

Offprint from
Asien- und Afrikastudien
der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin 33

Foundations of Daoist Ritual

A Berlin Symposium

Edited by Florian C. Reiter

2009

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

The Eight Immortals between Daoism and Popular Religion: Evidence from a New Spirit-Written Scripture

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1. The Eight Immortals between Daoism and Popular Culture

The group of the Eight Immortals (Baxian 八仙) consists of Zhongli Quan 鍾離權, Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓, Zhang Guolao 張果老, Li Tieguai 李鐵拐, He Xiangtu 何仙姑, Lan Caihe 藍采和, Cao Guojiu 曹國舅, and Han Xiangzi 韓湘子. These immortals came together as a group by the late Song dynasty (twelfth/thirteenth centuries), with only occasional variations in their composition.¹

Probably the earliest appearance of a Baxian group is found in a wall painting of a Jin dynasty tomb (Taihe 泰和 period, 1201-1209), reflecting a popularity that continued into the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) with the immortals as motifs on incense burners, clothing and folk art.² Dramatists of the Yuan period also got hold of their theme and produced the first literary codifications of their lore. In Yuan drama, the Eight Immortals appear in „deliverance plays“ (*dutuoju* 度脫劇), which focus usually on only a few of the group, most prominently Zhongli Quan and Lü Dongbin.³ By the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the Eight Immortals had come to occupy a firm place in the dramatic repertoire, both in the form of full-length plays⁴ and in short skits performed on auspicious occasions such as birthdays (*Baxian qingshou* 八仙慶壽)⁵. Especially the latter remain a fixture in local opera traditions

- 1 Wang Hanmin 王漢民, *Baxian yu Zhongguo wenhua* 八仙與中國文化 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2000), p. 36.
- 2 Wang Hanmin, *Baxian yu Zhongguo wenhua*, 37. For the development of the Baxian motif in Yuan period pictorial art, see Anning Jing, „The Eight Immortals: The Transformation of T'ang and Sung Daoist Eccentrics During the Yüan Dynasty“, in *Arts of the Sung and Yüan*, ed. Maxwell K. Hearn & Judith G. Smith (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996), pp. 213-229.
- 3 An example is the play *Han Zhongli dutuo Lan Caihe* 漢鍾離度脫藍采和 („Zhongli of the Han delivers Lan Caihe“), which has been translated by Wilt Idema and Stephen H. West. See their *Chinese Theater 1100-1450: A Source Book* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1982), pp. 299-343. See *ibidem* for an analysis of the thematic structure of deliverance plays.
- 4 One of the best-known examples is Tang Xianzu's 湯顯祖 Lü Dongbin play *Handan ji* 邯鄲記 Wu Xiuhua 吳秀華, *Tang Xianzu Handan meng ji jiaozhu* 湯顯祖《邯鄲夢記》校注 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2004).
- 5 On the place of the Baxian in traditional opera, see Idema & West, *Chinese Theater 1100-1450*,

across China. The Ming period also saw the first full narrative development of the Eight Immortals complex in the form of a novel, the *Dongyou ji* 東遊記 („Journey to the East“) by Wu Yuntai 吳元泰.⁶ Much of the later Eight Immortals lore is linked with this important text, including the famous story of their crossing of the ocean (*Baxian guohai* 八仙過海), which became a staple motif in folk art and can still be found today painted on many Taiwanese temple walls and stitched on bright red cloths (*baxiancai* 八仙彩) that are hung over entrances to bring blessings to the building and its inhabitants.⁷ Thus, since the Ming dynasty the Eight Immortals have found a firm place in Chinese popular culture, their stories transmitted through the theatre, folk art, story-telling⁸, novels⁹, and popular literature (such as „precious volumes“, *baojuan* 寶卷).¹⁰

300-308; Wang Hanmin, *Baxian yu Zhongguo wenhua*, chapter 5. Also, Chen Lingling 陳玲玲, *Baxian zai Yuan-Ming zaju he Taiwan baxianxi zhong de zhuangkuang* 八仙在元明雜劇和臺灣扮仙戲中的狀況 (M.A. thesis, Wenhua Xueyuan, 1978).

6 Numerous editions exist. See for example, *Si youji* 四遊記, comp. by Wang Jiquan 王繼權 (Harbin: Beifang wenxue chubanshe, 1985). Trsl. by Nadine Perront, *Pérégrination vers l'est* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).

7 On the *baxiancai*, see Wang Jingyi's 王滄苒 *Shenling huoxian: jingyan baxiancai* 神靈活現：驚艷八仙彩 (Luzhou shi: Boyang wenhua, 2000). The story of the Baxian's crossing of the ocean appears first in the Yuan drama „Zheng yuban Baxian guo canghai“ 爭玉板八仙過滄海 („Struggling over jade clappers, the Eight Immortals cross the vast ocean“). On this play see Chen Lingling, „Baxian zai Yuan-Ming zaju ...“, pp. 35-36. Paul R. Katz describes a Yuan dynasty mural with the *Baxian guohai* motif at the Yongle Gong 永樂宮 in Shanxi. See his *Images of the Immortal: The Cult of Lü Dongbin at the Palace of Eternal Joy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), pp. 188-189. A modern example of a Baxian temple mural is described in Zeng Qinliang's 曾勤良 *Sanxia Zushi Miao diaohui gushi tanyuan* 三峽祖師廟雕繪故事探原 (Taipei: Wenjin, 1996), pp. 302-304.

8 Three recent collections of Baxian stories collected in different parts of the Chinese mainland are: *Baxian chuanshuo gushi ji* 八仙傳說故事集, ed. Yu Hang 俞航 (Beijing: Zhongguo minjian wenyi chubanshe, 1988); *Baxian renwu de chuanshuo* 八仙人物的傳說, ed. Liu Xicheng 劉錫誠, Xiao Rong 蕭蓉, and Feng Zhi 逢之 (Shijiazhuang: Huashan wenyi chubanshe, 1995); and *Baxian de gushi* 八仙的故事, ed. Chen Delai 陳德來 & Liu Xunda 劉巽達 (Taipei: Jiangmen wenwu, 1995). There is considerable overlap between the books by Yu Hang and Liu Xicheng et al. Yu Hang's book has also been republished in Taiwan by a certain Ouyang Jingyi 歐陽晶宜 as *Baxian chuanqi* 八仙傳奇 (Banqiao: Kezhu shuju, 1992) and *Baxian de gushi* 八仙的故事 (Banqiao: Kezhu shuju, 1995).

9 In the 19th century, there appeared the novel *Baxian dedao* 八仙得道 („The Eight Immortals Attain the Dao“) by Wugou Daoren 無垢道人 (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 1987). A modern example is Chen Sanfeng's 陳三峰 *Baxian chuanqi* 八仙傳奇 (Xinzhuang: Mantingfang, 1994). An overview of Baxian-related novels is given in Han Xiduo's 韓錫鐸 *Baxian xilie xiaoshuo* 八仙系列小說 (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe, 1993).

