

Institutional Authority and Divine Legitimation in Taiwanese Spirit-writing Cults

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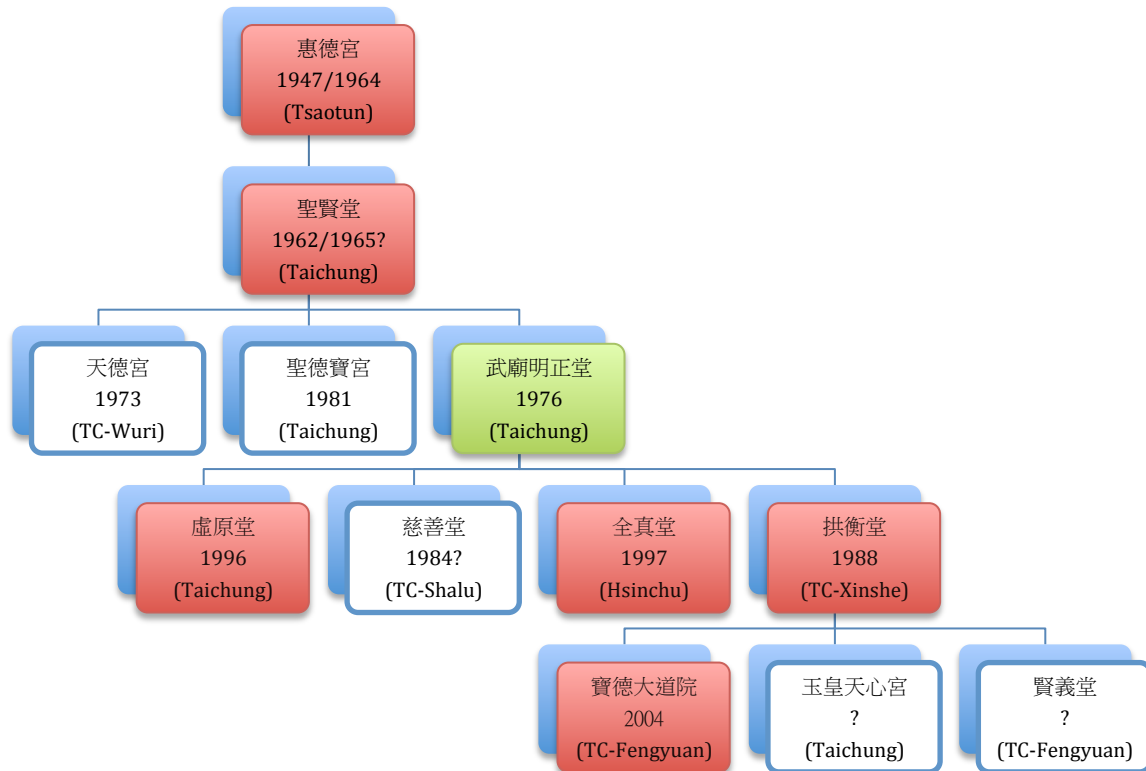
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1. Introduction

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; this paper explores the social dynamics underlying this process, focusing on a small sample of field data collected from a group of interrelated phoenix halls located mostly in the Taichung area. Specifically, the following groups are included in the sample:

Temple	Location	Year of Founding	URL
Huide Gong 惠德宮	南投縣草屯鎮	1947/1964	http://www.huide.org.tw/
Shengxian Tang 聖賢堂	臺中市	1962/1968	(no homepage)
Wumiao Mingzheng Tang 武廟明 正堂	臺中市北屯區	1976	http://www.wgmjt.com/Index.asp?ID=21&ID2=1 http://www.luan-yu.com/Index.asp?ID=9&ID2=1
Gongheng Tang 拱衡堂	臺中市新社區	1988	http://www.goon-herng.tw/
Xuyuan Tang 虛原堂	臺中市北區	1996	http://sheyun.myweb.hinet.net/
Baode Dadaoyuan 寶德大道院	臺中市豐原區	2004	http://www.boder.idv.tw/
Quanzhen Tang 全真堂	新竹市	2005	http://k5744038.pixnet.net/blog

The seven phoenix halls can be arranged in a “genealogical chart” (see the coloured rectangles):¹



The purpose of the present paper is to elucidate the connecting lines postulated in this chart. If the connected fields represented Mazu temples, we might interpret them as a “division of incense” hierarchy (*fenxiang* 分香); if they were the shrines (*tan* 壇) of Daoist priests (*daoshi* 道士), we might be looking at master-disciple relationships over five generations. However, as we will see, phoenix hall networks follow a quite different logic than these two models. Among the halls included in the chart, there exists no incense hierarchy and little of the master-disciple deference and “professional domain” (*hangyequan* 行業圈) avoidance characteristic of *daoshi*.² (This latter point is already apparent from the lack of geographic dispersal of the individual temples.)

¹ NB: The chart does not represent the complete network affiliations of the phoenix halls in question, but merely the connecting lines that I will address in this paper. Temples in white rectangles will be largely excluded from this discussion, awaiting further research and data gathering.

² Cf. Lee Fong-mao 2003.

So, what is the story behind this chart? I will present it in two steps: first, as an actual story, i.e., a narrative of the intertwined histories of these phoenix halls; second, in a preliminary analysis of the key actors and factors responsible for the frequent schisms of phoenix halls that produce networks such as this one.

2. Narrative

The narrative describes a network with the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang at its centre (green background) with the phoenix halls marked in red as its precursors and offshoots. (The phoenix halls with white background fields are not part of this analysis.) This approach does not imply any inherent centrality of the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang in this network, but is merely a structuring device. I have the most complete information on this phoenix hall, which therefore provides the best vantage point from which to view and analyze the network.

