of Documents] that [Emperor Yao] “was able to make the able and virtuous distinguished 克明俊德.”

In the Doctrine of the Mean it is said, “When intelligence arises from sincerity, it is due to one’s nature. When sincerity arises from intelligence, it is due to instruction.” Understanding is numinosity; numinosity is the precondition for understanding. The “Way” is a great numen; its numinosity is shining constantly. If humans can diligently cultivate the Heavenly Way, they can achieve the “numinous nature of the Way 道之靈性”, and the “brilliance of numen 靈之光明”. Numinosity can illumine darkness, differentiate good and bad, open up intelligence, and save the people of the world from amongst dangers.

Numen has come from the “Way”. By diligently cultivating the

Heavenly Way one can achieve the power of numen. However, you have to "refine your mind" so as to lessen selfishness and diminish desires and to cleanse your soul. Furthermore, you have to cultivate until you have some responsiveness and let your own numinous light shine brilliantly. Then you can naturally attain the numinous stimulation of the "Way".

However, cultivating to the stage [when one attains] the numinous stimulation of the Way is no easy matter. Not everybody can achieve the numen of the Way. Only if you cultivate and nourish [yourself] with the utmost sincerity and if you have a firm believing mind, will numinosity descend upon you. When it does, it is the time of responsiveness between Heaven and Humanity. Numinous penetration cannot be carried out at just any time; it must be at a time of quiet, when the 10,000 thoughts are all empty; [there] must be complete quiet and then the numinous light will resemble a star that appears before your eyes, emitting rays of light to the four sides. Whatever you think of will produce an immediate response. All who diligently cultivate the "marvellous method of the golden indicator 金指妙法" which I transmitted, if they have perseverance and firm resolution and absorb it over a long time, can by themselves attain the "numinous brightness of the Way 道之靈光". All this depends on efforts that take their beginning in the exercises of responsiveness and refining of the mind.

CHAPTER 21: The Relations Between Existence Before and After Death

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: Human life lasts only a few decades; it is over in the twinkling of an eye. How should one pass through this short life of a few decades? After death, having departed from
this world, does life end? I say with determination, “Life does not die”. Although the flesh body dies, life can ascend to Heaven and be eternally without death.

The Yellow Emperor Xuanyuan says, “The Valley Spirit never dies. It is named the Mysterious Female. And the Doorway of the Mysterious Female is the base from which Heaven and Earth sprang. It is there within us all the while; draw upon it as you will, it never runs dry (谷神不死，是謂玄牝，\textit{玄牝之门，是谓天地根；绵绵若存，用之不勤}).” The Valley Spirit is Humanity’s life and is also called “Mysterious Female”. This Female is the origin of Heaven and Earth. Everything in existence was born from the Valley Spirit. The Valley Spirit is like the fundamental substance of life; all life comes from it. [It is like] the flow of a spring that never ceases. After cultivating the Heavenly Way for more than one hundred years, the Yellow Emperor attained it; therefore he knew about the truth that “life never dies”.

Thus it is said: Even though humans’ flesh body is ruined, their life does not perish, but exists together with Heaven and Earth forever. It is sad that worldly people do not know how noble “life” is, and that they do not know that by awakening to and cultivating the “Heavenly Way” they can transcend life and end death. Many people are wrecking their own lives and send themselves into purgatory. This is brought about by sin which is the power of the demon. The disciples of the Way have to fight with the demon and must not let it get a foothold in their minds, and even less must give it free play. But this struggle is not easy. The disciples of the Way have to rely on their perseverance and firm resolution to be able to vanquish the demons by their own powers.

As cultivating the Way means “transcending life and ending death”,

\textsuperscript{67} Laozi, chapter 6. Translation by Waley [1958:149].
one needs to understand the "relations between existence before and after death". Why do I specifically expound the relations between existence before and after death? In order to awaken the confused ones.

1. Those who were greedy in their lifetime will after death be burned by the fire of greed.

   If one often has a greedy mind during one's lifetime, [this] arising of greed is due to the burning of fire in the inner mind. All with an abundance of fire have greedy minds. Thus, those who in their lifetime have sinned by greed are burned after death. This fire is the fire of greed [they harboured] in their lifetime.

2. Those who were angry in their lifetime will after death suffer the oppression of violence.

   When one is angry, one's matter energy flows over and one cannot avoid insulting people. Therefore after death one suffers [oneself] the oppression of violence. This violence is [exerted] by demons. These so-called demons are in reality a response to [your own] "anger" in your lifetime. Thus worldly people have to avoid "annoyance"; because the result of annoyance is being bound by demons.

3. Those who in their lifetime were often licentious will after death suffer the intrusion of female demons.

   He who commits adultery with another man's wife will suffer many ills after death and will be subject to the harassments of female demons. In his next existence he will remain single.

4. Those who liked to get involved in struggles and disputes during their lifetime, will have to fight with demons after death.

   Those who liked to struggle with others, will have to fight with
demons after death; this is an unavoidable karmic reaction. An action naturally produces an effect, just like the echo that without fail follows a sound. Acts committed during one’s lifetime will be carried out on oneself after death; this is the principle of karmic action and response.

5. Those who coveted material wealth during their lifetime, will become hungry ghosts after death.

Those who coveted material wealth in their lifetime and made it the purpose of their life will definitely become hungry ghosts after death. They will suffer hunger and cold and will remain forever in poverty and agony.

6. Those who in their lifetime were selfish will have to make up for it after death.

Those who had acted selfishly in their lifetime and were unfair in many matters will be judged after death and will have to make manifold amends for every selfish act.

7. Those who in their lifetime often lied will have their tongues cut out after death.

By telling lies one deceives people. Deceit is punished by cutting out the tongue, because it is the tongue that committed the sin in question.

8. Those who in their lifetime were content to stay in confusion will after death fall into the “River of Lost Souls 迷魂河”.

All who in their lifetime were entangled in confusion and made no effort to understand the principle of affairs, or to know right from wrong will after death fall into the “River of Lost Souls”, never to gain a clear consciousness.

You need to understand that all problems after death are closely related to your behaviour during your lifetime. Thus, in your lifetime, you have to
maintain the following three attitudes in order to avoid suffering after death.

1. Have a clear mind

Be clear in mind and do not live a dull and unenlightened life. Strive for a profound knowledge of human life and do not let your mind be confused by fame and profit, and do not encumber yourself with material desires.

2. Be peaceable

In your affairs do not be quarrelsome. Be modest and respectful towards other people, and always be peaceable so as to build up a benevolent mind.

3. Be joyful

Human life is too short to be melancholy. Melancholy leads to depression which eventually lets you fall into the demonic way. The joyfulness I am speaking of is not a superficial cheerfulness that is easily worn out, but a natural joyfulness that forms one's mood.

If you can be clear, peaceable, and joyful in your lifetime, you can avoid many problems after death. Since this is extremely important, I hope you will pay attention to it. To lay out evenly the great road for your life after death, you must accumulate much merit in your lifetime. Today's merit is a preparation for days to come. With a good preparation, you will naturally enjoy much bliss. "Merit" can be divided into four categories:

1. Offerings are many, but merit is small

When someone makes great donations, but harbours selfish intentions, his mind is not sincere. The merit accruing to the insincere is
2. Offerings are few, but merit is great

For a very poor person to donate one penny is a great sacrifice. Therefore his merit is great.

3. Offerings and merit are few

If someone gives unwillingly, then of course both the offerings and the merit will be small.

4. Offerings and merit are many

If someone gives a great amount willingly and with a sincere mind, his merit of course will also be great.

