

Institutional Authority and Divine Legitimation in Taiwanese Spirit-writing Cults

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Spirit-writing cults (“phoenix halls,” *luan tang* 鸞堂) have been a feature of the Taiwanese religious landscape since the 19th century. Their ritual focus are séances during which a possessed medium reveals written messages from the gods, either in response to questions posed by believers (*jishi* 濟世) or as a way of composing texts of religious doctrine and moral edification (*zhushu* 著書). Until the middle of the 20th century, such cult groups were usually attached to community temples and thus functioned in a largely local context. While this community-based type of spirit-writing cult continues to operate in many (especially rural) areas to this day, beginning in the 1960s a new type of phoenix hall began to emerge that absorbed influences from popular redemptive societies such as the Way of Unity (Yiguandao 一貫道). Such “sectarian” phoenix halls developed rapidly in many areas of Taiwan, with central Taiwan emerging as a particularly active area. The spread of such temples was aided by a continuous process of new cult groups splitting off from existing ones; as a result networks of phoenix halls formed across the island.

The present paper seeks to make a contribution to the sociology of Taiwanese religions by pursuing three aims: 1) To study the organizational dynamics conducive to this growth process (e.g. conflicts between institutional and charismatic sources of authority); 2) To investigate the interrelationships of phoenix halls within the resulting networks (cooperation and competition, exchange of ideas and personnel); 3) To compare these phenomena with (a) the “division of incense” (*fenxiang* 分香) hierarchies among local temples, (b) the development patterns of traditional-style, community-based phoenix halls, and (c) the segmentation of redemptive societies.