2.1 The Huide Gong

The phoenix hall at the top of our chart is located in the rural town of Tsaotun 草屯 in Nantou county 南投縣. The spirit-writing tradition in Nantou county goes back to the year 1902 when in Zhushan 竹山 the Keming Gong 克明宮 was founded by a group of local gentry members,³ and in Puli 埔里 the Huaishan Tang 懷善堂 by a wealthy merchant. The Huaishan Tang (“Hall for Harboursing 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 published by a book shop in Quanzhou 泉州 (Fujian province) in 1903.⁴ Other pre-war halls were the Qihua Tang 啟化堂 (1910, Yuchi district 魚池鄉),⁵ Tongtian Tang 通天堂 (1919, Puli),⁶ Yuhua Tang 育化堂 (1926, Puli),⁷ and the Xiuwu Tang 修悟堂 (Yuchi district).⁸ 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

³ “Keming Gong yan’ge”, in *Manghai zhigui*, p.92; Liu Zhiwan 1961:105-106.

⁴ Wang Chien-chuan 1995:181; Liu Zhiwan 1961:116. The Huaishan Tang wrote a second book, the *Golden Book on Awakening* (*Xingwu jinpian* 醒悟金篇) in 1903, which, however, was not published until 1943 (cf. Wang Chien-chuan 1995:183, Liu Zhiwan 1961:116). The Huaishan Tang is probably identical with the spirit-writing cult described by Gary Seaman as the first to appear in “Holi” (= Puli). Cf. Seaman 1978:30.

⁵ 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 jiuji zhenjing* 真武救劫真經), only in the last months of the Japanese occupation in 1945.

⁶ *Taiwan simiao quanji* 1977:41.

⁷ *Luanyou* 53; Liu Zhiwan 1961:107.

⁸ 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 Chien-chuan 1995:191.

gentry-led charitable society. Its building was completed in 1885 and included a shrine to Wenchang Dijun 文昌帝君, 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.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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 Tsaotun in 1947 by a physician named Wang Tianci 王添賜, who bought the land that the temple was erected on and bore most of the construction costs.¹¹ The Huide Tang was devoted to the worship of the “Martial Sage” Guan Sheng Dijun 關聖帝君. In 1949 the worship of Confucius, the earth god, Fuyou Dijun 孚佑帝君, Xuantian Shangdi 玄天上帝, Siming Zhenjun 司命真君, 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 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

⁹ 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 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 振文書院 in Xiluo 西螺 (Yunlin county 雲林縣) to which in 1934 the phoenix hall Yide Tang 懿德堂 was attached (cf. Guan Huashan 1993:13). A post-war example of an academy turned phoenix hall is the Lantian Shuyuan 藍田書院 in Nantou city, which was taken over by the spirit-writing cult Jihua Tang 濟化堂 in 1961 (Guan Huashan 1993:14). The Jihua Tang is still active and holds séances three times per month, on each 8th, 18th, and 28th day of the lunar month. (Field visit in March of 2012). On its history and activities see Li Gumo et al. 2004.

¹⁰ See Seaman 1978.

¹¹ *Luanyou* 1:23.

the establishment of the provincial government there.¹² 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.¹³

It was in this period of the Huide Gong’s rapid expansion that the later founder of the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang, Mr. Wang Yihan 王翼漢 (1916-1999), came to Tsaotun. Mr. Wang was born in the old, traditional port town of Lugang 鹿港 in central Taiwan, where his father made a living as a teacher of Classical Chinese (*Hanwen* 漢文). Although from a quite traditional-minded and traditional-educated background, Yihan went through the Japanese public school system and eventually to Japan to study law at Kansai University 關西大學. After the retrocession of Taiwan, Wang 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. Wang’s years in Taipei were thus not overly successful and when his wife died in 1962, he was left with a young son and 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 Wang Yihan and his six year old son Wang Qimou 王奇謀 (1956-) moved from Taipei to the rural town of Tsaotun, which is situated conveniently close to Zhongxing Xincun on the one hand and to the city of Taichung on the other hand. It seems that life in Tsaotun was not easy either; among other jobs, Wang 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” (*ruluan* 入鸞) 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.¹⁴ 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.

Wang Yihan 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” (Luanyou zazhishe

¹² See the biographies of leading Huide Gong members in the first issues of *Luanyou*.

¹³ *Luanyou* 1:29.

¹⁴ Chen Ruitang 1974:229.

鸞友雜誌社) 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.¹⁵ The first issue of the fortnightly *Luanyou* appeared on 1 May 1969, stating the magazine's charter of Ten Great Aims (*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;
10. Providing a Communication Link Between Phoenix Friends.¹⁶

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 黃國書 (president of the Legislative Yuan) and Xie Guansheng 謝冠生 (president of the Judicial Yuan); the latter also supplied the magazine's title calligraphy. As further evidence of the magazine's political orthodoxy, *Luanyou* editor and KMT-member Wang Yihan opened the first issue with the first instalment of a serialization of Chiang Ching-kuo's memoirs.¹⁷

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

¹⁵ It is claimed by many phoenix disciples of the Mingzheng Tang and also by the Magazine Society's founder Mr. Wang that *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 *Luanyou*. One of them, the *Shanyan wenzhai* 善言文摘, published in Hsinchu 新竹, is briefly described by Jordan & Overmyer (1986:307). The other, a monthly magazine named *Way and Virtue* (*Daode* 道德) was published in Taichung City. I am not sure how long this publication lasted, but it was probably already defunct by the time *Luanyou* was founded. Judging from the contents of the issues in my possession, which appeared between 1964 and 1965, *Daode* was an Yiguandao 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 *Luanyou*, so that it may have served as a blueprint for the first editions of *Luanyou*; perhaps the example of *Daode* even inspired the very idea of publishing a religious magazine devoted to the dissemination of messages received from the gods.