However, in giving pay attention to your [financial] capacity. Do not overdo it. Your mind’s sincerity is the crucial thing, there is nothing outside sincerity. It is said that “the Heavenly Way knows no favouritism, it is always with the good”. Good and not good are two separate ways. You have to choose one to walk on and stop prevaricating. Human life lasts only a few decades; you never know when you will have to leave. If you do not make preparations in time, your regrets will be too late, when your time comes up.

CHAPTER 22: The Heavenly Way has Five Virtues

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: Cultivating the Way means cultivating virtue; this is a fundamental thought. But what is virtue? Regarding its content, we can differentiate “bright virtue 明德”, “common virtue 公德”, and “lower virtue 下德”. Regarding its extent we find five categories. The Classic of the Way and Its Virtue says, “When one cultivates it
in oneself, one's virtue will be true. When one cultivates it in one's family, there will be surplus virtue. When one cultivates it in the village, one's virtue will be enduring. When one cultivates in the nation, one's virtue will be abundant. When one cultivates it in the world, one's virtue will be universal. If its cultivation is extended from oneself to the world than one can "cultivate one's self, regulate one's household, order the nation and bring peace to the world." This is the true essence of cultivating the Heavenly Way. Let us explain these Five Virtues one by one:

1. True Virtue 德真

"When one cultivates it in oneself, one's virtue will be true." In cultivating virtue you have start out from yourself. "Cultivating it in oneself" does not mean "refining cinnabar"; it means "non-interference". By not interfering nothing is left undone. The Changdao Zhenyan says, "The superior student of the Way cultivates it on his own body. The mediocre student of the Way looks for it in words. The inferior student of the Way seeks it in magic. Students are many, but adepts are few, because most look for the Way in the distance, while really it is close at hand." Therefore Confucius says, "The Way cannot be left for an instant; if it can be left, it is not the Way." That which cannot be left for an instant is life; apart from life there is no true Way. Hence you must act in accordance with virtue in your daily life.

68 Laozi, chapter 54. My translation tries to reflect the meaning given this passage within the context of the Tiandao aoyi. Waley's translation of this Laozi passage gives quite a different interpretation [1958:208]. In my translation I have largely followed Houang & Leyris with the difference that where they see qi de 質德 as referring to the "la Vertu de la Voie" [my emphasis], I interpret it as indicating the virtue of the cultivating individual -- which I think is what is intended by the author of the Tiandao aoyi.
2. Surplus Virtue 德餘

"When one cultivates it in one's family, there will be surplus virtue." Those who cultivate the Way do not merely benefit themselves, but have to extend it from themselves to their families. To extend it from myself to the whole family, there has to be a surplus of merit, i.e., there must be something left over, it must not be completely exhausted. When one extends virtue to the whole family, several dozen households, or several hundred households, the kindness of virtue received is not identical with the virtue of an individual. An individual's virtue is like a dot; widened to a family, it is increased to cover a surface. Such virtue is several times greater than individual virtue. For this reason it is called "surplus". Virtue tends to evolve itself. The light of virtue cultivated merely for the individual is too dim; it cannot attain to the Great Way. Just as the Way is omnipresent, virtue has to be extended to become superior virtue.

3. Enduring Virtue 德長

"When one cultivates it in the village, one's virtue will be enduring." A village is larger than a family; its virtue will also last longer. "Surplus" just means that that there is a little bit left over. "Enduring" means forever unperishing. In terms of the rewards of virtue cultivation, there exist the following categories: "Having cultivated 300 merits, one can become a human immortal. With 800 merits one can become a terrestrial immortal. 1,200 merits enable one to become a celestial immortal." Thus, the more virtue one cultivates, the higher the deified position one ascends to. This is an immutable principle. Therefore it is said: "Virtue moves Heaven and Earth 德感天地."
4. Abundant Virtue 德豊

“When one cultivates it in the nation, one’s virtue will be abundant.” If one can bestow virtue on the multitudes of a nation’s people, and all over the width of its territory, then virtue is abundant. Establishing virtue is the basis for ruling the country and pacifying the world. In order to do the latter effectively, one must start out by cultivating virtue. The aim of virtue, therefore, is non-interference: “Through non-interference nothing is left undone.” Cultivating virtue is serving the people; the greater the service, the greater the virtue cultivated.

5. Universal Virtue 德普

“When one cultivates it in the world, one’s virtue will be universal.” In this way a mighty flow of energy fills the universe. It is my hope that those engaged in government may base themselves on the cultivation of virtue, and do not take honours, riches, or status as their aims. Honours are transient and disperse like a dream. “The capacity of great virtue follows the Way only (孔德之容，為道是從).” 69 Virtue is the Way, cultivating virtue is cultivating the Way. The Way does not perish and neither does virtue. Thus virtue cultivation actually results in “prolonging one’s life”. The higher one’s virtue, the higher one’s life endowment. If one’s life endowment does not wither, then cultivating the Way is prolonging one’s life. The so-called way of longevity finds its source in virtue. To spread it across the world means “to deliver all living beings 渡盡衆生”.

Laozi says, “Through oneself one may contemplate Self. Through the family one may contemplate Family. Through the village one may contemplate

69 Laozi, chapter 21.
Village. Through the nation one may contemplate Nation. Through the world one may contemplate World."\(^70\)

These words complement those stated above. From this we can see Laozi's active attitude towards virtue cultivation: You have to practise it on yourself and carry it out in a concrete manner. From the individual to family, country, and world -- on each level you have to realize your virtue. The basic spirit of cultivating the Way is saving living beings; its practice centres on the cultivation of virtue.

CHAPTER 23: The Heavenly Way's Sevenfold Way of Goodness

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: There are seven ways of goodness 七善道 within the Heavenly Way. All who cultivate the Heavenly Way have to cultivate these in order to receive their rewards. The seven ways of goodness are: “Living in a good place, to have a profoundly good mind, to associate with good friends, to be good and trustworthy in speech, the order one's demeanour with goodness, to pursue one's affairs with good ability, to act in a timely way.” In the following I will explain these one by one.

1. Living in a good place 居善地: Work for the improvement of the area where you live.

The Heavenly Way gives first priority to transforming the people. I should try to improve the area where I live. The most important task in this transformation is spreading the Way. All students of the Way must shoulder this duty. Only by spreading the Way can you transform the people. There are

\(^70\) Laozi, chapter 54. Following Waley's translation [1958: 208].
many ways to do good: one accumulates merit by clothing the cold, and
feeding the hungry. Although this merit is great, the greatest merit accrues to
those who save people’s lives. How can you save people’s lives? Only by
spreading the Way and admonishing people to cultivate the Way, because the
Way is the source of life. The source of life is the Way: making one person
attain the Way is the ultimate charity. The Way is nothing very mysterious, it
is in the midst of daily life; life is the Way. Admonishing one person to
improve his life is cultivating the Way. The student of the Way cannot be
content with cultivating himself. Having himself attained the Way, he
should transform others. To spread goodness all through the world is the
highest aim of Way cultivation.

2. Having a profoundly good mind 心善瀾: The mind is like an ocean; in its
purity it reflects [all] things; the 10,000 streams return to it.
The ocean’s deepness symbolizes the profundity of the nature. Why do we
use the ocean as a symbol for the nature or the mind? Because mind and the
nature are just like the ocean: they cannot only illumine things with their
brightness, they can also carry things. What are nature and the mind? They
are not illusory. If they did not exist, their functions would not be here either.
Mind is the controlling power of the transformations of the universe. It is
limitless in space and time and fills the universe. As it is something that
cannot be expressed, we use the ocean as a metaphor for its vastness and
deepness. The mind needs to be like an abyss in order to fully unfold its
capacities:
(1) Submersion 沉瀾: if one is not light and fickle-minded, one can greatly
respond to all impulses, and [participate in] a thousand changes and ten
thousand transformations.
(2) Numinous brightness: If one’s mind is not murky, it can illumine the dark regions so that even the finest dust particles become visible.

