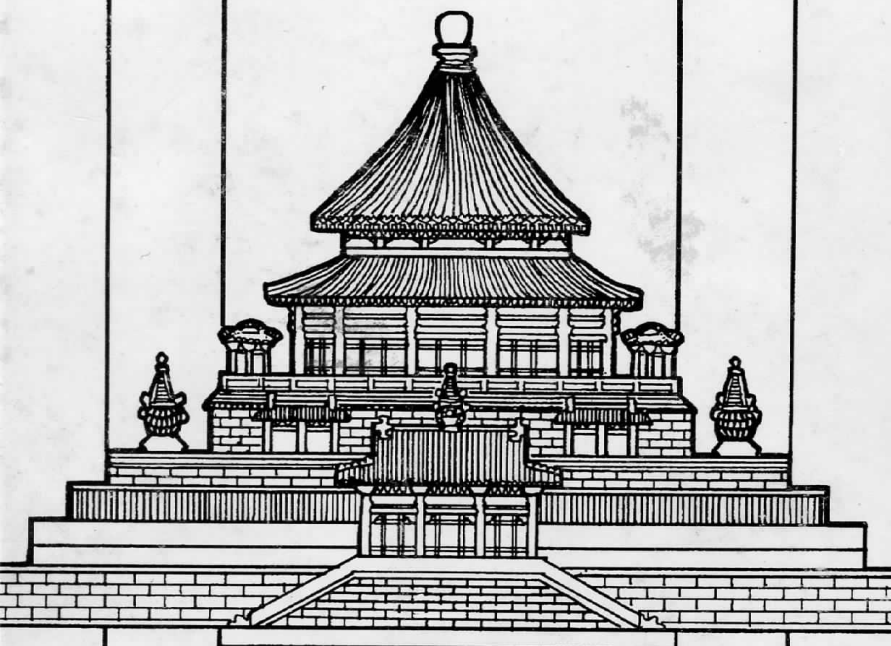


B.C. ASIAN REVIEW



Winter 1994 – 1995

No. 8

BRITISH COLUMBIA ASIAN REVIEW

The *B.C. Asian Review* is a refereed annual journal of graduate research on intellectual, political and historical topics; textual studies in both ancient and contemporary sources; literary pieces, translations, and reviews. We welcome contributions from present and former graduate students of Canadian universities, engaged in research on Asia.

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The *B.C. Asian Review* is published by the Publications Subcommittee of the Asian Studies Graduate Student Society, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C., Canada.

Subscriptions

CDN\$11.40 (Canada), US\$12.75 (USA), US\$13.25 (overseas)

The quoted prices include shipping and handling charges. Back issues are still available at reduced rates.

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Phillip Clart

The Birth of a New Scripture: Revelation and Merit Accumulation in a Taiwanese Spirit-Writing Cult

I. INTRODUCTION

On the fifteenth day of the twelfth month in the *xinyou* 辛酉 year (9 January 1982), Guan Ping 關平, the presiding deity of a spirit-writing temple in Taichung City 台中市, central Taiwan, descended during a seance onto the altar, and wrote via the planchette the following message:

Just now a messenger from Southern Heaven has visited the hall to transmit a proclamation: Heaven-on-High has decided to commission this hall to write the "Celestial Scripture of the Limitless" 無極天經. According to my knowledge, this scripture is a precious canonical text made of primordial ether. Although already three cosmic eras have passed, it has not yet descended into the world in response to the celestial cycles. It truly is a precious work for deities, humans, and ghosts who would cultivate the Way and attain its rewards. This hall has been honoured with this important assignment. If the scripture is completed, all the disciples who assisted can, through their merit rewards, above protect their ancestors, below benefit their descendants, and also complete their own rewards of the Way. I order this hall to set up an incense table tomorrow before [the oracular ritual of] the "relieving of the world" 濟世, so as to reverently receive the jade decree.¹

This message from the gods sets the stage for the genesis of a new scripture, a momentous event for the spirit-writing cult entrusted with this task, and a rare opportunity for the student of Chinese religions to witness revelation in action.