¹⁶ Jordan & Overmyer quote similar mission statements for two other spirit-writing magazines (1986:77-78).

¹⁷ *Fengyu zhong de jingning* 風雨中的靜寧 ("Tranquillity in the Midst of Wind and Rain"). Chiang Ching-kuo (Jiang Jingguo 蔣經國) was the son and heir-apparent of then president Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi 蔣介石).

“Scripture Illuminating Sageliness” (*Mingsheng jing* 明聖經, a spirit-written scripture used in the worship of Guan Sheng Dijun),¹⁸ biographies of various Huide Gong members, short articles on moral issues, announcements of activities of various temples in Tsaotun, two articles on the newly founded “Association of the Sagely Teachings” (Shengjiao Hui 聖教會), and transcriptions of planchette texts received in the Huide Gong and in the Hall of the Sages and Worthies (Shengxian Tang 聖賢堂) in Taichung City.

Wang Yihan had found a niche for himself where he could put 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 Qiu Chuigang 邱垂港, the chairman of the Hall of the Sages and Worthies in Taichung. Qiu was a well-to-do stationery merchant who in the 1960s conducted business with the provincial government administration in Zhongxing Xincun. The road from Taichung to Zhongxing Xincun passes through Tsaotun, 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 Qiu did not know anybody in the temple. This divine intervention came at a time of crisis in Qiu’s private life. Three years earlier, in 1962, Qiu had set up a private shrine in his home in Taichung, which he called the “Hall of Sages and Worthies” (Shengxian Tang).¹⁹ This was done out of gratitude for the deity Xue Wangye’s 薛王爺 protection against a vicious attack by means of black magic. On the altar he installed images of Xue Wangye, Guanyin 觀音, Yuanshi Tianzun 元始天尊, 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. Qiu was very depressed by this setback, and it was in this 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.²⁰ Having regained confidence, Qiu 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 spirit-writing, 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 Taichung to conduct séances on every third,

¹⁸ On this text, see Diesinger 1984.

¹⁹ This name was chosen by Qiu himself and approved by the gods through the divining blocks. At that time, Qiu was not aware of the existence of the “Palace of the Sages and Worthies” (Shengxian Gong 聖賢宮) in Wufeng 霧峰 (Taichung county), so the similarity in name is purely incidental (Qiu’s personal communication).

²⁰ The messages he received on that day are reprinted in *Taichung Shengxian Tang, Wuri Tiande Gong jianjie*: 1-2.

thirteenth, and twenty-third of the lunar month.²¹ This marks the beginning of the Shengxian Tang's operation as a spirit-writing cult.

Qiu kept in close touch with the Huide Gong in Tsaotun and was persuaded by Wang Yihan to become the principal sponsor of the Luanyou Magazine Society. Wang, acting as publisher and director, supervised the day-to-day running of the magazine, while Qiu, officially the vice-director of the Society, provided most of the funding.²² Meanwhile the Shengxian Tang kept attracting new members, and soon its quarters on the fourth floor of Qiu's home could not accommodate the crowd of participants any more. Together with Wang Yihan, Qiu 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 1970.²³ Wang Yihan 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.²⁴

Meanwhile, things in Tsaotun had taken 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 article 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.²⁵ Three months later, Wang Yihan 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.²⁶ 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 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. Wang Yihan, being one of the main figures in the dispute, realized that his projects, which centred on a further

²¹ *Taichung Shengxian Tang, Wuri Tiande Gong jianjie*: 3.

²² Personal communications. See also the impressum in *Luanyou* 1: 2.

²³ *Taichung Shengxian Tang, Wuri Tiande Gong jianjie*: 3-4.

²⁴ *Taichung Shengxian Tang, Wuri Tiande Gong jianjie*: 4.

²⁵ *Luanyou* 1: 30.

²⁶ *Luanyou* 7: 3.

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 Qiu Chuigang, who until then anyway had provided most of the funding for the publishing house.

2.2 Shengxian Tang

Wang, his son, and his magazine moved to Taichung, and from November 1970, *Luanyou* was attached to the Shengxian Tang. In 1971, about eight months after *Luanyou*'s move to Taichung, Wang Yihan's fourteen year old son Wang Qimou 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 *luan-tang* 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* 闡教) 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.²⁷ He also experimented with soul-travelling, participating in 1972 together with his divine teacher Nezha in the birthday banquet for the Primordial Heavenly Worthy (Yuanshi Tianzun 元始天尊), 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.²⁸

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 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 backgrounds; 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* 鸞生 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

²⁷ 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).

²⁸ 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 (for examples of such traditional *xingshu* and *anzheng* see *Manghai zhigui*). 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. 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* 洞冥寶記 and the *Pantaoyan ji* 蟠桃宴記 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. For studies of the spirit-travelogue genre see Sung Kwang-yu 1982 & 1993, Zheng Zhiming 1988b, and Julian Pas 1985.

prescriptions, but instead use the planchette mainly for its proper purpose, namely, “to expound the teachings and admonish to transformation” (*chanjiao quanhua* 闡教勸化).²⁹

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. In 1971, shortly before the cult moved into its new quarters, it was decreed that a number of deities worshipped in the new building (namely, Confucius, the Primordial Heavenly Worthy, Guanshiyin, and the three mediums’ teachers and spirit-familiars Jinzha 金吒, Muzha 木吒, and Nezha 哪吒) should not be represented by appointed meritorious souls, but taken over by their own original spirits (*benjia* 本駕).³⁰ 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* 南天直轄鸞堂).³¹ This meant 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 fulfil their duties in this endeavour and promised rewards on the day of its 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.