(3) Flowing down: if the mind is not partial and narrow, it can expand to take in the hundred rivers in its vastness.

The practice of nurturing the mind rests on sincerity. Sincerity means to be pure and singleminded. Purity and singlemindedness means “manifesting purity and embracing simplicity”, and also “recognizing the mind and manifesting the Buddha-nature 明心見性”. The meaning of the term “sincerity” is very profound. Confucius says, “Being sincere to the utmost is being like a deity 至誠如神.”71 He also says, “The possessor of sincerity does not merely accomplish himself. With this quality he also completes others (誠者，非自己而已也，所以成物也。).”72

3. Associating with good friends 善友: Saving by appropriate benevolence and love, resolving to be most sympathetic.

In helping others the most important things are benevolence and love; there should be no other motives involved. Many people in helping others harbour improper intentions; this is not right. But benevolence and love cannot be dealt out at random; one must not love that which should not be loved. That which benefits Heaven above, the ghosts in the middle, and humans below is called Heavenly virtue. Heavenly virtue is to be loved. That which neither benefits Heaven above, nor the ghosts in the middle, nor humans below is called the Heavenly robber 夭賊. The Heavenly robber is not to be loved.

71 Doctrine of the Mean, chapter 24.
72 Doctrine of the Mean, chapter 25.
4. Being good and trustworthy in speech 言善信: One’s words need to be trustworthy. Without trustworthiness the people cannot find a foothold. Humans have to be trustworthy. Only trustworthiness enables them to live together. Trustworthiness is like a contract. The relationship between the buyer and the seller is established by a contract. Trust is a contract. Contracts have to be respected. If they are not kept then the commercial transaction cannot be established. In government, trust is particularly important: a government stands or falls with its trustworthiness. If an individual has to establish trust, a nation even more needs to do so. Trust is a second life.

5. In government use good policies 正善治: This refers to the need for good politics in government. Not all politicians can establish a good government. Many governments are violent, as can be seen from the historical record. In the past, the Yellow Emperor had to fight fifty-two wars before he could pacify the realm. The Yellow Emperor fought and studied the Way at the same time. Those who cultivate the Way do not have to retreat into the deep mountains or old monasteries; cultivation is possible at any time, in any place. Those in government should take goodness as their policy in order to pacify the realm. This is the original purport of cultivating the Heavenly Way to save the world.

6. Pursuing one’s affairs with goodness 事善能: In one’s affairs one has to be diligent and persistent. To make good one’s ability is to strengthen oneself ceaselessly. The self-strengthening involved in Way cultivation requires utmost exertion of energy and thought, much more than the ordinary person’s effort. When
cultivating the Way you have to purify your mind and lessen desires, you have to singlemindedly concentrate on one thing at a time. This everyone has to seek within himself, not in others. Only if you do not rely on others, but make an effort yourself, can you create new achievements. They who employ their faculty of goodness in their affairs can achieve cultivation through their understanding of human life. This is why cultivation of the Way is so precious.

7. Taking action in a timely way 動商時: Acting in time, neither too late, nor too early.
Humans must act, yet they must not act recklessly, but rather in a timely manner. The universe is the body of movement, life is the faculty of movement. Human life naturally is also in movement. Those who know when to move are successful, those who do not know when to move fail. The difference depends on “timing”: those who know how to seize the moment will usually succeed. Time determines everything. The success and failure of many matters is determined by time. From this we can know the importance of utilizing time.
Let us take the planting of a field as an example: [the farmer who] ploughs and sows in time will certainly have a harvest. If he acts at the wrong time, in the end he will have no harvest. Therefore as a student of the Way I will do what other people do not want to do; only then can I advance on the Way. “If I do not go down to purgatory, who will?” -- this is the great spirit of cultivating the Way. Cultivating the Way means cultivating oneself through ascetic practice. Ascetic practice diminishes selfishness and lessens desires; it purifies and transforms and allows [the student] to activate his innate knowledge. The application of one’s innate faculties consists in repressing

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and stimulating. Only by suffering can one’s innate faculties become great. It is said, “when Heaven is about to confer a great office on any man, it first exercises his mind with suffering, and his sinews and bones with toil. It exposes his body to hunger, and subjects him to extreme poverty. It confounds his undertakings. By all these methods it stimulates his mind, hardens his nature, and supplies his incompetencies.”

Suffering is not melancholy distress; it is a test imposed on humans by the gods. All who are able to shoulder a heavy responsibility were born in poverty. This is a grace given to people by God. Those who rise from among adversity all have great achievements, and advance on the Way.

CHAPTER 24: Summary

The Venerable Mother of the Limitless says: In the present time, science has become highly developed. It emphasizes materialism and disregards the principle of the universe’s transformations. It only researches physical knowledge and possesses no high ethical thinking. This is why social customs are deteriorating daily, and wars become ever more frequent and ever more cruel. Because I cannot endure to watch all living beings suffer the great catastrophe [to come], I did not shirk the hardship of travelling the cloud roads in order to descend into the world and write the heavenly book Tiandao aoyi. I hope [thereby] to awaken the people of the world to cultivate the Way together, to walk the road of goodness together to relieve this great crisis.

Cultivation of the Heavenly Way is a broad road of light; it knows no taboos.

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or avoidances; everything can be studied openly. It truly makes contributions to society and has no corrupt practices, because that what is believed in is the highest “Way”, that what is sought is the truth common to all human life. Those who cultivate the Heavenly Way need to be of a single mind, unswayed by material things. When they reach the sphere of utmost sincerity, signs will appear by themselves. Why will signs appear when spirit and mind are concentrated and singleminded? Because when the mind is one, the spirit is perfected. When the spirit is perfected, everything one seeks will be attained. When the spirit is perfected, [one has reached] utmost sincerity. Being sincere to the utmost is being like a god. Thus the distance between Heaven and Humanity is very close and the means of communication is “utmost sincerity”. Belief is the first important step in Way cultivation. Belief is a kind of force by which a communicating road is opened between Heaven and Humanity.

“All creatures come out of the mysterious workings and go back into them again (萬物皆出於機，皆入於機).”74 Since human life and death are tied to the mysterious workings, one has to control these workings before they take effect. If one can control “mysterious workings”, then life and death are transformed and everything is under one’s control. What are the mysterious workings? They are the Mysterious Female. They also are “the Gate of Marvels”. What is the Mysterious Female? She is also called Valley Spirit and represents the “Way”. In the universe there is a place without birth and death. Cultivating the Way is seeking this place. Once one has reached it, one is released from birth, aging, sickness, death, and all sorts of troubles. For humans cultivating the Way has two great aims. First, to escape from all the troubles of life. Second, to attain the sphere of no birth and no death.

“What is decreed by Heaven is called human nature. Following one’s nature is called the Way. Cultivating the Way is called the teaching.” This is the first section of the Doctrine of the Mean which summarizes its teachings in a nutshell: Heaven, nature, Way, and teaching.

Heaven: Heaven is nature, Heaven is spirit. The Heavenly decree is that which is given by Heaven. Afterwards it also discusses destiny which also means Heaven. Thus the heavenly decree can be viewed in a unified manner, or divided into two meanings. The nature is that what is given by heaven, i.e., that which comes naturally. Humans are born from their parents, but this drop of numinous nature is not given by their parents, but by Heaven.