10 Che Xilun 車錫倫 lists six Baxian *baojuan* in his bibliography *Zhongguo baojuan zongmu* 中國寶卷總目 (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiusuo choubenchi, 1998), 1-2. A fairly easily accessible one of these is the *Baxian da shangshou baojuan* 八仙大上壽寶卷 („Precious volume on the Eight Immortals' birthday congratulations“), which is included in the collection *Baojuan chujī* 寶卷初集, ed. by Zhang Xishun 張希舜 et al., vol.28 (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, no date). An overview of Baxian motifs in folk art and folk

While their place in popular culture is uncontested, their relationship to Daoism is less clear. In one of the early studies of the Eight Immortals, Pu Jiangqing concludes that their relationship with Daoism is quite superficial.¹¹ Their main link with Daoism proper are Zhongli Quan and Lü Dongbin, who are revered as patriarchs by the Quanzhen tradition and are the putative authors of a number of texts on inner alchemy in the Daoist Canon. As a group, the Eight Immortals' presence is clearly stronger in popular culture than in a Daoist context. Be it in popular literature and theatre, or in folk art such as woodblock prints or the colourful embroidery of the *baxiancai*, the Eight Immortals were ubiquitous in traditional local culture across many regions of China and to a considerable extent remain so today. What purpose do images of the Eight Immortals serve when they are hung over doors, temple altars, or at weddings? Typically, their function is described in general terms as „auspicious“, as „bringing in good fortune“. The Eight Immortals seem similar to other auspicious deities such as Hehe erxian 和合二仙, the god of wealth (*caishen* 財神), or the gods of Blessings, Wealth, and Longevity (*fulushou* 福祿壽): They are well-known and widely present in popular iconography and narrative and performative literature—but they are seldom the object of serious religious veneration. Instead of on a temple's main altar, their pictures are found on murals or on the inner beams and eaves of temple roofs, on New Year prints and fans, on paintings and embroidered cloths. This is not to say that organized cults for these deities do not exist. Just as there are temples to the God of Wealth, so we find temples to the Eight Immortals collectively or to individual members of their group. On Taiwan, we find a handful of Baxian temples, which are usually small, privately-run shrines.¹² In addition there are shrines to individual members of the group, most of which are dedicated to Lü Dongbin, also known as Patriarch Lü (Lüzü 呂祖) or Thearch of Reliable Succour (Fuyou Dijun 孚佑帝君).¹³ Lü Dongbin has enjoyed a career quite separate from that of the other seven immortals and is worshipped as a powerful immortal in his own right in many areas of China. In Taiwan, we encounter numerous shrines and temples to this deity, often referred to as *xiangong*

literature can be found in Wang Hanmin, *Baxian yu Zhongguo wenhua*, chapter 4. See also Shan Man 山曼, *Baxian chuanshuo yu xinyang* 八仙傳說與信仰 (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2003).

- 11 Pu Jiangqing 浦江清, „Baxian kao 八仙考“, *Qinghua xuebao* 清華學報 11 (1936): 103.
- 12 Web searches turned up references to Taiwanese temples called Baxian Gong 八仙宮 in Qingshui township 清水鎮 (Taizhong county 台中縣), Zhonggangxi 中港溪 (Miaoli county 苗栗縣), Sanzhi district 三芝鄉 (Taibei county 台北縣), and Su'ao township 蘇澳鎮 (Yilan county 宜蘭縣).
- 13 On the web, I discovered one reference to a Taiwanese temple devoted to Li Tieguai: the Zhixuan Gong 指玄宮 in Jilong 基隆市. On the Chinese mainland, there exist a few temples to other members of the group, such as the well-known He Xiangju shrine 何仙姑家壇 of Zengcheng 增城 in Guangdong province, and the Guolao Miao 果老廟 (devoted to Zhang Guolao) in Huaibin county 淮濱縣 of Henan province. Both these temples are located in the putative hometowns of the immortals. On these two locations, see Shan Man, *Baxian chuanshuo yu xinyang*, pp. 151-155.

仙公, the most famous being the Zhinan Gong 指南宮 in the Muzha 木柵 district of Taipei.¹⁴ His independence from the collective of the Eight Immortals is perhaps best seen in the fact that he can be part of other groupings of deities as well, such as the Benevolent Lords (Enzhu 恩主) worshipped by Taiwanese spirit-writing cults.¹⁵ In spite of his independent-mindedness, Lü Dongbin's link to the other seven immortals is rarely completely severed and we usually find iconographic references to the group as a whole in temples dedicated to Lü Dongbin as the main deity.¹⁶

This enduring link also exists in clearly Daoist contexts, in distinction from popular temples. In spite of Pu Jiangqing's declaration that the Eight Immortals represent a popular tradition largely separate from Daoism, the high standing of Lü Dongbin in the Quanzhen school has produced a number of Quanzhen sanctuaries dedicated to the Eight Immortals. The best-known example is the Baxian Gong 八仙宮 (also known as Baxian An 八仙庵 (Palace/Hermitage of the Eight Immortals) in Xi'an 西安, whose history goes back to the Song dynasty and which is still one of the best-known temples in the metropolis of Xi'an today.¹⁷ The Quanzhen head monastery in Beijing, Baiyun Guan 白雲觀, has a Baxian shrine, and we find other such sanctuaries in places where the Quanzhen school maintained a strong presence.¹⁸ If we further take into account that stories of all or some of the Eight Immortals appear in Daoist hagiographical works from the Tang dynasty onwards, then a clear distinction between popular and orthodox Daoist immortals becomes untenable. In fact, in the course of late Imperial Chinese history popular and Daoist strands of tradition have crossed frequently, exchanging mutual influences. Tales of the Eight Immortals have become part of Daoist hagiography and their protagonists

14 On the Zhinan Gong, see Paul R. Katz, „The Wayward Phoenix? The Early History of the Palace of Guidance (Chih-nan Kung)“, in *Yishi, miaohui yu shequ* 儀式、廟會與社區, ed. Chu Ron-guey 朱榮貴 and Li Feng-mao 李豐楙 (Taipei: Institute of Literature and Philosophy, 1996), pp. 197-228. On a Xiangong temple in northern Taiwan, see Feuchtwang, Stephan, „Spiritual Recovery: A Spirit-writing Shrine in Shifting under Japanese Rule“, in *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica* 88(1999): 63-89.

15 There are different groupings called the Three, Four, or Five Benevolent Lords, but most are centred on an immutable core group of three deities: Guan Di 關帝, Fuyou Dijun, and Siming Zhenjun 司命真君. To these are then added others such as Xuantian Shangdi 玄天上帝 and Huoluo Lingguan 豁落靈官. See Philip Clart, *The Ritual Context of Morality Books: A Case-Study of a Taiwanese Spirit-Writing Cult*, Ph.D. diss., University of British Columbia, 1997; Wang Zhiyu 王志宇, *Taiwan de Enzhugong xinyang: Ruzong Shenjiao yu feiluan quanhua* 臺灣的恩主公信仰: 儒宗神教與飛鸞勸化 (Taipei: Wenjin, 1997).

16 See for example the elaborate Baxian statuary at the Xiangong Miao 仙宮廟 on Qingshan 青山 in Dongshan district 東山鄉 (Tainan county), <http://www.ttvs.cy.edu.tw/kcc/zsen/senkon1.htm>. accessed on 29 September 2007.

17 Shan Man, *Baxian chuanshuo yu xinyang*, pp. 118-125.

18 For example on Mt. Wudang and in Sichuan. *Wudangshan zhi* 武當山志 (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 1994), p. 145; Mei Li 梅莉, „Qingchu Wudangshan Quanzhen Longmenpai de zhongxing yu Wudangshan gongguan de fuxiu 清初武當山全真龍門派的中興與武當山宮觀的復修“, paper presented at the International Symposium on Quanzhen Daoism in Modern Chinese Society and Culture, 2-3 November 2007, University of California-Berkeley.

have earned their places on the altars of Quanzhen shrines, while these merry immortals have at the same become propagators of Quanzhen doctrine in media accessible to the general population, such as deliverance plays and narrative literature such as novels, ballads, and precious scrolls.¹⁹

However, both in the Quanzhen and the popular settings, formal worship of the Eight Immortals is still relatively rare. Why is that? The existence of a number of Baxian shrines in both religious spheres demonstrates that there is no fundamental obstacle to their worship, so why are they not more popular, given their otherwise high degree of recognition? On the Quanzhen side, the Eight Immortals are linked to, yet still stand outside its patriarchal line. Stories about the Eight Immortals circulated already in the lifetime of the Quanzhen founder Wang Chongyang, and thus it is probably no coincidence that the two immortals who transmitted the Dao to him were identified as Lü Dongbin and Zhongli Quan. This was exactly what they are shown to do in many stories and plays about the Baxian. With the conversion of Wang Chongyang, however, a new serial conversion story begins, that of the Seven Perfected (Qizhen 七真). There are interesting structural similarities between the successive conversions of the eight immortals on the one hand, and of the Seven Perfected on the other. Of these two structurally similar narratives, the story of the Seven Perfected was clearly of greater concern to the Quanzhen school as it involved its own patriarchal line; the Baxian story cycle, by contrast, represented a parallel tradition of master-disciple relationships that shared two protagonists with the Quanzhen school's foundation myth, but may well have been regarded as competing with and subversive of the Quanzhen story. Its subversive potential is apparent in the sometimes disrespectful depictions of Lü Dongbin and other immortals. The Baxian story cycle pre-existed the Quanzhen school and continued to be generated and transmitted beyond its control by storytellers, theatre troupes, and popular authors. Over the centuries, Quanzhen followers seem to have pursued a two-pronged strategy towards the Eight Immortals: On the one hand, they created a Quanzhen mythology in stories about the exploits of the Seven Perfected, an endeavour that had only limited and very late success in the shape of a number of moderately successful *baihua* novels in the nineteenth century.²⁰ The other strategy,