²⁹ *Luanyou* 64: 40.

³⁰ *Luanyou* 64: 40.

³¹ *Luanyou* 62: 9.

Only if it is written in such a way that everyone can recite and read it, and grasp its meaning as well, can it fulfil 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 immortality, 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.”³² 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 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.³³ 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. In Yongbi's earliest writings, those produced during his training as a spirit-medium, he

³² *Yuhuang pudu shengjing*: 4.

³³ On the title Wenheng Shengdi see Wang Chien-chuan 2008.

already used the title Xuanling Gao Shangdi when writing a birthday poem for Guan Sheng Dijun.³⁴ 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 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.³⁵

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* 聖賢真理 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* 太上無極混元真經),³⁶ its own sacred scriptures (the *Sacred* and the *True Scripture*), and its own liturgy.³⁷ 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 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* 桃園明聖經 (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

³⁴ *Luanyou* 57: 14. This mythological theme has a longer history, though. For details see Clart 1997a: 112-116; Wang Chien-chuan 2000.

³⁵ *Luanyou* 102: 9.

³⁶ An English translation of this scripture has been prepared by Mr. John Johnson (1994).

³⁷ The latter was a particular concern of the Shengxian Tang's chairman Qiu Chuigang, who in early 1973 requested the presiding deity Guan's 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. Qiu did not lose sight of it, however, and finally, in 1979, the Shengxian Tang published the *Luantang shengdian* 鸞堂聖典. 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* 寶誥) for deities.

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.³⁸ 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 靈霄寶殿) 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 Yiguandao belief this is where the Venerable Mother resides, an alternative name for the “Principle Heaven” (*litian* 理天), promised to all Yiguandao believers.³⁹ In the *Tianjie chuanzhen*, a Golden Mother does reside in the Limitless Heaven, but she is the Daoist Golden Mother of the West (Xiwangmu 西王母), one of the Five Venerable Ones (Wulao 五老). She resides with the other four Venerable Ones in the Wulao Gong 五老宮, 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 *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 smouldering conflict between Yongbi’s father and the Shengxian Tang’s chairman Qiu Chuigang concerning the running and finances of the Phoenix Friend Publishing Society came to a head leading to 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.⁴⁰ Qiu Chuigang 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 Wang Yihan had taken care to retain effective control over it and had run it basically as an independent entity. Qiu 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, Qiu wanted to make the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society formally a part of the new juridical person; Wang Yihan 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 Qiu Chuigang) in all matters concerning the running of the *Phoenix Friend*, including of course its finances. Wang, 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

³⁸ Therefore I do not agree with Sung Kwang-yu’s classification of the *Tianjie chuanzhen* as a *youji* (1993: 40).

³⁹ Jiang Guosheng 1992: 49.

⁴⁰ The temple was registered as a *caituan faren* on 9 December 1975 (*Taizhong Shengxian Tang, Wuri Tiande Gong jianjie*, p.8).

if the Shengxian Tang wanted to run the *Phoenix Friend* they would have to buy Wang's rights over the publication for a stated sum of money.⁴¹ The board rejected the price as too high and determined that Wang Yihan and the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society should move out of the Shengxian Tang's premises by 21 June 1976, i.e., within three months.⁴² In the event, Wang did not need that much time. With the help of a flock of faithful followers and the assets of the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society, Wang 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.

2.3 Wumiao Mingzheng Tang

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 Wang and Qiu. With this mediating agency gone, conflict erupted and resulted in Wang'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. Wang 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.⁴³

At the same time, Wang 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 Taichung, near the village of Dakeng 大坑, was acquired and the ground was broken on 23 October 1976.⁴⁴ 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.

⁴¹ The amount given in the minutes of the meeting was NT\$ 3 million.

⁴² Minutes of the Shengxian Tang's meeting of the board of directors, 21 March 1976.

⁴³ *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).

⁴⁴ *Luanyou* 182.

As the editor of the *Phoenix Friend*, Mr. Wang 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 in the *Phoenix Friend* rather than in the Shengxian Tang's new publication, *Sages and Worthies Magazine* (*Shengxian Zazhi* 聖賢雜誌), whose inaugural issue appeared on 1 June 1976. However, Wang 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 religion in general.⁴⁵ 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."⁴⁶

The *Phoenix Friend* records the first official contact between the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society and the Yellow Thearch Religion for 19 August 1976 when a high functionary of the latter, Xiong Qihou 熊起厚, visited the editorial office.⁴⁷ 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* 黃帝經) (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 and continuing relationships. 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 中華民國儒宗神教會, 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

⁴⁵ Jochim 1990: 7.

⁴⁶ Jochim 1990: 18.

⁴⁷ *Luanyou* 177: 27.

building was finished in early 1979 and consecrated on 11 February.⁴⁸ Its rather lengthy name was: Taichung Divine Palace of the Yellow Thearch, Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy (Taizhong Huangdi Shengong Wumiao Mingzheng Tang 台中黃帝神宮武廟明正堂). 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 Wang Yihan.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰

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* 實人實事因果報應), 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 friendships in the army and tended to fill his free time with amusements other than spirit-writing. With his son gone incommunicado, Wang Yihan 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.⁵¹ Moxianzi turned out to be a very prolific and successful medium and spirit-writing gradually became a higher-profile activity again in the Mingzheng Tang. His writings begin to figure the Venerable Mother (Wuji Laomu 無極老母) and to manifest increasing influence by the sect Yiguandao. This represents a significant theological change vis-à-vis the Shengxian

⁴⁸ 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. Wang stresses the great assistance rendered by him to the Yellow Emperor Religion. Cf. Wang Zhiyu 1996: 294.