The Way: Nature is originally good, following one’s nature is thus called the Way. There are two ways to explain the Way: in itself or by its methods. The Way of Prior Heaven is a theory of the Way’s fundamental substance. The Way of Posterior Heaven is a theory of methods.

Teaching: cultivating the Way is called teaching. Having added cultivation to the Way, it is then called teaching. The Book of Changes says, “The sages use the way of the gods to establish the teaching, and the realm submits.” The teaching is established by means of the gods in order to make the people easily understand the principles of Way cultivation.

The above is a summary of the present book and at the same time functions as an epilogue. All who cultivate the Way can reap limitless benefit, if they read, study, appreciate, and then cultivate it.

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75 Guan hexagram.
APPENDIX 2: TRANSLATION OF THE AUGUST MOTHER OF LIMITLESS [HEAVEN’S] CELESTIAL SCRIPTURE FOR AWAKENING [HER CHILDREN] (WUJI HUANGMU HUANXING TIANJING 无極皇母唤醒天經)

The Celestial Scripture was revealed in 1982 through Yongbi as a charter scripture to formally legitimize the Hall’s new focus on the Venerable Mother as the highest cosmic deity. She effectively replaced the Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Beginning (Yuanshi Tianzun) in this position; it is surely no coincidence that the scripture was supposedly written by the Heavenly Worthy himself who thus gracefully acknowledged the new distribution of power in Limitless Heaven. Parallel with the revelation of the Celestial Scripture’s main text, a vernacular commentary and translation were revealed by the Venerable Mother’s assistant, the Mysterious Woman of the Nine Heavens (Jiutian Xuannü), through the services of the medium Moxianzi. The following translation covers only the main text, not the commentary. For more details on the Celestial Scripture and the process of its revelation see my article on this topic.1

1 Clart 1994/95.
THE AUGUST MOTHER OF LIMITLESS [HEAVEN'S] CELESTIAL SCRIPTURE
FOR AWAKENING [HER CHILDREN]

無極皇母喚醒天經

Hymn on Sending Up Incense
The incense-burner's smoke rises up in seal-script curves
To the Prior Heaven of the Limitless.
It fills the universe with auspicious clouds.
The Way's matter-energy exists in perpetuity,
Awakening the [Mother's] sons and daughters
To diligently recite [this scripture] and [thus] give proof of their good karmic affinity.

We take refuge in
The Great Celestial Worthy, the Supreme August Mother of the Limitless
(recite three times)

Hymn on the Purifying Water
The perfect water of Prior Heaven
Widely sprinkles the dust [of the world].
It purifies and washes the numinous terrace; [in consequence] the fruits of Way are planted,
And wisdom suddenly opens in enlightenment.
If the *Celestial Scripture* is recited diligently,
Every place will be the [paradise of the] Penglai islands.

We take refuge in
The Great Celestial Worthy, the Supreme August Mother of the Limitless
(recite three times)

**Mantra for Purifying the Mind**
The numinous terrace is clear and pure.
The numinous abode is focussed.\(^2\)
Numinous wisdom manifests itself.
The numinous mind is responsive and penetrating.

We take refuge in
The Great Celestial Worthy, the Supreme August Mother of the Limitless
(recite three times)

**Mantra for Purifying the Mouth**
The teeth in the mouth are clear and pure.
The mouth’s breath is fragrant.
The tongue in the mouth is unsullied.
The mouth’s virtue is luminously displayed.

We take refuge in

\(^2\) “Numinous terrace” and “abode” stand for the “mind”.
The Great Celestial Worthy, the Supreme August Mother of the Limitless (recite three times)

Mantra for Purifying the Body
The body is clear and pure.
The outer shell is free from dust.
The body is clean and without dirt.
The three karmas\(^3\) can be cherished.

We take refuge in
The Great Celestial Worthy, the Supreme August Mother of the Limitless (recite three times)

Hymn on Beginning the Scripture
The Mother of Heaven and Earth,
The Utmost Worthy of the Limitless,
The unified matter-energy of Prior Heaven transforms the people,
And awakens the original numina.
If they preserve their nature of goodness,
they can soon return to their home.

We take refuge in
The Great Celestial Worthy, the Supreme August Mother of the Limitless (recite three times)

\(^3\) The karma produced by (1) one’s actions (shenye 身業), (2) one’s words (kouye 口業), and (3) by one’s thoughts (yiye 意業).
The Supreme August Mother says:

In the primordial chaos there was a correct matter-energy,
Which gave birth to the original numina,
Ninety-six [myriad] in number.
Incessantly they came into being,
And entered the secular world.

To assume form, they attached themselves to bodies.

At first, human nature is good;

When [humans] practise goodness, their virtue has a fragrant reputation.
When they practise evil, they produce sins.

The karmic obstructions [thus produced] are difficult to disperse.

With great righteousness, Heaven covers [above].
With even more feeling, Earth supports [below].
Humans are between Heaven and Earth.

Of all beings, they are the most refined and numinous.

Heaven, Earth, and Humanity are the Three Powers.

The original numen is eternally imperishable,
The numinous nature is originally luminous.

[In this state], humanity can form a trinity with Heaven and Earth,
And can shine forth together with sun and moon.

The human body is most precious,
But only if one knows the need for cultivation.

By cultivating perfection, one can hope to return to simplicity,
To return to the root and revert to the origin.

A human body is difficult to obtain,
Birth in the Eastern Land is even more difficult to get.
Now you have already obtained a human body,
And have been born in the Eastern Land.
Cultivating the self and nurturing one's nature,
Is the great root of humanity.