19 In addition, I am aware of at least one more technical *neidan* 內丹 text whose authorship is ascribed to the collective of the Eight Immortals (presumably by means of spirit-writing). See *Jindan xinfa* 金丹心法, vol. 8/7 of *Daozang jinghua* 道藏精華 (Taipei: Ziyou chubanshe, 1998). It has also been argued that the Baxian birthday plays have a ritual origin and therefore are not just Daoist adaptations of an entertainment genre, but may themselves arise from within a Daoist liturgical context. See Wu Guangzheng 吳光正, *Baxian gushi xitong kaolun: neidandao zongjiao shenhua de jian'gou ji qi liubian* 八仙故事系統考論—內丹道教神話的建構及其流變 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006), pp. 16-40.

20 Vincent Durant-Dastès, „The *Qizhen* 七真 Vernacular Novels of the Late Qing in the Context of the Ming-Qing Hagiographical Novels“, paper presented at the International Symposium on Quanzhen Daoism in Modern Chinese Society and Culture, 2-3 November 2007, University of California-Berkeley. Eva Wong (trsl.), *Seven Daoist Masters: A Folk Novel of China* (Boston:

which was much more successful, was to co-opt the Eight Immortals as models and propagators of Quanzhen ideals. This process of co-optation becomes visible in plays, tales, and novels where the Eight Immortals collectively or individually preach the futility of worldly success and teach principles of *neidan* practice. In order to achieve this end, the popular tales need to be „cleaned up“ and refocused, a process clearly discernible in Daoist hagiographic versions of Baxian tales and in other self-consciously didactic redactions of Baxian material. A good example is the early 17th century novel, *Han Xiangzi quanzhuan* 韓湘子全傳, whose author is at some pain to distance Han Xiangzi's teacher Lü Dongbin from tales implicating him in sexual adventures such as the famous episode of White Peony (Bai Mudan 白牡丹).²¹ The marginal presence of Baxian shrines on Quanzhen premises is thus probably another aspect of the co-optation of these immortals: a tentative endeavour to utilize their popularity and convert them into carriers of Quanzhen ideas and values without full liturgical integration. This hypothesis could be further corroborated by field studies of the Quanzhen shrines and their iconography, something which I hope to accomplish in the near future.

What about the relatively scarcity of Baxian shrines outside the Quanzhen context? Concerns about Daoist orthodoxy presumably play less of a role here, so we have to look for reasons elsewhere. My hypothesis and, pending future field research, that is all it is right now, is that the Eight Immortals, like the god of wealth, are deities that are primarily personal in orientation. Their stories focus on the destinies of individuals and families, not communities. A key theme in Baxian lore is the encounter of one or all the Baxian with an individual who proves him or herself worthy of deliverance and consequently receives the Dao from them. Often this experience then leads further to the deliverance and ascension to Heaven of the person's whole family. Since their stories tie the Eight Immortals to individual and familial destiny, it is not surprising that we find them primarily in the private sphere, not as main deities in community temples. Their focus on personal deliverance and lack of a community-building emphasis make them unsuitable as foci of community worship and symbolism.²² In this respect, they resemble the „unruly gods“ studied in the eponymous volume edited by Meir Shahar and Robert Weller.²³ Due to their anomic character, unruly deities such as Erlang, Nezha, and Jigong Huofo rarely become the focus of community worship; they do play a role, however, in religious settings devoted to the aspirations of individuals beyond (and sometimes against)

Shambhala, 2004).

21 See Yang Erzeng, Philip Clart (trsl.), *The Story of Han Xiangzi: The Alchemical Adventures of a Daoist Immortals* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), pp. 109-111. On the treatment of Lü Dongbin's sexual adventures in different narrative genres, see Paul R. Katz, „Images of Lü Dongbin in Ming Literature“, unpublished MS.

22 See Philip Clart, „The Relationship of Myth and Cult in Chinese Popular Religion: Some Remarks on Han Xiangzi“. *Xingda zhongwen xuebao* 興大中文學報: forthcoming.

23 *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996).

community life, such as the shrines of spirit-mediums and popular sects. It is therefore no coincidence that a recent effort to start a cult of the Eight Immortals originated in a religious group devoted to individual and familial spiritual advancement, namely, a spirit-writing cult (*luan-tang* 鸞堂, „phoenix hall“). The following section of this paper focuses on a scripture produced for the cult of the Eight Immortals by a cult group in the central Taiwanese city of Taichung 台中: the *True Scripture of the Eight Immortals' Numinous Responsiveness* (*Ba xianweng lingying zhenjing* 八仙翁靈應真經; hereafter: *True Scripture*)

2. The Revelation of the True Scripture at the Hall of Empty Origin

2a. Institutional Context

The cult group in question goes by the name of the 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). I will refer to it as Xuyuan Tang. It came into being in 1996 as an offshoot of another Taichung phoenix hall, the Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy (Wumiao Mingzheng Tang 武廟明正堂; short: Mingzheng Tang). The latter was the subject of my Ph.D. dissertation research, which included a field study that I carried out from 1993 to 1994 and which resulted in a thesis completed in late 1996.²⁴ The founding of the Xuyuan Tang came too late to be included in my dissertation and since it happened after I had left Taichung, I was unable to witness the events leading up to it. However, from conversations with cult members on brief visits to the Mingzheng Tang in 2002 and 2006 it appears that a simmering tension among the leadership of the Mingzheng Tang came to a head in 1996 and led to the founding of the breakaway Xuyuan Tang which was spearheaded by a close-knit group of Mingzheng Tang vice-chairmen (*futangzhu* 副堂主), including its principal medium (*zhengluansheng* 正鸞生). Such splits are not unusual among phoenix halls. The Mingzheng Tang itself had come into being in 1976 as an offshoot of another Taichung phoenix hall, the Hall of Sages and Worthies (Shengxian Tang 聖賢堂), and had produced its own share of progeny in its twenty-year history up to that point. The founding of the Xuyuan Tang, however, was unusual in that it involved such a big portion of the Mingzheng Tang's leadership and in that it did not right away lead to a 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 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

24 *The Ritual Context of Morality Books: A Case-Study of a Taiwanese Spirit-Writing Cult.*

permanent worship space.²⁵ The medium divided his time between séances held at Mingzheng Tang and Xuyuan Tang, calling himself Mingbi 明筆 (Bright Stylus) in the former context, and Xubi 虛筆 (Empty Stylus) in the latter. During my visit in 2002, the separation seemed to be well under way and everyone expected a complete split between the two halls in the foreseeable future, which by the time of my last visit in the spring of 2007 had indeed occurred.