⁴⁹ *Luanyou* 236: 14.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Luanyou* 237: title page.

⁵¹ Wang 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 彰化 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 Chien-chuan 1996: 213). While I translate “Moxianzi” as “Master Ink-Immortal”, Mr. Wang gave this sobriquet a private meaning: “Moxian” was the sobriquet of his father, and “Moxianzi” therefore means “Son of the Ink-Immortal” (Wang Zhiyu 1996). I retain my translation as it represents the “public meaning” of this name, while Wang's interpretation would only be known to a few insiders.

Tang that had tried to construct a Daoist-inspired theology clearly distinguished from and in competition with Yiguandao teachings.⁵² 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 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 Wang Yihan 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 avenues of development for the Mingzheng Tang. Throughout the 1970s, the Yiguandao 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 Yiguandao initiates.⁵³

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.⁵⁴ While there was no open break and the Mingzheng Tang maintained intermittent contacts with the Yellow Thearch 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* 天道奧義),⁵⁵ 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

⁵² See Clart 1997a: 112-118. On Yiguandao's relationship with Taiwanese phoenix halls, see also Clart 1997b.

⁵³ 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. Wang recounts that he was repeatedly sought out by a former phoenix disciple who had become an Yiguandao functionary; this person tried to persuade him to join the Yiguandao and convert his phoenix hall into a Buddha hall. Wang, however, steadfastly refused. Cf. Wang Zhiyu 1996: 293.

⁵⁴ 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.*).

⁵⁵ See this work's full English translation in Clart 1997a: appendix 1.

liturgical calendar.⁵⁶ 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). 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 medium here wrote with a red felt pen directly on yellow paper. This is much faster, though less impressive, than the traditional method. Wang Yihan 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.⁵⁷

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 Zhengdaoyuan* 無極證道院).⁵⁸ 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 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.

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 Zhengdaoyuan*. 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 Zhengdaoyuan* fulfils the same functions for the dead that a phoenix hall fulfils 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

⁵⁶ *Luanyou* 337: 17.

⁵⁷ Wang Yihan claimed to have been initiated into this method in his youth by Hong Yueqiao. See Wang Zhiyu 1996: 291.

⁵⁸ Cf. *Luanyou* 367: 6; 368: 8-9.

will then be appointed directly to celestial office. The ranks of Wuji Zhengdaoyuan 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 Zhengdaoyuan 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 Yiguandao, for example, offers its members a ritual mechanism for posthumously initiating their ancestors and thus transferring them to the Principle Heaven.⁵⁹ The Wuji Zhengdaoyuan seems to be designed as a functional equivalent to this Yiguandao 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 Zhengdaoyuan 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 ("Bright Stylus," Li Zhongxiong 李忠雄) and Zhengbi 正筆 ("Orthodox Stylus," Cai Pingxun 蔡平勳); they turned out to be gifted mediums, who helped increase the Mingzheng Tang's morality book output considerably.⁶⁰ 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, the Cishan Tang 慈善堂, in Shalu 沙鹿 (Taichung 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.

⁵⁹ Cf. Wang Guangci 1991: 42.

⁶⁰ In late 1983 a female medium named "Phoenix Stylus" (Fengbi 鳳筆) 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 Kaohsiung. 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.

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. 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 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.⁶¹ 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 seclusion to recharge his spiritual and moral energies.⁶² This did not have any lasting effect, however, and eventually Guan Sheng Dijun handed in a memorial formally requesting the Venerable Mother to close Yongbi's "numinous aperture" (*lingqiao* 靈竅). 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 serious effort at moral reform; otherwise she would permit the punishment proposed by Guan Sheng Dijun to be carried out.⁶³ 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.⁶⁴ 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 fulfil his long-time dream of a more profitable secular business career—a dream that did not come true. In 1988, Yongbi returned to

⁶¹ Cf. *Chudao xinsheng*, p.72.

⁶² *Luanyou* 363: 6-7.

⁶³ In a message dated 5 January 1985, see *Luanyou* 379: 6.

⁶⁴ *Luanyou* 380: 6.

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 (Taichung 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.⁶⁵ Yongbi went ahead with his new phoenix hall all the same, modelling it closely on the Mingzheng Tang.⁶⁶

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 fulfil his duties effectively.⁶⁷ At a time when Heaven seemed to be forsaking the Mingzheng Tang the establishment of the Wuji Zhengdaoyuan 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 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 for moral exhortation and didacticism remains typical of his writings. Mingbi shared neither Moxianzi's interest in classical scholarship nor Yongbi's capacity for sprightly

⁶⁵ Cf. *Luanyou* 446: 4; 447: 4-5. When he founded his own phoenix hall, the Gongheng Tang, shortly afterwards, 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).

⁶⁶ Yongbi's Gongheng Tang was a sensitive topic at the Mingzheng Tang at the time of my field research there in 1993/94. Many of the Mingzheng Tang's phoenix disciples were rather unhappy about its existence and viewed Yongbi as an impostor. A number of Mingzheng Tang disciples, however, especially younger ones, did not share this critical attitude, but maintained 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* 拱衡雜誌). 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, which is now located in the Xinshe district of Taichung City 臺中市新社區.

⁶⁷ Moxianzi wrote his last morality book, the *Huangmu zhimi pian*, between 1985 and 1986.

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 first phase of fieldwork (1993/94). 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 Taichung 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 Taichung 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 1981.⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹

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 Zhengdaoyuan Wumiao 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*

⁶⁸ "Shengshou Gong yan'ge," in *Taizhong Shengshou Gong luocheng tekan*, p.58.