Human life does not exceed a few springs and autumns.
The cycle of birth and death revolves without pause.
If you want to withdraw from samsara, you have to awaken soon,
Seriously nurture your nature, and cultivate your self well.
Rectify the mind and make your intentions sincere - this is the root.
If [your] loyalty and filial devotion are both complete, who can compare to you?
If modest and frugal customs are diligently mastered and maintained,
A vast correct matter-energy will pervade the Divine Realm [= China].
If you practise trustworthiness and righteousness, all will respect you.
Peaceful coexistence avoids worries and sorrow.
Today I call you children to awaken:
If the Great Way is diligently cultivated, your vows can be requited.
You are all original numina who have descended into the world.
If those born from the same womb love each other, their happiness will be without end.
The virtuous one [should] be ruler, the worthy one minister.
If the ruler engages in virtuous government, he will cause the people to submit.
When the Pole Star resides in its position, all stars pay obeisance to it.
[Thus the ruler] enriches the nation, strengthens the army, and [brings about]
daily renewal.
When the ruler is upright and the ministers are loyal, they can rule the nation,
The winds will be harmonious, the rains favourable, celebrating the year's plenty.
Scholars, farmers, workers, and merchants - the people will live happily and in peace.
Great peace will exist in the world, and it will enter the age of Great Harmony.
The father's grace and the mother's virtue are one with Heaven and Earth.
He is unfilial who offends against his parents.
Brothers should feel like hands and feet [of the same body].
If they harbour friendship and love in their minds, they are good people.
Love between spouses should be sincerely maintained.
If the husband calls and the wife follows, happiness will be unending.
You need to know that sisters-in-law should maintain harmonious relations,
And that the feelings between sisters are fundamentally close.
When human relationships succeed and you maintain the [three] bonds and the [five] constant virtues.
You [can] hope to become sages and worthies, and your vows can be rewarded.
If only you cultivate the Great Way with a steadfast mind,
You will return to the Limitless and ascend to the heavenly halls.
The mind-monkey and the thought-horse must be locked up.
Refrain from killing and benefit living beings, [thus] you will nurture longevity.
Unaffected by the six desires and seven emotions,
The noble person shines forth in his modesty.
If you comprehend your mind and manifest your nature, your numinous
terrace will be pure,
You will remain uncorrupted by wealth and rank; such determination is to be lauded.
When [you recognize that] all appearances are empty and your mind is undivided,
Even though you may be poor you will take constant delight in the Great Way.
You need to know that liquor, licentiousness, and reckless gambling Have dispersed many a glorious reputation.
Keep your self aloof from the wrong road and disasters and calamities will be extinguished.
Keep your mind close to the orthodox Way and blessings will be limitless.
You should accumulate much formless merit,
Then you will have a method for refining a non-senescent spirit.
Cultivating oneself and saving others sets an example worth following.
Aiding the poor and taking pity on those in distress is [an expression of] a good heart.
In governing nation and family you have to use the right method,
Then people's minds will be united and the strength [of the community] will be increasing.
If government through non-interference is used, [a state] of great peace will come about;
All within the four seas will submit, and the nation's fortunes will be prosperous.
Now that you have entered the world and have attained a human body,
[Ensure that your] Way of filial devotion is complete, and everyone will respect you.
Return to perfection and recognize principle, make a vow of compassion;  
By saving all the scattered numina, you will embody the mind of Heaven.  
Above requite the four heavy [debts], giving honour to your parents,  
Below aid the beings suffering in the three paths of rebirth.  
Redeem and shelter your ancestors by cultivating hidden merit,  
Then your family will enjoy a brilliant reputation.  
The three bonds, the five constant virtues, the rules of human relationships,  
the principles of the Way, the four social bonds, and the eight virtues  
Have been transmitted through ten-thousand generations until today.  
Practise them determinedly without slackening in your efforts,  
Because from these [are derived] the precious regulations governing the  
proper conduct of human existence.  
If the five constant virtues, the rules of human relationships, and the  
principles of the Way are obediently followed,  
The Way of Humanity can be said to possess a firm foundation.  
Make a vow of goodness to give alms and practise all-encompassing love,  
Than you can hope to transcend the secular and enter the sacred.  
By practising benevolence and righteousness, your hidden merit will  
accumulate,  
And you will protect and support the spirit of the Way of the Earth.  
When you have achieved inner sageliness and outer kingliness,  
Do not hesitate to diligently cultivate the Way of Heaven.  
Human nature is originally supremely good,  
So you need to realize [the need] to study goodness and non-interference.  
The mind is the ruler of the human body;  
If the mind is correct and without aberration, the Way is not separated from it.
Heavenly nature, all-penetrating and brilliant, is to be cultivated and realized. If it is clear and pure, the nature can naturally remain immutable. When nature and life-endowment are both cultivated, you can achieve longevity. This is the right time to contemplate the mystery and become enlightened to the Way.

When the August Mother expounds upon the dharma, All numina come forward. The scripture without beginning Calls awake the millions. The primordial chaos Was one unified matter-energy, a fine numen. When qian and kun were first established, They divided yin and yang, The five phases and the six directions. The natures of all beings were upright and correct. At the root of Humanity there was a numinous seed, Which waxed and waned in creative transformations. There is a road to Heaven, There is no gate to purgatory. Only through cultivation and enlightenment [Can] the Great Way [be practised]. The Way's mystery is subtle and marvellous, Limitlessly embracing everything. To cultivate and practise inner [sageliness] and outer [kingliness]
Directly indicates the true statute.

In the trigrams and the hexagrams, the river chart and the Luo script
The numerical principles are deeply stored.

When nature and life-energy evolve and transform,
The Way’s matter-energy shines forth brilliantly.
The human body is a false structure.

Once death arrives,
The ten-thousand phenomena are all empty.

Why covet fame and profit
And fabricate right and wrong?
Things outside the self,
Cannot be pursued for long.

How much better to become enlightened to the Way,
Recognize principle and cultivate perfection.

If the spirit is not darkened,
It can engage in the mysterious practice of alchemical refinement.

If you practise your nature of goodness,
You can last as long as Heaven and Earth.

If you reach the stage of returning to perfection,
The number of your years will be unlimited.

Like a sun-ray falling through a crack in the wall,

Time is fleeting.

Human life is like a temporary lodging,
Short and transitory like [the lives of] ephemeridae.

Birth, aging, disease, death -
The wheel of transmigration turns without cease.
Calamities are made by the mind,
If you covet and hanker after luxury,
Your karmic obstructions will be deplorable.
Ordinary people
Do not know the cultivation of perfection.
They perish in a sea of suffering,
And can hardly escape the dust of the world.
They keep being reborn through the kalpas,
Unable to preserve their bodies.
Once one has sunk down,
It is difficult to regain human existence.
You need to have a consciousness of goodness,
And cultivate the true by means of the false.
The realm of the Way is not far
And the numinous mountain is right beside you.
Preserve sincerity and eliminate all falseness.
Clearly recognize the truth.
Let your whole mind be clear and pure.
Sweep away all emotional attachments.
Extirpate the five skandhas.
Take cultivating the Way as your first priority.
Cultivate both nature and life-energy.
When numen and matter-energy are both firm,
Mind and spirit are at peace,
And wisdom is complete,
You will transcend the secular and enter the sacred,
Become a Buddha or immortal.
In studying the Way you must cultivate essence, matter-energy, and spirit. When these three great principles are nurtured to firmness, you can achieve perfection. Clear away all defilements so that the numinous terrace is pure, then you can roam freely in utmost bliss. Although your self [still] is in the secular world, it is not affected by it. When the mind is removed from the customs the world, these cannot invade it. Do not let your determination be disordered by emotional attachments. Do not let riches confuse your mind. The two matter-energies of \textit{yin} and \textit{yang} have to be harmonized, then wisdom will never leave the mind. As appearances are all empty, cultivate the original nature. When attachments to the world are finished, you can ascend to the Jasper Pool. Today I call awake the original numina. You must not sink down into confused dreams without awakening. The sea of suffering is vast; which place is the right one? If you turn back to the other shore - that is the court of Heaven. The road of confusion is boundless and extremely difficult to recognize clearly. The affairs of the world are in constant flow and change. You can escape from the gate of life and death. You can avoid inscribing your name on the road of samsara. If you do not cultivate the Great Way, calamities can hardly be made even. If you do not enter the mysterious gate, you have wasted a lifetime in error.
If you want to withdraw from the road of confusion, you have to awaken soon.
Cultivate mind and nature so that both become brilliant.
The heavenly halls of utmost bliss are your native place,
But the people of the world do not recognize the Great Way.
They are deeply confused by fame and profit and would rather suffer [than cultivate the Way].
They have not yet awakened from the yellow millet [dream] and are caught in distress.
Again and again I call my confused children to awaken:
Do not tarry in cultivating the Way and cultivating your selves!
I am leaning against the gate, constantly standing and waiting
That your numinous light may be successfully refined so that you may return to the Jasper Pool.
Human life is short and transitory like that of ephemeridae.
You absolutely must not sink into confusion, revelling [in worldly pleasures] without cease.
As soon as possible, cultivate the true by means of the false.
Then your vow to return to the Limitless can be requited.
Leave confusion, enter enlightenment, and cultivate yourself well.
Build a firm foundation of the Way to withdraw from the secular and transcend the profane.
Refine a dharma-body and preserve your original nature.
Diligently cultivate the true principle and do not let your will be swayed.
Each and every sentence of the Celestial Scripture calls upon you confused children
To awake quickly from the yellow millet dream and not to tarry any longer.
It admonishes you people of the world to awaken to enlightenment,
To practise and faithfully receive [the scripture’s teachings]; then blessings will always be with you.