The present essay does not attempt a systematic exposition and analysis of the scripture's teachings. Rather, it focuses on the process

¹ *Luanyou* 鸞友 307:8. All messages from the gods are accompanied by short, classical-style poems, which I usually do not translate as they do not add any additional information beyond what is contained in the prose text. For a translated sample, see below p.185.

of revelation and the role that this revelation and its product, the scripture, play in the cult. Thus, what we are interested in are the meaning and functions of scriptural revelation in one form of Chinese religion. I shall try to give a detailed description of the production process of this scripture, and will then proceed to a discussion of the nature of the scripture and its revelation, and of their functions in the producing cult.

The religious group entrusted by heaven with the honourable duty of receiving the *Celestial Scripture* is a "phoenix" or spirit-writing hall (*luan* 鸞堂)², located in the central Taiwanese city of Taichung and called the "Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Illuminating the Correct" (Wumiao Mingzheng Tang 武廟明正堂)³. Phoenix halls are voluntary religious associations, which have as

² "Phoenix hall" is not a strictly accurate translation for *luan*. The *luan* is a mythical bird akin to but not identical with the *feng* 鳳 or *fenghuang* 鳳凰, which is usually rendered into English as "phoenix". It has been proposed to "translate" *luan* as "simurgh" to differentiate it properly from the *feng* [Hargett 1985]. "Phoenix" and "simurgh", fabulous birds drawn from Graeco-Egyptian and Persian mythology respectively, of course are purely conventional translations: there exists no intrinsic relationship between them and the Chinese concepts for which they are used. While philological exactitude may call for a differentiation of *feng* and *luan*, I feel that to translate *luan* as "simurgh hall" creates an unnecessary opacity for the Western reader, who will most likely have never heard of the simurgh. I therefore render *luan* as the more familiar "phoenix", following the precedent of most authors who have written on spirit-writing so far. "Phoenix" is to be understood as a generic term for "mythical bird".

³ As this essay is partly based on field research, conducted at the hall in question between November 1993 and June 1994, I feel obliged to protect my informants by using pseudonyms for most personal names. All pseudonyms are marked with an asterisk "**". I would like to thank all phoenix disciples of the Hall of Illuminating the Correct for putting up with my bothersome questions, making me feel always welcome, and offering me their helpful cooperation in all aspects of my research. I would also like to express my gratitude to the institutions which directly or indirectly assisted in funding this research project: the Center for Chinese Studies 漢學研究中心 (Taipei), the Lin Pen-yuan Foundation 林本源基金會 (Taipei), External Affairs Canada, and the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of British Columbia. I also acknowledge warmly the support rendered to me as a visiting scholar by the Institute of Ethnology at the Academia Sinica 中央研究院民族學研究所, and the valuable advice I received from Profs. Qu Haiyuan 瞿海源, Sung Kwang-yu 宋光宇, Lin Meirong 林美蓉, Zheng Zhiming 鄭志明, as well as Mr. Wang Chien Chuan 王見川.

The present article has also profited from the advice of Prof. Daniel L. Overmyer, Mr. Soo Khin Wah 蘇慶華, and Mrs. Brittani Faulkes, which is hereby gratefully acknowledged.

their ritual centre mediumistic communication with the gods by means of "spirit-writing" (*fujī, fuluan* 扶乩, 扶鸞). This technique is similar to the use of the "planchette" in Western spiritualism: one or two mediums hold on to a writing implement which is directed by a deity to write characters onto a sand-covered surface. These characters, strung together, form revelatory texts which are then studied and disseminated by the "phoenix disciples" (*luansheng* 鸞生), i.e., the cult members. It is through this technique of spirit-writing that the *Celestial Scripture* came into being.