⁶⁹ 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 am 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).

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 Zhengdaoyuan. 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 Zhengdaoyuan 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.

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 (Longbi 龍筆) exclusively for the application of "numinous healing" (*lingliao* 靈療). 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 (Lin Zhesan 林哲三 and Liu Mingwen 劉明文 respectively) and thus drawn from the cult's inner leadership circle.

The mediumship of Zhenbi and Yingbi was fairly short-lived, but they maintained a close friendship with Mingbi who in 1991 had revealed that these three men were banished immortals who possessed a deep karmic affinity from their previous existence.⁷⁰ They formed an ambitious group dissatisfied with their limited role in the running of temple and magazine society. Right from the start, there had been a strong tendency for Wang Yihan and his family members to maintain control of key areas of administration, in particular the finances. With rising age and declining health, Wang Yihan's functions were more and more taken over by his second wife, Hu Shaocha 胡紹茶, who during Wang's lifetime was a deputy chairperson and after Wang's death succeeded to the leadership of both temple and magazine society. At the same time, the management of the magazine society ended up in the hands of Hu Shaocha's brother, Hu Jinfeng 胡進豐, while her son Wang Shengbin 王晟賓 (i.e., Wang Yihan's second son, half-brother to Wang Qimou) was trained as a new medium, with the pen name Shenghuabi 聖化筆. He is a graduate of the Chinese literature department of National Chung-hsing University 國立中興大學 in Taichung. With key positions apparently dominated by Wang Yihan's

⁷⁰ *Penglai xiandao youji*, p.194-198.

blood and affinal relatives, Mingbi and his two friends decided to set up a new phoenix hall under their own leadership: the Xuyuan Tang.⁷¹

2.4. The Mingzheng Tang's Offshoots

2.4.1 Xuyuan Tang

The new phoenix hall's full designation is Non-Ultimate's Court of Chan Transformation, Southern Heaven's Hall of Origin in Emptiness (Wuji Chanhua Yuan, Nantian Xuyuan Tang 無極禪化院南天虛原堂). It was founded in 1996 by the three Wu Mingzheng Tang deputy chairmen Li Zhongxiong, Lin Zhesan, and Liu Mingwen, as well as a number other Mingzheng Tang members. As the reader may recall, the Mingzheng Tang itself had come into being by splitting off from another phoenix hall, the Shengxian Tang. The founding of the Xuyuan Tang differed from that precedent in that it involved a rather large portion of the Mingzheng Tang's leadership and in that it did not lead to a quick and clean break between the two cult groups. The Xuyuan Tang founders, in fact, continued their activities in the Mingzheng Tang, while simultaneously developing the Xuyuan Tang, with the objective of switching their allegiance over to the new group once it had become self-sufficient. A modest shrine was set up in a shop space at the ground level of a multi-storey building not far from Taichung City's Confucius temple and a monthly magazine named *Xuyuan zazhi* 虛原雜誌 was started, in which the Xuyuan Tang's spirit-written texts were published alongside calls for donations to acquire a more permanent worship space. The medium divided his time between séances held at Mingzheng Tang and Xuyuan Tang, continuing to call himself Mingbi 明筆 (Bright Stylus) in the former context, and Xubi 虛筆 (Empty Stylus) in the latter. During a visit I made in 2002, the separation seemed to be well under way and everyone expected a complete split between the two halls within the foreseeable future. However, it took several more years before the formal separation of the two cult groups was concluded. When I visited the Mingzheng Tang again in 2009, the split had already been finalized and the Mingzheng Tang was operating with Shenghuabi as its new planchette medium.⁷² In March of 2011 the Xuyuan Tang was still in its cramped storefront quarters, with the magazine society operating out of the basement. The hall had purchased land in the Dakeng area, i.e., in the general vicinity of the Mingzheng Tang, and was supposedly only waiting for the building permits to be issued before breaking ground for a new temple building. The permits, however, were proving difficult to obtain due to building restrictions in the Dakeng scenic area.

The director of the Xuyuan Magazine Society and main medium of the Xuyuan Tang, Li Zhongxiong alias Xubi, passed away in 2010. Despite having been trained as *zhengluansheng* 正鸞生 in the Mingzheng Tang, neither the Xuyuan Tang chairman Lin

⁷¹ I need to point out that this is my interpretation of events about which the participants are very reluctant to talk.

⁷² The separation was not complete in terms of its membership, though. A number of Xuyuan Tang members also maintain their membership at Mingzheng Tang, and Xuyuan Tang activities seem to be scheduled so as to minimize conflict with Mingzheng Tang calendar of events. I witnessed participants of Xuyuan Tang *fuluan* sessions carpooling afterwards to drive across town to the Mingzheng Tang's séance. One of the Xuyuan Tang deputy chairmen even holds the same position in the Mingzheng Tang so that a network of personal relationships continues to connect the two phoenix halls.

Zhesan nor deputy chairman Liu Mingwen continued as mediums in the Xuyuan Tang. Instead, after Xubi's death, a new medium and magazine society director was brought in from outside: Mr. Wang Wendi 王文迪 (pen name Shengbi 聖筆) had been involved with another Mingzheng Tang offshoot, the Quanzhen Tang 全真堂 in Hsinchu, which he left after unspecified conflicts with that hall's chairman, Mr. Tong Mingqing 童明清. With his wife, Wang Wendi runs a chain of cram schools preparing students for graduate programmes; his function as medium for the Xuyuan Tang is thus not his principal source of income. He practises exclusively the *jinzhi miaofa* method of spirit-writing.