The key activity of any phoenix hall is spirit-writing, i.e., the recording of texts authored by the cult group's gods through the services of a human medium wielding either a pen on paper, or a wooden, Y-shaped „planchette“ (*mubi* 木筆, *taobi* 桃筆) on the sand-covered surface of a tray.²⁶ Most of the texts thus produced are classified as „morality books“ (*shanshu* 善書), texts admonishing people, and society at large, to moral reform and spiritual cultivation. The writing and distribution of such texts is the primary *raison d'être* of a phoenix hall – and its key source of income. While I have not been able to peek into the account books of any phoenix hall, the lists of donors and their donations in the back of phoenix hall magazines are evidence of the significant amounts of money they receive for the printing and distribution of spirit-written texts. An active writing and publishing programme is both a sign of the high estimation in which the gods hold a particular phoenix hall, and an absolute economic necessity as it generates the donation income that is needed to fund the day-to-day operations of the hall and its publishing business.²⁷ Thus right from the beginning the Xuyuan Tang embarked on an ambitious schedule of spirit-writing and morality book publishing, which would simultaneously build up its religious reputation and economic foundation. The inaugural issue of its monthly magazine *Xuyuan zazhi* 虛原雜誌 contained the first séance records of the Hall's first two morality books, entitled *The Heart Needs to Find Peace* (*Fangcun dang zhi suo an* 方寸當知所安) and *The Sorrow of Living Beings* (*Shengling de beiqi* 生靈的悲悽). The divine authors of the former text were the Eight Immortals (Baxian 八仙), while the latter was written by the Ancient Buddha of the South Sea, the Bodhisattva Guanshiyin (Nanhai Gufo Guanshiyin Pusa 南海古佛觀世音菩薩). To date, the Xuyuan Tang has published roughly thirty book-length texts, or about three per year. All of these were first serialized in *Xuyuan zazhi* before being published as books. Most of these texts are morality books, but this number also contains four texts that the Xuyuan Tang classifies as „scriptures“ (*jingwen* 經文):

25 The first issue appeared in January of 1997.

26 For a general introduction to spirit-writing and spirit-writing cults, see David K. Jordan and Daniel L. Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

27 On the economic underpinnings of modern Taiwanese phoenix halls, see Clart, „Merit beyond Measure: Notes on the Moral (and Real) Economy of Religious Publishing in Taiwan“, in *The People and the Dao: New Studies of Chinese Religions in Honour of Prof. Daniel L. Overmyer*, ed. Philip Clart & Paul Crowe (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, forthcoming).

1. Guanyin's Lotus Sutra of the Marvellous Dao (Guanyin miaodao lianhua jing 觀音妙道蓮華經).
2. True Scripture of the Eight Immortals' Numinous Responsiveness (Ba Xianweng lingying zhenjing 八仙翁靈應真經).
3. Commentary on the Sutra Spoken by the Buddha Concerning the Heavy Debt Owed to One's Parents (Quanshi Foshuo fumu enzhong nanbao jing 詮釋佛說父母恩重難報經).
4. Marvellous Scripture on the Most High's Action and Response (Taishang ganying miaojing 太上感應妙經).

The two latter texts are derivative of existing scriptures and morality texts that have a long history of popular reception: a commentary on a Buddhist apocryphal sutra and the *Most High's Treatise on Action and Response* (*Taishang ganying pian* 太上感應篇).²⁸ The first two, however, are original creations. The Guanyin scripture was composed from 1998 to 2000, the Eight Immortals scripture from 2001 until 2003. During these periods, séances for the writing of the scriptures alternated with sessions devoted to various morality books. It is interesting that both the Xuyuan Tang's first two morality books and its first two original scriptures were authored by the Eight Immortals and Guanyin. The Xuyuan Tang's main deities are the same as those of the Mingzheng Tang and many other phoenix halls, namely, the Five Benevolent Lords (Wu Enzhu 五恩主): Guan Sheng Dijun 關聖帝君, Fuyou Dijun 孚佑帝君, Siming Zhenjun 司命真君, Xuantian Shangdi 玄天上帝, and Yue Wumu Wang 岳武穆王. In addition, both Halls venerate the sectarian mother goddess, August Mother of the Non-Ultimate (Wuji Huangmu 無極皇母). Beyond these key figures, however, both Halls also worship a profusion of other deities, with emphases shifting over time between them. The Eight Immortals and Guanyin never were strong foci of Mingzheng Tang worship and their early appearance in the newly founded Xuyuan Tang may well be part of an attempt to create a profile for the new cult that would distinguish it from its mother temple.

Several of the early morality books of the Xuyuan Tang were authored by the Eight Immortals as a group or by individual members of the group:

1. *The Heart Needs to Find Peace* (*Fangcun dang zhi suo an* 方寸當知所安). This was the very first book completed by the Xuyuan Tang. It was composed from 15 June 1996 (preface by Nanji Xianweng 南極仙翁) until 26 January 1997 (colophon by Beihua Dijun 北華帝君), and consists of 32 brief essays. Each immortal

28 On the *Foshuo fumu enzhong nanbao jing*, see Alan Cole, *Mothers and Sons in Chinese Buddhism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 42-46. On the *Taishang ganying pian*, see Cynthia J. Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 36-43.

wrote four essays dealing with the proper cultivation of the human mind.²⁹

2. *Inclining the Will* (*Xinzhi guixiang* 心志歸向). A collection of essays by Han Xiangzi on moral cultivation of the mind. It was composed from 22 February 1997 (preface by Zhongli Quan) until 30 May 1998 (colophon by Taibai Jinxing 太白金星), and consists of 60 chapters.³⁰
3. *In the World of Illusions and Confused Emotions* (*Huanhua miqing shijian* 幻化迷情世間). This work was composed from 28 August 1999 (preface by Nanji [Xianweng]) until 20 May 2000 (colophon by Jiutian Xuannü 九天玄女), and consists of 32 chapters. As in the case of *The Heart Needs to Find Peace*, each immortal wrote four chapters dealing with various issues of moral turpitude and confusion; however, the chapters here are not expository essays, but take the shape of a dialogue between the medium and the immortal.³¹

In addition, right from the first issue of *Xuyuan zazhi*, the journal serialized a pre-existing text by Lü Dongbin admonishing against sexual lust (*Lü xianzu jieyin wen* 呂仙祖戒淫文), whose installments were paired with positive and negative example stories (*shanzheng* 善證, *yinzheng* 淫證). Eventually, these texts were published in book format under the title *The Calamity of Lust* (*Yinhuo* 淫禍).³² Furthermore, the Eight Immortals either individually or collectively continued to make frequent appearances in the *Xuyuan Tang*, and so the reception in 2002 of a heavenly mandate for the Baxian to compose a scripture in their own name came as a formal confirmation of the Immortals' already well-secured position in the Hall's pantheon. We will now turn our attention to the process of scripture composition, beginning with an overview of earlier scripture texts composed at the *Xuyuan Tang*'s mother temple, the *Mingzheng Tang*.

2b. The Revelation of Scriptures (*jing* 經)

Prior to the emergence of the *Xuyuan Tang*, the *Mingzheng Tang* itself had also produced a number of scriptures. The writing of a new scripture usually occurred at a crucial transition in the cult's history. The *Mingzheng Tang* has over the years written four scriptures, each of which can be interpreted as a charter text for a new ritual focus of the Hall. The first was the *August Mother of Limitless Heaven's Celestial Scripture for Awakening [Her Children]* (*Wuji Huangmu huanxing*

29 This book is serialized in *Xuyuan zazhi* 1-5 (January-May 1997).

30 This book is serialized in *Xuyuan zazhi* 4-20 (April 1997-August 1998).

31 *Huanhua miqing shijian* (Taichung: Xuyuan zazhishe, 2000).