Originally there was no gate for calamities and blessings [to enter human existence];
[Humans bring them onto themselves through their actions and so] the good shine forth while the evil are in darkness.

Now the Celestial Scripture of the Limitless has descended into the world
To greatly open universal salvation and save the people.

The Celestial Scripture of the Limitless
Calls awake the original numina
To diligently cultivate the Great Way
And thus realize their rewards in the Jasper Capital.

The Celestial Scripture of the Limitless -
When recited piously without interruption
The immortals and deities will be moved to respond
And your virtuous karma will give you a fragrant reputation.

The Celestial Scripture of the Limitless -
If you receive it faithfully and enact it respectfully
And take refuge in the August Mother,
Your numinous nature will shine forth.
The *Celestial Scripture of the Limitless*

Moves and transforms the life of the people,
Universally carries out virtuous government;
Between the four seas prosperity will reign everywhere.

The *Celestial Scripture of the Limitless*

[Expresses] the August Mother’s mind and feelings
Calling awake the prodigal children
To be loyal to the nation.

The *Celestial Scripture of the Limitless*

Wishes that you living beings
Will practise meritorious acts and establish virtue
And will be pious and sincere with an undivided will.

The *Celestial Scripture of the Limitless*

Transforms and resolves all disputes;
Conflicts will cease forever
And great peace will reign under Heaven.

The *Celestial Scripture of the Limitless -*

If recited piously and with sincerity
Annuls disasters and resolves distress;
Ghosts and ghouls vanish [before it].

The *Celestial Scripture of the Limitless -*

When its meanings are clearly expressed
A divine light will guard the body
And the five matter-energies will rise up.

The *Celestial Scripture of the Limitless*
Embraces the Great Purity;
When you piously request blessings and many years,
It will protect you and [give you] longevity.

The *Celestial Scripture of the Limitless* -
The true principles are clearly expounded [herein].
If you cultivate correct rewards
Your name will be struck from [the registers] of purgatory.

The *Celestial Scripture of the Limitless* -
When clearly chanted, the gods will welcome you,
To guard you in the three realms;
Your soul will have nothing to be frightened of.

The *Celestial Scripture of the Limitless*
Widely announces to all numina
That they [should] return to the orthodox Way;
Then their merit rewards will resound like thunder.

The *Celestial Scripture of the Limitless* -
Is clear sentence for sentence;
The August Mother has [given] a command
To capture all heterodox spirits.
The Celestial Scripture of the Limitless -
Protects all living beings;
If you recite it ten-thousand times,
You will remove illness and extend your years.

The Celestial Scripture of the Limitless
Preserves the original numina;
If you ask for blessings in the netherworld [for your ancestors],
You will save them and cause them to be reborn above.

The Celestial Scripture of the Limitless,
[represents the virtues of Heaven in being] Great and Originating,
penetrating, advantageous, correct and firm;
If you pray piously and sincerely,
You will be granted daughters and sons.

The Celestial Scripture of the Limitless
Moves and transforms all living beings;
If you cultivate the inner and the outer,
Your name will be inscribed on the placard [of Heaven].

The Celestial Scripture of the Limitless -
When it is cultivated and practised,
Any impure atmosphere will vanish
And the five viscera will by subtly luminous.
The *Celestial Scripture of the Limitless*
Responds to changes without pause,
Drives out the heterodox and exterminates baleful influences.
Inside and outside will be clear and pure.

The *Celestial Scripture of the Limitless*
Transforms and nurtures the heroic ones,
Greatly opens universal salvation;
Its compassion reaches to the dark regions.

The *Celestial Scripture of the Limitless*
Inspires the [Sacred Thearch] Wenheng,
To Clearly display [the workings] of karmic retribution
[So that] good and evil are clearly distinguished.

Mantra for Dedicating [Merit]:
With a determined mind we repent.
We will truly maintain the three bonds and the five constant virtues,
The three obediences and the four virtues.
These we will greatly put forth.
We will diligently cultivate the Great Way,
Moving toward it,
So that together we may ascend to utmost bliss,
Thereby consoling our mother.
We take refuge in
The Great Celestial Worthy, the Supreme August Mother of the Limitless
(recite three times)

Hymn on Concluding the Scripture
The *Celestial Scripture* has descended into the World
To call awake the confused children.
If the original numina cultivate the Way and become enlightened to its mysteries,
They will open their [numinous] aperture and will have natural knowledge.
The Mother’s intentions are unselfish,
[She only wishes that] the light of her mercy will illuminate and be applied universally.

We take refuge in
The Great Celestial Worthy, the Supreme August Mother of the Limitless
(recite three times)
APPENDIX 3: MEMORIALS (SHUWEN, WENSHU)

3.1 “Memorial on Entering the Phoenix and Proclaiming a Vow” (Ruluan xuanshi shuwen 入鸞宣誓疏文)

Bowing down I acknowledge
That the sages and deities harbour sympathy, teaching all living beings to establish great virtue, and
That the immortals and Buddhas are benevolent and compassionate, awakening the confused ones and saving the masses [by making them] build extraordinary merit.

Now, ____ , disciple under the phoenix of the Academy of the Limitless for Realizing the Way, Temple of the Martial [Sage] and Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy under the direct administration of Southern Heaven, located in Taizhong City of Taiwan Province, recommends that the new disciple ____ , living at ____ , his/her original destiny [fixed] by his/her birth in the year ____ , the month ____ , the day ____ , the hour ____ , of male/female gender, having lived ____ years, be inducted to perform [the ritual] of entering the phoenix and proclaiming a vow, and sincerely hopes for gracious permission thereof. Since [the initiate] finds it difficult to forget his/her gratitude for [the divine] virtue, he/she vows that in addition [to fulfilling] his/her duties at home by being filial to parents, caring for the young, making a living, and looking after family affairs, he/she shall not dare to behave recklessly and waste his/her time. He/she will regularly come to the Hall to assist in phoenix [duties], respectfully listen to the sacred instructions, study the regulations and rituals, inquire after the Dao, cultivate the self, and nourish
his/her nature so as to complete his/her duties as a human being. With a loyal mind, he/she will hold on to correct principles and will not dare to mix private interests with public duties. He/she will sincerely assist [in the Hall’s work], and will compliantly carry out the responsibilities of any office to which he/she is appointed. He/she will under no circumstances waver in his/her determination. Should he/she be diligent in the beginning, but become lazy later, or should he/she lapse after having only gone half the way, this will count as an offense against the sacred regulations. He/she is willing [in this case] to receive reprobation without objecting to it. As I am afraid that an oral [proclamation to this effect] cannot be relied upon, I specifically present this memorial [recording] the respectful vow.

I reverently present it to the Benevolent Teacher Guan, presiding deity of the Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy, under the direct administration of Southern Heaven, for his examination.

May the Three Treasures certify it, and the Ten Thousand Numina investigate it thoroughly.

The new phoenix disciple __
The overseer of the vow __

__ year, __ month, __ day of the Heavenly Cycles.

****************************************
3.2 General Purpose Memorial

SUBMITTED MEMORIAL

Bowing down I recognize that
The sages' virtue is great like Heaven; all living beings are touched by it.
The gods' mercy is deep like the sea; the common people receive its benefit.

Person who respectfully reports his/her intentions: ___
Address: ___

The memorial: The believer ___ offering up his/her sincerity
gladly aids in [title of project] by donating NT$ ___. He/she transfers this
merit to [name of a person], praying and requesting that [space for stating a
request].

He/she earnestly asks [this] of
The presiding deity of the Martial Temple, Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy,
the Benevolent Teacher Guan, and

knocking his/her head seeks that
[repetition of the request]. Truly he/she is grateful for
the arrival of divine mercy.