Like other phoenix halls originating from the Mingzheng Tang, the Xuyuan Tang copied its basic structures (division into temple and magazine society plus an ancestor-salvation scheme similar to the Wuji Zhengdaoyuan), with regular *fuluan* sessions both for composing books and scriptures (*zhushu* 著書) and for resolving believers' personal problems (*jishi* 濟世). Like the Shengxian Tang in the early 1970s and the Mingzheng Tang in the early 1980s, in its first years the Xuyuan Tang composed new scriptures so as to define a new and separate theological identity for itself.⁷³ Particularly noteworthy is a stronger Buddhist element than existed at the Mingzheng Tang.

2.4.2 Gongheng Tang and Baode Dadaoyuan

As noted above, the Gongheng Tang was one of the earliest and most controversial offshoots of the Mingzheng Tang. There is usually a strong reluctance among phoenix hall members to speak ill of other groups, but for the Gongheng Tang some people in the Mingzheng Tang were willing to make an exception, at least at the time of my first field research in 1993/94. The main reason for that is the perceived illegitimate nature of the Gongheng Tang whose founder, Wang Yihan's oldest son Wang Qimou (alias Yongbi), had been expelled from the Mingzheng Tang and had his authorization to perform as a medium permanently revoked. His continued activities were therefore seen as an affront against the Mingzheng Tang and its gods. Still, in the early phases of the Gongheng Tang's development, Yongbi could count on the individual support of some Mingzheng Tang members, especially the younger ones; it also appears that in recent years the relationship between Mingzheng Tang and Gongheng Tang has been much improved.⁷⁴ In spite of his personal moral lapses that had been put on display so dramatically at the Mingzheng Tang, Wang Qimou is a charismatic and persuasive person. In a couple of interviews I conducted with Wang Qimou in 1994, he came across as mercurial, but very knowledgeable. He obviously made friends easily, but could just as easily alienate them again, which might explain the significant number of offshoots the Gongheng Tang has produced. Among these, the Baode Dadaoyuan in Fengyuan is a fairly recent creation.⁷⁵

⁷³ On these efforts see Clart 2009 & 2011.

⁷⁴ A Luanyou zazhishe publication commemorating an important dharma assembly (*fahui* 法會) held in August of 2009 reports the visit of a delegation from the "friend hall" (*youtang* 友堂) Gongheng Tang, including a guest *fuluan* séance performed by Yongbi at the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang and a group photo displaying Wang Qimou side by side with his stepmother Hu Shaocha. See *Jinque dehui dashe tianxia guhun jinianji* 金闕德暉大赦天下孤魂紀念輯, pp.23-25, 55.

⁷⁵ I visited the Baode Dadaoyuan and also conducted interviews with the temple leadership in March of 2011, but most of the following information is derived from a master's thesis completed in July of 2011 at

Its chairman, Mr. Wu Zhenfeng 吳振鋒 (1955-) is a native of Beigang 北港, where he and his father had been active in the phoenix hall Shengde Gong 聖德宮. He left Beigang in 1982 to pursue job prospects in the Taichung area. After some involvement with the Yiguandao he decided to return to his phoenix hall roots and eventually became a deputy chairman of the Gongheng Tang. Mr. Wu can perhaps best be described as a religious virtuoso, a man with a spiritual vision and the will and capacity to translate that vision into practical and institutional forms. At first he tried to pursue his goals within the Gongheng Tang, leading in late 2003 to an announcement by the Gongheng Tang's Guan Di that as of the new year's day of the *jiashen* 甲申 year (22 January 2004), the Gongheng Tang would be promoted (*shengge* 升格) to "Precious Virtue Great Court of the Dao" (Baode Dadaoyuan).⁷⁶ This name change apparently was to herald a number of liturgical and doctrinal innovations, but this met with the opposition of Wang Qimou and led eventually to a schism. Together with the planchette medium Qiu Yuanzhang 邱原章 (1972-), Wu Zhenfeng left the Gongheng Tang and set up the Baode Dadaoyuan as separate entity in March of 2004.⁷⁷ The temple now operates with two mediums: Qiu Yuanzhang and the female medium Chen Meiyu 陳美宇 (1961-). As in the case of the Xuyuan Tang, its institutional structures resemble the Mingzheng Tang model (including an ancestor-salvation mechanism called Wuji Wufang Zhengdaoyuan 無極五方證道院, which is a key source of income); also as in the case of the Xuyuan Tang, the new phoenix hall quickly revealed a series of programmatic texts and scriptures and thus created a new denominational identity for itself, distinguishing it from its predecessors in the network. The Baode Dadaoyuan's doctrinal and liturgical system is characterized by an Yiguandao-influenced cult of Maitreya Buddha and an emphasis on Buddhist Pure Land thought that presents itself as a "Pure Land branch within the Phoenix school" (鸞門淨土宗).⁷⁸ So far I do not have any data on continuing contacts between Gongheng Tang and Baode Dadaoyuan, but a few Mingzheng Tang members also attend activities of the Baode Dadaoyuan, including one of the Mingzheng Tang's deputy chairmen (not the same one as the person with dual functions in Mingzheng Tang and Xuyuan Tang).

2.4.3 Quanzhen Tang

During my first field stay at the Mingzheng Tang, the later founder of the Quanzhen Tang, Mr. Tong Mingqing, was a particularly assiduous and pious member. An elementary school teacher in Hsinchu, he would come down to Taichung every weekend with his young family to attend the Mingzheng Tang séances as an announcer of the revealed texts (*changluansheng* 唱鸞生). His deep interest in spiritual matters was already apparent at the time; Mr. Tong was probably part of the group of ambitious individuals in the Mingzheng Tang hoping to receive training as mediums, but being thwarted by the gods'

Feng-chia University 逢甲大學 by Mr. Shen Changliu 沈長流 under the guidance of Prof. Wang Zhiyu 王志宇. See Shen Changliu 2011.