32 *Yinhuo* (Taichung: Xuyuan zazhishe, 1999).

tianjing 無極皇母喚醒天經), written in 1982 by the medium Valiant Stylus (Yongbi 勇筆), which laid the foundation for the Hall's then newly introduced worship of the August Mother.³³ The second scripture to be written was *The Thearch Shun's Scripture Admonishing to Filial Piety* (*Shun Di quanxiao jing* 舜帝勸孝經), revealed in 1984. If this text was intended as a charter text for a new focus on the Thearch Shun (mythical early emperor of China and one of the Three Official Great Thearchs 三官大帝), it failed. Its revelation seems oddly out of step with the general trend of the Hall's development at the time; it is possible that it represented a pet project of the medium Orthodox Stylus (Zhengbi 正筆) who apparently developed a special bond with the Thearch Shun during the previous writing of the *Xiaodian* 孝典, a morality book authored by the Thearch Shun and channelled by Zhengbi. Perhaps Zhengbi's decision soon afterwards to leave the Hall and set up his own phoenix hall was related to his failure to establish his favourite deity as a cult focus in the Mingzheng Tang. The third scripture, the *Mysterious and Marvellous Scripture of Limitless Heaven for Realizing the Way* (*Wuji zhengdao xuanmiao jing* 無極證道玄妙經), was composed in 1987 by Mingbi as the charter text for a ritual innovation of the Hall, the establishment of the „academy for realizing the Way“ (Wuji Zhengdao Yuan 無極證道院), where the faithful could enrol their ancestors so that they would find it easier to cultivate the Dao and be appointed to divine offices in Heaven. Finally, in 1995/96 the *Earth Mother's True Scripture for Universal Transformation* (*Dimu puhua zhenjing* 地母普化真經) was revealed by Mingbi to accompany the installation of a new image of the Earth Mother beside the Venerable Mother on the third floor of the temple building. This new focus upon the Earth Mother was another pet project by a leading member of the Hall, in this case one of the deputy chairmen. He initiated the fund raising project for the new Earth Mother image and afterwards repeatedly requested the gods to reveal an Earth Mother scripture. After some procrastination, Mingbi finally received a mandate to channel the scripture. There are some similarities here with Zhengbi's attempt to establish an individual cult for Shun Di in 1984 in that the Earth Mother also seemed to lack a broad basis of support among the phoenix disciples and was pushed mainly by a small faction supporting her. During the last ten years, the new Earth Mother scripture has taken hold in the liturgical activities of the Mingzheng Tang, though it has not ushered in a theological reorientation of the Hall.

Thus, by the time Mingbi and his colleagues decided to strike out on their own and found the Xuyuan Tang, Mingbi had already served as medium in the writing of two scriptures. His new Xuyuan Tang persona of Xubi thus had Mingbi's experience to build on. It seems clear that the two new scriptures revealed by Xubi were intended to serve as charter texts for the liturgy of the new phoenix hall and to set it

33 For an analysis of this revelation process, see my „The Birth of a New Scripture: Revelation and Merit Accumulation in a Taiwanese Spirit-Writing Cult“, in *British Columbia Asian Review* 8 (Winter 1994/1995): 174-203.

apart from its parent cult. But why the Eight Immortals and Guanyin? Mingbi/Xubi has felt a special affinity to the Eight Immortals ever since one of them, Han Xiangzi, had become his spiritual mentor. Every planchette medium honours a particular deity as his or her „immortal teacher“ (*xianshi* 仙師). It is this deity that guides the candidate through the training that qualifies him or her as a medium. Through his mentor Han Xiangzi, Mingbi/Xubi's destiny is connected with the rest of the group of the Eight Immortals. The link with Guanyin is less obvious, but may have to do with the fervent Guanyin devotion of at least one vice-chairman of the Xuyuan Tang. Furthermore, while the Eight Immortals are well known in Taiwanese popular culture, they rarely are objects of intense religious veneration; Guanyin on the other hand has a wide following among Taiwanese and would seem to offer a devotional focus for the new phoenix hall that could attract new members to the cult.³⁴ Thus, in a sense, the Eight Immortals by dint of their unusualness as objects of worship seem to function as markers of the Hall's unique and separate identity, while the cult of Guanyin serves the double purpose of setting the Xuyuan Tang off from the Mingzheng Tang, while at the same time tapping into the strong current of Guanyin devotionism in Taiwanese popular culture. At the same time, Guanyin fits in with a relative, though by no means exclusive, emphasis in the Xuyuan Tang on Buddhist deities. A significant portion of its texts is revealed by Buddhist figures: the Sixth Patriarch Huineng 六祖慧能禪師, the Bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī 文殊菩薩, Samantabhadra 普賢菩薩, and Ksitigarbha 幽冥教主地藏王菩薩, and of course Guanyin herself.

Let us now take a look first at the process of the *True Scripture's* writing before I proceed to analyse its contents and structure. On 12 January 2002, the imperial emissary and great minister, Grand Councillor of the Golden Palace, the astral deity Taibai 欽差大臣金闕內相太白金星 descended to proclaim the Jade Thearch's mandate for the Xuyuan Tang and its medium Xubi to compose the True Scripture so as to aid in the moral cultivation of human beings, and provide a standard scripture for use in shrines and dharma assemblies (一來可供世人悟明修持；二來可作為法壇法會「啟請」之標典).³⁵ The scripture's composition was to begin on 19 January. On the appointed day, the Immortal of the South Pole (Nanji Xianweng

34 On the role of Guanyin in Taiwanese popular religion see Zheng Zhiming 鄭志明, „Taiwan Guanyin xinyang de xianxiang fenxi 臺灣觀音信仰的現象分析“, in *Taiwan minjian de zongjiao xianxiang* 臺灣民間的宗教現象 (Zhonghe 中和: Dadao wenhua 大道文化, 1996), 48-68; Lin Mei-rong 林美容 & Su Quanzheng 蘇全正, „Taiwan de minjian Fojiao chuantong yu ‚giam-a‘ de Guanyin xinyang zhi shehui shijian 台灣的民間佛教傳統與「巖仔」的觀音信仰之社會實踐“ *Xin shiji zongjiao yanjiu* 新世紀宗教研究 2.3 (2003): 2-34; Lin Mei-rong 林美容, „Taiwan Guanyin xinyang de zhuyao xingtai-jianlun minjian Fojiao yu minjian xinyang de guanxi 臺灣觀音信仰的主要型態—兼論民間佛教與民間信仰的關係“ in *Minjian Fojiao yanjiu* 民間佛教研究, ed. Tam Wai Lun 譚偉倫 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), pp. 15-31.

35 *Ba xianweng lingying zhenjing, Taishang ganying pian zhenjing* (Taichung: Xuyuan zazhishe, 2004), p. 3.

南極仙翁) descended to compose a preface in which he bemoans the moral decay in the world, but also expresses his joy that the Eight Immortals will write this scripture as a blessing for all living beings. For many ritual occasions, people are often unclear which scripture to use; the *True Scripture* could become a standard text to be recited in supplication, as well as a manual for one's personal cultivation (可為「啟請」之要據, 感應咸明, 亦可為個人受持之根典).³⁶ The composition of the scripture itself began on 26 January, when Zhongli Quan revealed the invocations and ritual formulae that open the scripture.³⁷ The scripture was then revealed in instalments, with each of the Eight Immortals serving his/her turn directing the planchette. The séances were held on Saturdays and ended with the writing of the concluding ritual formulae by He Xiangu on 30 August 2003.³⁸ The revelations of each séance were serialized in *Xuyuan zazhi*, where they were interspersed with explications of difficult vocabulary (*zhu* 註) and concise summaries in modern Chinese of the passages' key ideas (*jie* 解). About halfway through this process appeared the first of many calls for donations to help in the printing of the scripture:³⁹

Call for Sponsoring the Printing of the True Scripture of the Eight Immortals'
Numinous Responsiveness

The Eight Immortals are composing a sacred and true scripture
To help and benefit humans so that their virtuous nature may be purified.
A very rare opportunity has arrived
To exert oneself diligently in the deliverance of all beings.

Heaven sending down a scripture truly is a rare opportunity. Scriptures are beacons of correct spirit, correct method, correct insight, and correct Way. They can rectify and transform the human mind so that all may ascend to the sacred realm and attain limitless blessings and wisdom. On the 29th day of the eleventh moon of the *xinsi* year, this temple had received a mandate for the Eight Immortals to compose the *True Scripture of the Eight Immortals' Numinous Responsiveness*. For those who cultivate themselves and seek to awaken the people's minds, this is an outstanding opportunity to receive the benefit of the Eight Immortals' numinous responsiveness and achieve the deserved rewards of successful cultivation. For those able to donate funds to sponsor the scripture's printing and thus universally deliver living beings, merit will be limitless.

A hardcover recitation edition of the *True Scripture* costs NT\$85, a paperback annotated edition NT\$35 per copy. How much to give is completely left to those who wish to sponsor its printing and wide

36 *Xuyuan zazhi* 64 (April 2002): 16.

37 *Xuyuan zazhi* 64 (April 2002): 17-19.

38 *Xuyuan zazhi* 85 (January 2004): 9-10.