The Mingzheng Tang was founded in 1976, having split off from another Taichung phoenix hall, the Shengxian Tang 聖賢堂 ("Hall of Sages and Worthies"). One of the former Shengxian Tang members who went over to the new group was its medium, "Valiant Stylus" (Yongbi 勇筆). Yongbi had been the Shengxian Tang's principal medium for almost five years, greatly contributing through his inspired writings to the success of the hall. Among the many texts produced by (or maybe through?) him in the Shengxian Tang were two scriptures (*jing* 經): the "Jade Emperor's Sacred Scripture for Universal Salvation" (*Yuhuang pudu shengjing* 玉皇普度聖經, composed in 1972), and the "True Scripture of the Chaotic Primordium of the Most High Limitless" (*Taishang wuji hunyuan zhenjing* 太上無極混元真經, also composed in 1972). These scriptures continued to be utilized by the Mingzheng Tang for years after the break with Shengxian Tang, until the new *Celestial Scripture* was revealed through Yongbi. This later scripture gradually replaced the earlier ones; by the time of my field research, the *Sacred Scripture* and the *True Scripture* were not in use any more at the Mingzheng Tang. Four other texts had taken their place: the *Celestial Scripture*, the "Mysterious and Marvellous Scripture of the Limitless on Attaining the Way" (*Wuji zhengdao xuanmiao jing* 無極證道玄妙經, written in 1987 at the Mingzheng Tang by Mingbi 明筆, "Bright Stylus", Yongbi's successor), and two older scriptures, not produced by the Mingzheng Tang itself: the "True Scripture of the Lord of the Way of the Pure Empyrean of the Southern Dipper for Resolving Distress" (*Nandou Lingxiao Daojun jie zhenjing* 南斗凌宵道君解厄真經), and the "Northern Dipper's Marvellous Scripture for Prolonging Life" (*Beidou yanshou miaojing* 北斗延壽妙經)⁴.

⁴ The *Northern Dipper's Scripture* is a Daoist text of the Zhengyi 正一-Tradition (cf. *Daozang* 341). The *Southern Dipper's Scripture* seems to be a spirit-written text: its preface is dated the fifteenth day of the first month in the fifteenth year Guangxu 光緒 (= 14 February 1889) by "Siming

The Mingzheng Tang publishes a fortnightly magazine by the title of *Luanyou* 鸞友 ("Phoenix Friend")⁵, which carries transcripts of spirit-writing sessions at the Hall of Illuminating the Correct, as well as essays and stories by human writers, concerned with religious matters. The present essay draws most of its textual sources from issues #307 (1 February 1982) to #321 (1 September 1982).

II. THE REVELATION

Let us now see how the promulgation of the *Celestial Scripture* in 1982 proceeded after the first announcement.

On the appointed day, 10 January 1982, the Mingzheng Tang's presiding deity Guan again descends to announce the imminent arrival of an emissary of the Jade Emperor carrying the "jade decree" (*yuzhi* 玉旨). After a four-line *jueju*-poem, he commands the Hall's city god (*chenghuang* 城隍) to meet the messenger's chariot at a distance of five *li* 里 from the Hall, and the Hall's earth god (*fushen* 福神) to do the same at a distance of ten *li*. All deities and humans should arrange themselves in orderly rows to receive the chariot. Thereupon the Supreme Councillor Zhuge of the Precious Palace of the Pure Empyrean (Lingxiao Baodian Zhuge Shangxiang 凌霄寶殿諸葛上相)⁶ descends to proclaim the Jade Emperor's mandate:

Wenchang" 司命文昌 in the "Plum Blossom Library" (Meihua Shuge 梅花書閣) in Fujian 福建 province.

⁵ This is the oldest spirit-writing magazine in Taiwan. It was originally founded by the Mingzheng Tang's chairman, Mr. Zhang Yunchang*, in 1969 as the publishing arm of a spirit-writing hall by the name of Huide Gong 惠德宮, in the town of Caotun 草屯 (Nantou county 南投縣).