⁷⁶ Shen Changliu 2011: 15.

⁷⁷ The already mentioned avoidance of criticism made it difficult for Shen Changliu to discover what the specific internal conflicts at the Gongheng Tang were, but apparently Wang Qimou's irregular conduct in temple affairs played a major role. See Shen Changliu 2011: 18.

⁷⁸ Shen Changliu 2011: 22.

reluctance (communicated through Mingbi's séances) to accede to such requests. Having already established his own shrine in his Hsinchu home in 1997, which he called "Shrine of Complete Perfection" (Quanzhen Tan 全真壇), Mr. Tong decided to leave the Mingzheng Tang in 2001 and strike out on his own. His brother-in-law, the son of a Daoist priest (*daoshi* 道士), owned a spirit-shrine (*shentan* 神壇) and agreed to facilitate his training as a planchette medium, in other words: to be his "human teacher" (*renshi* 人師). His immortal teacher (*xianshi* 仙師) became the deity Fazhu Shengjun 法主聖君; due to Mr. Tong's strong spiritual nature the training lasted only a single day (rather than the 49 days usual in phoenix halls). At some point Mr. Tong lost his job as school teacher and decided to pursue his religious interests full time. In December of 2005, the Quanzhen Tang was formally founded and moved into the sixth floor of a building across from the Hsinchu Confucius temple; in 2008, Mr. Tong also purchased the fifth floor to expand the Quanzhen Tang's premises. At present, the temple has a male (Mr. Tong alias Tongtian Quanbi 通天全筆) and a female medium (Ms. Jian 簡, pen name Daobi 道筆). Both use *jinzhi miaofa* to compose texts. The Quanzhen Tang has developed a unique focus on Fazhu Shengjun as its principal deity, which sets it apart from other phoenix halls; this new liturgical focus also led to the revelation of a new scripture devoted to the cult of this deity (*Fazhu Shengjun zhenjing* 法主聖君真經).⁷⁹ Asked about the network affiliation of the Quanzhen Tang, Mr. Tong's wife opined that their temple was not an offshoot of the Mingzheng Tang, as it neither worshipped the same deities nor had Mr. Tong received his training as a medium there.⁸⁰

3. Conclusions

In his 1997 study of Taiwanese spirit-writing cults, Wang Zhiyu describes formal ritual procedures for the formation of branch halls and offshoots of existing phoenix halls.⁸¹ The procedure recounted by one of his interview partners resembles the "division of incense" (*fenxiang*) of territorial temples, but is formally named "lamp transmission" (*chuandeng* 傳燈). It seems that such rituals were practised among Japanese-period phoenix halls and contributed to the formation of identifiable networks.

Among modern, sectarian phoenix halls no such system of orderly division exists. The closest equivalent is the commissioned training of mediums by one phoenix hall for an already existing other hall. I have not been able to witness this yet, so I have no data on the rituals involved and the effect on the future relationship of the two phoenix halls. However, the cases I found documented usually involve phoenix halls that are geographically quite distant from each other and thus unlikely to compete (somewhat comparable to the avoidance rules governing the training of Daoist priests).⁸² Whether these cooperations translate into the formation of networks is an open question that awaits further enquiry.

⁷⁹ Hsinchu: Quanzhen Tang, 2004. On this deity, better known as Fazhugong 法主公, see Wang Chien-chuan 2007.

⁸⁰ The above description is based on interview data gathered in March of 2011.

⁸¹ Wang Zhiyu 1997: 68-69.

⁸² Lee Fong-mao 2003.

The network described in this paper is neither the outcome of an orderly “lamp transmission” nor of the contractual training of religious personnel by one temple on behalf of another. Instead, what we are looking at here are mostly schisms engendered by internal conflicts. These conflicts typically revolve around personality clashes, moral lapses, thwarted ambitions, accusations of institutional or financial mismanagement, and other such negative factors that prosper in the environment of any relatively small-scale social group. However, these destructive group dynamics do not by themselves lead to the formation of new, schismatic groups. That requires the constructive drive and vision of a religious virtuoso, or perhaps better: *religious entrepreneur*, who can focus latent dissatisfactions into a new project of a better phoenix hall, which would outperform the earlier group. The term “entrepreneur” is especially fitting, as such persons usually combine theological vision with institutional skills and economic interests, making the new phoenix halls not just worthier agents of Heaven, but also economically viable entities and (often) a secure basis of the entrepreneur’s own livelihood. All of the examples described above crucially involved such an entrepreneur—a type of religious specialist that deserves closer scrutiny. The result of these schisms are networks of filiation with almost no formal relationships among the constituent phoenix halls. However, that does not mean that such a network is meaningless either to the phoenix halls or the researcher studying them: As we saw, informal relationships continue to exist in the form of overlapping or dual membership, thus preserving lines of communication and access to common resources within the network for its member temples.⁸³ For the researcher, delineating a network is helpful in tracing the spread of doctrinal and institutional continuities and innovations. If we focus just on the Mingzheng Tang’s offshoots we see significant continuities in the basic (and highly successful) institutional setup of the groups; at the same time, each schismatic group is driven to introduce certain innovations (in doctrine, ritual, cult emphasis etc.) to create its own and separate identity. Thus, such networks are important aids to the study of social dynamics and patterns of religious innovation among Taiwanese religious movements.

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⁸³ An example is provided by the Xuyuan Tang’s recruitment of Wang Wendi as medium after he had left the Quanzhen Tang.

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