39 *Xuyuan zazhi* 76 (April 2003): inside cover page.

distribution. Please remit your donation to the Xuyuan Charitable Society's postal bank account #22340711. Please indicate the name of the book you are sponsoring and any matters for which wish to offer prayers, so that this temple may submit a memorial to Heaven and that your vow may find its response.⁴⁰

Donations had already begun to come in before that formal announcement and picked up considerably afterwards. They ranged between a hundred and several thousand New Taiwan dollars. Donors attached a great diversity of prayers to their donations: for expunging of karma, health and healing, success in examinations, wisdom and intelligence, transfer of merit to living and deceased parents and grandparents, the salvation of all beings, etc.⁴¹ On 1 January 2004, the scripture was ceremonially presented to Heaven (*jiaoshu tianting* 繳書天廷) during a full-day event that included scripture recitation, spirit-writing, the presentation of the *Taishang ganying pian* scripture that had been written during the same time period, and a communal lunch.⁴² The spirit-written messages of that day originated from two deities: First, the presiding deity Benevolent Lord Guan assigned merit to the people involved in the writing of the two scriptures presented that day. Every participant of the presentation ceremony was to be awarded 100 merit units (*gong* 功), while leading officers in the ritual were to be assessed 200 to 300 *gong*. All who had attended at least three fourths of the séances during which the two scriptures were composed were to receive three *daogong* 道功 (= 30,000 *gong*). Those who attended at least two-thirds of the séances were awarded 2.5 *daogong*. For those with lower attendance rates, 100 *gong* per séance were assessed up to a maximum of one *daogong*.⁴³ Further merit was to be bestowed on those who would sponsor the printing and distribution of the texts; the protection of the scripture authors, Taishang Daozu 太上道祖 and the Eight Immortals respectively, was promised to all who recited the scriptures and cultivated themselves in accordance with their instructions.⁴⁴ All Eight Immortals were deemed to be present at the ceremony and expressed their appreciation through their spokesman, Zhongli Quan:

The Immortal Zhongli Quan descends

Proclamation: On behalf of the Eight Immortals I bestow the following encouragement:

40 NT\$85 ≈ US\$2.60. NT\$35 ≈ US\$1.07. A form for the memorial that was to transmit the sponsor's prayers and vows to Heaven was included in many editions of *Xuyuan zazhi*. See, for example, vol.85 (January 2004): 6.

41 Donors, donation amounts, and prayers are listed in the back of each *Xuyuan zazhi* issue.

42 *Xuyuan zazhi* 85 (January 2004): 1.

43 On the phoenix hall system of merit assignment see Clart, „Merit beyond Measure: Notes on the Moral (and Real) Economy of Religious Publishing in Taiwan“.

44 *Xuyuan zazhi* 87 (March 2004): 3.

Poem:

*The True Scripture of Numinous Responsiveness is bestowed on those with karmic affinity,
The Eight Immortals harbour the ambition to transform the lotus field.
The disciples of Empty Origin have exerted themselves single-mindedly
By their ceaseless cooperation they will deliver multitudes.*

Sagely Pronouncement:

The descent into to the world of the *True Scripture of Numinous Responsiveness* is due to the sincerity of mind maintained by the worthy disciples of the Hall of Empty Origin over many years. Although your hall's founding is quite recent, yet it has already received such a momentous opportunity; success in this endeavour had to rely not just on the planchette medium, but also on the support of the other worthy disciples. However, it is said, „A mountain's fame does not depend on its height, but on the immortals dwelling on it; the numinosity of a body of water does not depend on its depth, but on the dragon taking its residence there“.⁴⁵ In view of the present condition of your hall, I hope that the worthy disciples will not lightly abandon their ambitions. Even greater sacred tasks are waiting to be accomplished by you. Then you can hope to ascend to Heaven and reach your divine position, and therefore I am mentioning this to urge you on.⁴⁶

This message from Zhongli Quan had been preceded by a revelation from the Xuyuan Tang's presiding deity Guan in which he expressed his regret about the cramped quarters of the temple and admonished the temple members to exert themselves in the construction of a new, more spacious building. Zhongli Quan here uses the occasion of the *True Scripture's* completion to put in his plug for the temple building capital fund. Two days later, another of the Eight Immortals descends into the planchette, this time Lü Dongbin under the designation „Vice-presiding deity of this temple, Divine Lord of Reliable Succour“ (*bentang fuzhuxi* Fuyou Dijun 本堂副主席孚佑帝君) to add a merit item that had been „overlooked“ during the séance on the day of the dharma assembly itself. He bestowed a bonus of 150 *gong* on the leader of the sutra-chanting group and 100 *gong* on each of its members for being the first ever to chant the two new scriptures in a formal setting. He further granted

45 A famous quote from the „Inscription on a Poor Hut“ (*Loushi ming* 陋室銘), an essay by Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772-842). See *Guwen guanzhi* 古文觀止 (Tianjin: Tianjin guji shudian, 1981), p. 624. This text became the topic of an essay by one of the Xuyuan Tang's vice-chairmen in the next issue of the temple's magazine. See *Xuyuan zazhi* 88 (April 2004): 26-28.

46 *Xuyuan zazhi* 87 (March 2004): 4.

the blessings of the Eight Immortals to all participants of the assembly and ordered the „deities of merit and demerit” (*gongguoshen* 功過神) to record this merit.⁴⁷

3. Structure and Contents of the *True Scripture*

3a. Structure

Like the two *Xuyuan Tang* morality books jointly authored by the Eight Immortals, the scripture was composed in sections composed by one immortal after the other until everyone had his or her turn. It has a preface composed by the Old Immortal of the South Pole (Nanji Xianweng).⁴⁸

The *True Scripture* is enclosed by a number of ritual formulae that are typical of popular as well as Buddhist and Daoist scriptures. Appearing at the beginning and end of the main text, they serve as boundary markers and thus create a sacred space-time for the scripture’s recitation. Preceding the main text, we find:

1. a hymn on presenting incense (*shangxiang zan* 上香讚)
2. a hymn on purifying water (*jingshui zan* 淨水讚)
3. four mantras (*zhenyan* 真言) for the purification of mind, speech, body, and altar respectively (淨心、口、身、壇真言)
4. a hymn and a gatha for the opening of the scripture (*kaijing zan* 開經讚, *kaijing jie* 開經偈)

Then follow the eight major thematic sections authored in turn by Zhongli Quan, Lü Chunyang, Li Tiegua, Zhang Guolao, Lan Caihe, Han Xiangzi, Cao Guojia, and He Xiang. Each section is preceded by a „precious invocation” (*baogao* 寶誥) to the immortal in question. These invocations praise the immortal for his/her accomplishments and end with a three-fold recitation of his/her full title. These titles are:

Name	Titel	Translation
Zhongli Quan	鍾離權仙翁洪慈救劫正陽帝君	Old Immortal Zhongli Quan, Divine Lord of Correct Yang, Who Saves from Calamity with Vast Compassion

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Each of the *Xuyuan Tang*’s three texts authored by the Eight Immortals has a preface composed by this deity. The connection of the Eight Immortals with Nanji Xianweng (the longevity god) is primarily an iconographic one, as they are often depicted together on pictures presented at birthdays (*Baxian qingshou tu* 八仙慶壽圖).

⁴⁹ Among the three *Baxian* texts of the temple, the immortals’ sequence of appearances varies, but shared features are that Zhongli Quan (as the senior male immortal) always comes first, and He Xiang (as the only female immortal) usually appears last. Each of the three texts has a preface composed by the Old Immortal of the South Pole (Nanji Xianweng).