Reverently he/she submits this memorial.

Memorialist [name] knocks his/her head a hundred times.
___ day of the ___ month of the ___ year of the Heavenly Cycles.

*******************************************************

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3.3 “Memorial of a Printing-Sponsor’s Prayer and Request” (Zhuyinzhe qiqiu wenshu 助印者祈求文疏)

Bowing down I recognize that
The virtue of Heaven is majestic, / all living beings are touched by it.
The mercy of the Thearch is vast, / the common people receive the benefit of
this mercy.
Now the Academy of the Limitless for Realizing the Way, Temple of the
Martial Sage, Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy Correct [located at] [...] Taizhong
City, Taiwan Province, Republic of China, has received
order to write by means of the supported phoenix [the work] “—”. This
task being already completed,
it has now received

a sacred mandate and has reverently determined to present the book on the
___ day of the ___ month. It has reverently arranged the jasper terrace and
holds the ceremony for presenting the book. Reverently it submits the items
prayed for and requested by the sponsor of the printing to
Heaven, bowing down and asking that they may be permitted as requested.

Fragrant name of the sponsor(s): ..... 
Number of copies [sponsored]: ..... 
Matter(s) requested: ..... 
Address: ..... 
As expressed above, it is asked respectfully
that the Venerable Mother of the Limitless in her compassion, and the
Thearch-on-High of Vast Heaven in his virtue of loving all living beings,
will grant these [wishes] as requested, [and will furthermore bestow] blessings,
prosperity, longevity, auspiciousness and good luck in the four seasons, success in all affairs, a hundred blessings for males; and a thousand auspicious signs for females.

Reverently I submit [this memorial] to the presiding deity of the Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy under the direct administration of Southern Heaven, the Lord of Mercy Guan Sheng Dijun who in turn shall submit it to the director of the Academy of the Limitless for Realizing the Way, the Old Patriarch Yellow Thearch, who in turn shall submit it before the palace of the Lord of Mercy, the Sagely Thearch Wenheng of Southern Heaven, who in turn shall memorialize to his Majesty, the Mysterious, Efficacious, Lofty Thearch-on-High, the Great Heavenly Worthy, the Jade Thearch of the Golden Palace of the Vast Heavens, and to her Majesty, the Celestial Mother, Utmost Worthy, the Venerable Mother of the Limitless. Their gracious granting of all requests will earnestly be prayed for with utmost gratitude. Reverently I submit this memorial. The sponsor of the printing and cultivator of merit knocking his/her head a hundred times submits the memorial on the __ day of the ___ month of the ___ year of the Heavenly Cycles.

************************************************

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3.4 “Memorial for Praying for Peace, Venerating the Bushel, and Planting Blessings” （Qi’an lidou zhifu wenshu 祈安禮斗植福文疏）

Bowing down I recognize that
The South Pole all around responds to the Seven Primordia, expunging calamities and recording life-spans.
The Northern Constellation from on high shines upon the world, protecting destinies and extending lives.

Now, in Taiwan Province of the Republic of China [the following persons]
[Name:] ___
[Gender:] ___
his/her original destiny [fixed by being] born at ___ hour of the ___ day of the ___ month of the ___ year, [and now] ___ sui of age are glad to meet with the opportunity that
the Academy of the Limitless for Realizing the Way, Martial Temple, Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy holds a ___ dharma assembly. In sincere awe they knock their heads. In reverence for the auspicious matters of praying for peace, venerating the bushel, planting blessings, expunging calamities, and resolving distress, they respectfully drew up a memorial and piously prepared the ceremonial sacrifice of incense, flowers, tea, fruits, and delicacies. These they offer to
The Benevolent Teacher Guan, presiding deity of this hall,
The Old Patriarch Yellow Thearch, director of the Academy of the Limitless for Realizing the Way,

---
1 Sun, Moon, and the Five Planets.
2 Space is provided on the memorial form for ten such entries.
The Five Sagely Benevolent Masters and the other deities.

They who respectfully report their intentions
have their destiny-palace of the current year restricted by the revolutions of
the stars and hit in punishment by the baleful [influence] of the Year [Star].
They rely on the divine brillance’s broad illumination to protect their bodies,
on the maintenance of benevolence and virtue to safeguard their health.

Reverently they have come to this assembly where they respectfully chant
the Venerable Mother’s Celestial Scripture Calling Awake [Her Children], the
Mysterious and Marvellous Scripture for Realizing the Way in Limitless
Heaven, the true scriptures of the South and the North Pole, and the true
scriptures of various sages. They repent of their past transgressions, and
diligently cultivate their future rewards of blessings.

Bowing down they beg that
the Astral Lord of the Southern Dipper Whose Six Offices Extend Longevity,
and
the Astral Lord of the Northern Dipper Who Among the Seven Primordia
Resolves Distress, and
All deities of Heaven and Earth,
may memorialize to
the Sagely Thearch Wenheng of Southern Heaven, and
the Three Official Great Thearchs,
who in turn shall memorialize to
his Majesty, the Mysterious, Efficacious, Lofty Thearch-on-High, the Great
Heavenly Worthy, the Jade Thearch of the Golden Palace of the Vast
Heavens, and
to her Majesty, the Celestial Mother, Utmost Worthy, the Venerable Mother
of the Limitless,

That they may grant that what is sought and that what is vowed for may come to pass as desired. This is earnestly prayed for with utmost gratitude. Reverently this memorial is submitted on the

___ day of the ___ month of the ___ year of the Heavenly Cycles.
APPENDIX 4: CHARMS (FU 符)

4.1 “Purifying Charm” (Jingfu 淨符 or Qingjingfu 清淨符)

A therapeutic charm; red ink on yellow paper.
First revealed by Fuyou Dijun in 1987, this is one of the most commonly employed charms of the Mingzheng Tang; it is given to anyone who asks for it without need for specific authorization by the gods. As the name suggests, it is used for purifying polluted objects and persons. This is achieved by a command to “a dragon to spew purifying water” (long tu jingshui 龍 吐 淨水). The Hall uses it for the purification of new god images and tablets introduced into the Hall, but it finds its broadest application in the private lives of individual petitioners. It is usually burnt and its ashes are resolved in water purified by boiling (kaishui 開水) or in water left over from the second washing of rice-grains. This “charm water” is then applied to the object that is to be purified. This may be a house believed to have been invaded by ghosts in which case the water is sprinkled lightly throughout the house using the index and the middle finger (whose combination is called “sword finger”, jianzhi 劍指). Persons having been polluted by ghostly intrusion or by attending a funeral can either ingest the charm water and/or use it to wash their bodies. The purifying charm can also be employed prophylactically by being worn to ward off any pollution; this is recommended in particular when one exposes oneself to potentially polluting situations.
4.2 "The Sacred Charm of the Old Patriarch" (Laozu shengfu 老祖聖符)

A prophylactic charm; red ink on yellow paper. Originally revealed by the Yellow Emperor to ward off evil influences and so to bestow peace (ping'an 平安), protect one's house (zhenzhai 鎮宅), and keep one's family harmonious (hejia 合家). Functionally it is a "protective charm" (hushenfu 護身符 baoshenfu 保身符) and is usually given out on request. It is worn in a pouch on the body or kept in the car; it can also be pasted up above the door of one's house, above the domestic altar, or any other threatened locality. It is often prescribed in combination with a purifying charm: when the latter has done away with an existing pollution, the "sacred charm" is installed to prevent its recurrence.
4.3 "Examination Charm" (Gongmingfu 功名符)