Lü Dongbin	呂純陽仙翁洪慈救劫孚佑帝君	Old Immortal Lü Chunyang, Divine Lord of Reliable Succour, Who Saves from Calamity with Vast Compassion
Li Tieguai	李鐵拐仙翁洪慈救劫凝陽帝君	Old Immortal Iron-Staff Li, Divine Lord of Congealed Yang, Who Saves from Calamity with Vast Compassion
Zhang Guolao	張果老仙翁洪慈救劫飛陽帝君	Old Immortal Zhang Guolao, Divine Lord of Flying Yang, Who Saves from Calamity with Vast Compassion
Lan Caihe	藍采和仙翁洪慈救劫南陽帝君	Old Immortal Lan Caihe, Divine Lord of Southern Yang, Who Saves from Calamity with Vast Compassion
Han Xiangzi	韓湘子仙翁洪慈救劫元陽帝君	Old Immortal Han Xiangzi, Divine Lord of Primordial Yang, Who Saves from Calamity with Vast Compassion
Cao Guojiu	曹國舅仙翁洪慈救劫洪陽帝君	Old Immortal Cao Guojiu, Divine Lord of Vast Yang, Who Saves from Calamity with Vast Compassion
He Xiangu	何瓊仙翁洪慈救劫一陽帝君	Old Immortal He Qiong, Divine Lord of Unitary Yang, Who Saves from Calamity with Vast Compassion

The titles have an obvious pattern: All eight personages are described as old immortals (*xianweng*) and „divine lords“ (*dijun*) who „save from calamity with vast compassion“ (*hongci jiuji*). The male labels *xianweng* and *dijun* are even applied to the female immortal He Xiangu. Variation is present in the immortals' personal names and in the two-character terms occurring before *dijun*. With the exception of Lü's title (which is fixed as Fuyou Dijun among Taiwanese phoenix halls), all other immortals have titles phrases ending in *yang*: correct *yang*, congealed *yang*, etc. Some of these have precedents in other texts. Zhengyangzi or Zhengyang Dijun is a common formal title of Zhongli Quan and reflects the name of the cave in which he supposedly cultivated himself (Zhengyang Dong 正陽洞). Ningyang 凝陽 is the personal name of Li Tieguai and he is worshipped under the title Ningyang Dijun in some Taiwanese temples.⁵⁰ The titles of the remaining five immortals are harder to

50 For example in the Baxian Gong 八仙宮 of Sanzhi district 三芝鄉 in Taipei county. See

trace, though I am certain that they were not newly created for the *True Scripture*. A list of very similar titles is appended to a scripture included in the *Complete Works of Zhang Sanfeng* (*Zhang Sanfeng quanji* 張三丰全集), a mid-nineteenth century compilation.⁵¹ The scripture is titled *Dongxuan duren baochan zhutian wushang zhenjing* 洞玄度人寶懺諸天無上真經. A comparison of titles shows the close overlap (diverging characters are underlined):

Immortal	Baxian scripture	Dongxuan scripture
Zhongli Quan	正陽帝君	正陽帝君
Lü Dongbin	孚佑帝君	孚佑帝君
Li Tieguai	凝陽帝君	齊陽帝君
Zhang Guolao	飛陽帝君	飛陽帝君
Lan Caihe	南陽帝君	<u>養</u> 素帝君
Han Xiangzi	元陽帝君	<u>恆</u> 陽帝君
Cao Guojiu	洪陽帝君	洪陽帝君
He Xiangu	一陽帝君	一陽帝君

Further research may produce additional information on the genealogy of the Baxian's titles and thereby perhaps produce some insight into the intertextual aspects of the *True Scripture*.

The invocation of the immortals' titles is followed by each section's main body of text, which is divided into two blocks of five-character and seven-character rhymed verses, respectively. In most cases, these blocks consist of 48 five-character and 30 seven-character verses; the only exception is Lü Dongbin's section, which contains 60 five-character and 30 seven-character verses. In the scripture's chanting the two text blocks are recited in different rhythms.

The *True Scripture* concludes with 24 lines of four four-character verses each praising the efficacy of the scripture, a „hymn on closing the scripture“ (*wanjing zan* 完經讚), a threefold declaration of refuge (*guiming* 皈命) in the Eight Immortals, and a mantra for the dedication of merit (*huixiang zhenyan* 回向真言).

3b. Contents

The structure described above already tells us a few things about the religious world of this text. In this world the text is regarded as sacred by dint of its divine authorship; this sacredness is marked by the liturgical formulae preceding and

http://www.sanchih.tpc.gov/trv/temple_sight.htm. Accessed 29 September 2007.

51 See *Zhang Sanfeng quanji* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang guji chubanshe, 1990), p. 289. On this work, see Wong Shiu Hon (Huang Zhaohan) 黃兆漢, *Mingdai daoshi Zhang Sanfeng kao* 明代道士張三丰考 (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju, 1988). According to Wong, the *Dongxuan duren baochan zhutian wushang zhenjing* was compiled by the *Zhang Sanfeng quanji*'s editor, Li Xiyue 李西月 (fl. 1796-1850), and attributed to Zhang Sanfeng (op. cit., pp. 71, 211-212).

following the main text, which serve to draw a boundary line between ordinary and sacred time-space whenever the scripture is recited. The same formulae further serve to (1) glorify the Eight Immortals, (2) purify the reciter, and (3) establish the merit accruing from the recitation. All of these formal aspects and functions enhance the authority of the concrete teachings contained in the text. What are those teachings? A strong emphasis is placed on moral cultivation, i.e., the need to cultivate and practise morality if one wishes to achieve transcendence. Given that this scripture was produced by a Taiwanese phoenix hall, this is not a particularly surprising finding. Transcendence, meaning ascension to Heaven as a deity or immortal by means of merit-accumulation through moral cultivation is central to the phoenix hall belief system. This is the key message of practically all spirit-written morality books produced by such groups and naturally holds pride of place in liturgical texts such as scriptures (*jing*) as well. In the *True Scripture*, this orientation finds expression in stock phrases such as the following:

<p>Those who do evil are legion, Those who know to cultivate themselves are few. Reform yourself, know to correct your faults, And honour virtue—only that can be deemed perfection. If you restrain your anger and control your desires, Your merit will be renewed daily. Give alms without stinginess And your field of blessing will be planted with causes [of future good fortune].</p>	<p>為非作歹眾 知修無幾人 遷善明規過 崇德方屬真 懲忿且制欲 功德日日新 布施除慳吝 福田種植因⁵²</p>
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While the moral cultivation discourse is highly visible throughout the scripture and is voiced by all Eight Immortals, it shares space throughout with a second, cosmological discourse that is less prominent in the morality book literature as a whole. Each of the *True Scripture*'s eight sections typically starts out with several verses of general disquisition on the Dao and its cultivation before leading over into the specifics of moral cultivation. For example, the passage cited above, from the section attributed to Zhongli Quan, is preceded by the following verses:

52 *Ba xianweng lingying zhenjing, Taishang ganying pian zhenjing*, p. 11.

<p><i>Yin</i> and <i>yang</i> are called the Dao, Those who cultivate themselves need to understand this. Too much <i>yang</i>-fire produces excessive dryness, By itself <i>yang</i> will not grow. Too much <i>yin</i>-fire produces excessive humidity, By itself <i>yin</i> will not give life and nourishment. When <i>yin</i> and <i>yang</i> benefit and aid each other, The Great Dao will spread freely. Heaven, earth, stars, sun, and moon— <i>Yin</i> and <i>yang</i> manifest their brilliance. By knowing the waxing and waning of <i>yin</i> and <i>yang</i> Do the sages and worthies ascend high in virtue. Being light, the <i>yang</i>-pneuma floats up, [Producing] <i>qian</i>-Heaven in its bright perfection. Being turbid, the <i>yin</i>-pneuma solidifies below, [Producing] <i>kun</i>-Earth that gives birth in stillness. The Dao of Heaven diminishes the full and augments [the humble], The Dao of Earth is not disturbed by emotions. When Heaven and Earth are constantly complete and fulfilled, All sentient beings can be rectified.</p>	<p>陰陽謂之道 修者理當明 陽火多必燥 孤陽不長成 陰水多則溢 孤陰不生營 陰陽相潤助 大道暢流行 天地象日月 陰陽現其英 陰陽知消長 聖賢德高登 陽氣輕浮動 乾天圓可明 陰氣濁下凝 坤地靜而生 天道虧盈益 地道無為情 天地常圓滿 萬靈得歸正⁵³</p>
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This is a pastiche of yin/yang cosmology drawing on the *Book of Changes* (陰陽謂之道；天道虧盈益), traditional primers such as the Ming dynasty *Youxue qionglin* 幼學瓊林(陽氣輕浮動；陰氣濁下凝), medical texts (陽火多必燥；陰水多則溢), and proverbial and customary phrases (孤陽不長成；孤陰不生營). Beyond the sources just listed, we find a few quotes from the *Zhuangzi* and the *Laozi*, and some verses that refer to *neidan* 內丹 concepts. The latter aspect, however, is never systematically developed. Thus it seems that the main function of cosmological discourse is to set a vaguely Daoist tone and to embed the practices of moral cultivation within a wider view of cosmology, thereby validating them.

4. Conclusion

In a paper on the second major scripture produced by this cult group, *Guanyin's Lotus Sutra of the Marvellous Dao* (*Guanyin miaodao lianhua jing* 觀音妙道蓮華經),⁵⁴ I argue that this text has an embedded-circle structure which leads the reciter from an outer layer of ritual formulae, through a second ring of Buddhist

53 Op.cit., pp. 10-11.

54 „The Other Lotus Sutra: A Newly Revealed Guanyin Scripture“, paper presented at the seminar „Kuan-yin and the Lotus Sutra“, 4-9 June 2007, Putuoshan, Zhejiang province, PRC.

devotionalism, to a core of phoenix hall moral cultivation, and from there outwards again in reverse order. From this I draw the following conclusion:

The effect is not to supersede Buddhist images of Guanyin, but to use these as steps to an underlying truth that transcends the denominational particularity of Guanyin devotion. This does not invalidate such devotion, nor does it seek to radically change it. In fact, its inclusion in the sutra validates it. What is intended is a revisioning of devotional practice as rooted in an ecumenical approach to spiritual and moral cultivation that places a premium on human initiative and agency. Guanyin devotion as espoused by the sutra leads the chanter further inwards to the cultivation of the Dao as the true spiritual endeavour of humanity that allows for purification and transcendence. [...] In effect, the Guanyin sutra provides an *inclusivist re-anchoring* of Guanyin-related devotional practices in a core set of sectarian notions of personal cultivation. Viewing the Guanyin sutra from the outside in towards the text's centre, we see a „skilful means“ (*upāya*) approach that uses orthodox and popular Guanyin devotion as a stepping stone toward Dao cultivation. Viewed from the centre outwards, we see Guanyin devotionalism arising out of and remaining rooted in the unitary Dao that underlies and gives meaning to all religious practice.⁵⁵

What I refer as to „Dao cultivation“ in this excerpt is in fact the system of moral cultivation espoused by Taiwanese phoenix halls. The *True Scripture's* structural approach to integrating this system with elements of a „great tradition“ is quite different. While it, like most recitation scriptures, also has an outer ring of ritual formulae, the inner structure is not that of two concentric circles, but of eight sections, each of which integrates two elements: a backdrop of „generic Daoist“ cosmology and a hortatory discourse of moral cultivation linked with promises of this- and other-worldly rewards. In the Guanyin scripture, the practices of Guanyin devotion had a clear and extensively referenced textual basis in Buddhist scripture (Lotus Sutra, Great Compassion Dharani, and Heart Sutra) and served as a stepping-stone towards phoenix hall moral cultivation. In the *True Scripture*, by contrast, the „Daoist“ aspects have no consistent textual referent, being cobbled together from a plethora of sources accessible to non-specialists, including even some apparent quotes from martial arts novels; furthermore, they provide no competing or ancillary model of cultivation, but a general cosmological framework that validates moral cultivation as not just an ethical imperative, but as the true way for humans to achieve cosmic harmony and hence, transcendence.

Both scriptures thus serve to link the phoenix hall teachings with the two major religious traditions of China, Buddhism and Daoism. In the case of the Guanyin scripture, moral cultivation is shown to be the culmination and true basis of

⁵⁵ Op. cit., pp. 24-25.

Buddhist devotional practice, while in the *True Scripture*, moral cultivation is presented as the practical concretization of a generically Daoist worldview. In either case, the phoenix hall „Way“ is validated by this connection, and at least in the Buddhist case presented as clearly superior to or more fundamental than Buddhist practice. If we combine this with the phoenix halls' traditional stress on „Confucian“ cultivation,⁵⁶ these two scriptures provide canonical confirmation of the claim of this religious movement to represent the true Dao shared by China's Three Teachings.

Furthermore, we need to keep in mind that both scriptures were composed in an early phase of the Xuyuan Tang's development. They served to establish a dual liturgical focus that would distinguish it from other phoenix halls, especially its mother temple, the Mingzheng Tang, while at the same time tapping into the popularity of Buddhist piety by way of Guanyin and popular imaginations of Daoism through the Eight Immortals. The teachings of the *True Scripture* display the focus on personal moral cultivation typical of a voluntary religious association such as a spirit-writing cult; references to local community concerns are almost completely absent, which makes sense given the fact that many modern phoenix halls such as the Xuyuan Tang are not locally based, but serve a translocal clientele interested in spiritual practice and advancement for themselves and/or their ancestors. This fact accounts both for the nature of the *True Scripture*'s contents and for the fact that it was revealed not to validate a long-standing cult of the Eight Immortals, but to jump-start a new one. In this, the *True Scripture* differs markedly from the popular scriptures studied by Kenneth Dean in Fujian province. Dean argues that an important service provided by Daoist priests to local cults in Fujian was the composition of scriptures that would provide canonical status to local deities of long standing and integrate them into a Daoist framework.⁵⁷ These texts typically follow a narrative, hagiographic format, stressing the efficacy of the protagonist deity. The divergent example of the *True Scripture* shows that popular scriptures (*jing*) do not constitute a unified genre; what they share is a claim to authoritative canonicity and arguably a few common formal features, e.g. certain ritual formulae such as mantras and hymns. However, these qualities and formal characteristics can be put to quite different uses, depending on the nature and needs of the religious group that sponsors the composition of the scripture.⁵⁸ The *True Scripture* thus adds

56 See my „Confucius and the Mediums: Is there a ‚Popular Confucianism‘?“ in *T'oung Pao: International Journal of Chinese Studies* 89.1-3(2003): 1-38.

57 Kenneth Dean, *Daoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 18.

58 Lin Mei-rong 林美蓉 has published a first survey of popular scriptures circulating in Taiwan, which includes interesting background information on structural characteristics of the genre and the social context of their production. Comparative study of the corpus of available texts may eventually give us a better sense of the range of structural characteristics of popular *jing*. See her „Cong minjian zaojing chuantong de shenming jingshu lai fenxi shenshengxing de suzao 從民間造經傳統的神明經書來分析神聖性的塑造“, in *Zongjiao shensheng: xianxiang yu quanshi* 宗教神聖：現象與詮釋, ed. Lu Huixing 盧惠馨, Chen Deguang 陳德光, Lin

to our understanding of the nature and functions of sacred texts in Chinese popular religion by guiding our attention, first, to spirit-writing cults as major sources of such texts, and second, to the fact that the nature and functions of these texts vary greatly with the social context in which they are produced. Furthermore, the *True Scripture* provides insights into the popular imagination of Daoism and into the strategies for appropriating this image of Daoism and integrating it with a popular-sectarian view of spiritual cultivation. The Eight Immortals act as a catalyst for this construction of religious identity by virtue of a confluence of factors: their popular identification with Daoism, their great familiarity to ordinary Taiwanese (in the words of the gods, „八仙翁與世人關係密切，因緣最深“⁵⁹), their focus on individual and familial salvation, their usefulness in creating a distinctive corporate identity for a fledgling religious association, and their personal spiritual link with the revealing medium. These factors come together to transform the protagonists of narrative literature into objects of religious veneration. What remains to be seen is whether the *True Scripture* is the outcome of a combination of factors unique to the Xuyuan Tang and thus unlikely to be adopted in other contexts, or whether it will transport to other religious settings and join the ever-growing canon of widely available and utilized popular scriptures.

Changkuan 林長寬 (Taipei: Wunan tushu gongsi 五南圖書公司, 2003), pp. 21-49.

59 From Nanji Xianweng's preface to the *True Scripture*. See *Ba xianweng lingying zhenjing, Taishang ganying pian zhenjing*, p. 4.