Inductive charm; black ink on red, scented paper.
This charm, revealed by the Venerable Mother, is functionally described as a "charm to assist numinosity" (zhulingfu 助靈符), i.e., assists the candidate's numinosity and therefore intelligence, increasing his or her powers of concentration. It contains the Venerable Mother's command to the astral deity Kuixing 魁星 (traditionally associated with matters of scholarly advancement) to look after the student so that his or her name may appear on the "golden placard" (jinbang 金榜) announcing the successful candidates. It is only granted shortly before examinations and is supposed to be returned to Hall or destroyed afterwards. The charm's efficacy is bolstered by regular recitation of the "Divine Lord Wenchang's Mind-Mantra [Aiding] Intelligence" (Wenchang Dijun congming xinzhou 文昌帝君聰明心咒) or of the "Divine Mantra for Opening the Mind and [Aiding] Intelligence" (Kaixin congming shenzhou 開心聰明神咒). The former is a traditional mantra, while the latter seems to have been first revealed by Fuyou Dijun at the Mingzheng Tang (for the text see Shiyi chandao lu II:15).
A therapeutic charm; red ink on yellow paper.
A broad spectrum healing charm used against any kind of disease. It was revealed by the Venerable Mother in 1987 and is usually distributed in sets of three to be taken one charm a day dissolved in water on three consecutive days. Its application is to be supplemented by the recitation of the Venerable Mother's full title (shenghao 聖號).
4.5 "Numinous Cancer-Healing Charm" (Zhi'ai lingfu 治癌靈符)

A therapeutic charm; red ink on yellow paper.
Revealed in 1990 by Han Xiangzi, this charm is claimed to be effective against any kind of cancer. It counteracts the patient's burden of bad karma which is ultimately deemed responsible for the disease. Thus the charm's operation can be aided by good works on the part of the patient, which create merit to lessen his/her karmic burden. It is not effective if the accumulated bad karma is too heavy.

The charm is given out in sets of three or multiples of three, which are to be taken one charm a day on consecutive days. Recitation of Han Xiangzi's "sacred name" ("Divine Lord of Primordial Yang, Immortal Elder Han Xiangzi", Yuanyang Dijun Han Xiangzi Xianweng 元陽帝君韓湘子仙翁) helps the charm unfold its full potential.
4.6 "Charm for Safeguarding the Embryo" (Antaifu 安胎符)

A prophylactic charm; red ink on yellow paper. Revealed in 1993 by Guan Sheng Dijun, this charm serves to protect the unborn child during pregnancy against negative influences, thus preventing a miscarriage. It is worn by the mother in a pouch.
Therapeutic charm; red ink on yellow paper.
A child's soul is not yet firmly anchored in its body and the tenuous connection can easily be ruptured by frightening experiences. All sorts of psychosomatic symptoms among young children are ascribed to frights that have damaged the bond between soul and body, and ritual attempts to reestablish the soul by "collecting the fright" (shoujing) are often the first treatment considered. Shoujing is offered by many religious specialists, most importantly by talking mediums and Daoist practitioners (see, for example, McCreery's description of the shoujing rites of a fashi in Puli [1973:127-133]).

The Mingzheng Tang's solution to the problem is this charm, revealed by Fuyou Dijun in 1987, which contains an order for the three hun souls and the seven po souls to reattach themselves to the body and is to be worn by the child in a little pouch. It is intended only for children under seven years of age.
Therapeutic charm; red ink on yellow paper. Revealed by the Venerable Mother in 1993, this charm is supposed to be effective against most kinds of drug addiction, including tobacco smoking, but excluding alcoholism and betel nut chewing. Its primary target, however, are stronger illegal drugs such as marijuana, heroin etc. It is given out in sets of ten, to be ingested one by one over ten consecutive days, supported by recitations of the Venerable Mother's shenghao. This therapy is to be repeated as often as necessary.
### APPENDIX 5: List of deities' birthdays and other fixed calendrical feast days celebrated by the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang  
(copied from a public notice in the temple)

Order: moon/day -- name of deity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Deity</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1/1</td>
<td>Yuanshi Tianzun</td>
<td>元始天尊</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mile Gufo</td>
<td>梅勒古佛</td>
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<td>1/13</td>
<td>Ascent to Heaven of the Benevolent Masters' orthodox matter-energy</td>
<td>恩主正気昇天</td>
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<td>Shangyuan Tianguan Yao Di</td>
<td>上元天官鈞帝</td>
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<td>2/2</td>
<td>Jigong Chanshi</td>
<td>濟公常師</td>
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<td>Fushen</td>
<td>福神</td>
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<td>2/3</td>
<td>Wenchang Dijun</td>
<td>文昌帝君</td>
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<tr>
<td>2/15</td>
<td>Jiu Tian Xuannü</td>
<td>九天玄女</td>
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<td>Yue Wumu Wang</td>
<td>岳武穆王</td>
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<td>Guanyin Pusa</td>
<td>觀音菩薩</td>
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<td>Huangdi Laozu</td>
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<td>玄天上帝</td>
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<td>釋加牟尼佛</td>
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GLOSSARY OF CHINESE CHARACTERS

an Taisui
anzheng
bade
baidou
baogao
baojuan
bazi
Beidou Xingjun
benjia
benming
benwei
Bixia Gong
bo'ai
caituan faren
chaguosheng
changpao
changluansheng
chaoba
Chen Longzheng
chengdao
Chenghuang Zunshen
chengxin
Chijing
chong
chuanzhen
chunji
Cihui Tang
Cishan Tang
Dabei zhou
daitian xuanhua
daluo jinxian
daluo tian
dao
Daode Xueshe
daogong
daogu
daoshi
daotan
Daoyuan
datong

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Shengjiao Hui
Shengmen
Shengxian Tang
shengyu
shengyuan
shenjiao shu
Shenmiao Weiyuanhui
shenshui
shentan
shenye
shenyu
shezhang
shi
shitang
shizhen
shoutao
Shuiguan Dadi
Shuihuo Bu
Shuijing
Shun Di
shuwen
shuyuan
si enzhu
silishen
Siming Zhenjun
sui
taiji
Taiping
Taishang ganying pian
Taisui
Taiwan Sheng Shengjiao Hui
Taiyi Zhenren
tan
tang-ki
tanggui
tangwu
tangzhu
taobi
Taoyuan mingsheng jing

社
生
聖德寶宮
聖號
聖教會
聖門
聖賢堂
聖諭
生員
神教書
神廟委員會
神水
神壇
身業
神諭
社長
失
師堂
失真
壽桃
水官大帝
水火部
水精
舜帝
疏文
書院
四恩主
司禮神
司命真君
歲
太極
太平
太上感應篇
太歲
台灣省聖教會
太乙真人
壇
童乩
堂規
堂務
堂主
桃筆
桃園明聖經
tian nei zhi tian
tian wai zhi tian
Tiandao Yuan
tiandao
Tiandi
Tianguan Dadi
Tianji
tianjun
tianlü
tianzun
tongling
Tongshan Hui
Tongshan Huiguan
Tongshan She
Tongtian Lingxia Baodian
tongtian lingbi
Tudi Gong
waijianluan
Wanfa guizong
Wang Fengyi
Wang Jueyi
Wangsicheng
Wanguo Daode Hui
wangye
Weidao Weiyuanhui
Wen Di
Wenchang Dijun
Wenheng Shengdi
wenshu
Wu Lao
Wu Sheng
Wu Wenchang Dijun
Wu Wenchang
wu enzhu
Wuji Laomu
Wuji neijing
Wuji Tian
Wuji Zhengdao Yuan
wuji
Wujiao Jiaozhu
Wumiao Mingzheng Tang
Wusheng Dijun
wuxing