⁶ This official is the head of the celestial government, directly subordinate to the Jade Emperor. According to a description of the heavenly bureaucracy produced by Yongbi in 1975, the *Tianjie chuanzhen* 天界傳真 ("True Description of the Celestial Realm"), his office is housed in the central hall of the Precious Palace of the Pure Empyrean, in the thirteenth stratum of Central Heaven (Zhongtian 中天). The current office holder is surnamed Zhuge; most likely this refers to the Three Kingdoms period strategist Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮. It underlines the importance attached by Heaven to the *Celestial Scripture* that the highest official of Central Heaven is sent down to transmit the Jade Emperor's mandate. Ordinarily, all affairs requiring communication with the human world are administered by Southern Heaven 南天, which is subordinate to Central Heaven. Southern Heaven is the only heaven that possesses a gate opening onto the human world.

Mandate of the Mysterious, Efficacious, Lofty Emperor-on-High, the Great Heavenly Worthy, the Jade Emperor 玉皇大天尊玄靈高上帝詔曰：

Although We dwell on high, We pay attention to the lowly. There is no time when We do not think of the common people in the dust of the world. All the time We think of the period of decay that has come about, of the demonic vapours that are rampant, of [all the beings] perishing in the sea of suffering, of the incessant [growth of] karmic obstructions; things have gone so far that black clouds and obstructive ethers are soaring right up to the Celestial Realm.

Because of this, We are melancholy and distressed. Fortunately, however, there is the Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Illuminating the Correct under the direct administration of Southern Heaven, where those above and those below are of one mind, embody the mind of Heaven, and exert their strength, proclaim and transform on behalf of Heaven, share their sorrows, and do services for each other. [This hall's] abundant merit and great achievements are recorded for eternity in the pure clouds [of Heaven]. Thus, after deliberation, the permission of the Venerable Mother of the Limitless 無極老母 was obtained to hand over the "Celestial Scripture of the Limitless". Starting from the seventh day of the first month of the *renxu* 壬戌 year [= 31 January 1982], the wooden brush shall be wielded as the phoenix; [the scripture] shall be composed every Sunday and shall be completed in five months. The book shall be presented to the Heavenly Court on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month.

We hope that you gods and humans of the Hall of Illuminating the Correct will be of one will, and that you will each fulfill your duties and complete the great task. Do not turn your back on [this] conferral of Heaven's mind. On the day the scripture is completed, We shall discuss merit and bestow rewards.

Sixteenth day of the twelfth month of the *xinyou* year of the celestial cycles.⁷

⁷ *Luanyou* 307:8.

One week later, on 17 January 1982, the preparations for the writing of the scripture begin. The Hall's presiding deity again announces the arrival of an emissary from the Jade Emperor. This time, it is Zhang*, the Imperial Emissary, Great Minister and Censor of the Golden Gatetower (Qinchai Dachen Jinque Yushi [Zhang*] 欽差大臣金闕御史 [張*])⁸, who arrives to proclaim another imperial mandate:

You, the Hall of Illuminating the Correct of the Temple of the Martial Sage under the direct administration of Southern Heaven, have received a decree to write the *Celestial Scripture of the Limitless*. Its full title is: "The August Mother of the Limitless' Celestial Scripture for Awakening [the World]" 無極皇母喚醒天經. It shall be written starting on the seventh day of the first month of the *renxu* year, be completed in five months, and presented to the Celestial Court.

By this we appoint the officers; each shall fulfill his duties and not turn his back on Our will.

By order, Guangchengzi 廣成子 assumes the office of deity in overall charge of proof-reading and correcting 校正總司神.

By order, the Perfected One of the Great Oneness 太乙真人 assumes the office of deity in overall charge of rewarding good and recording merit 賞善記功總司神.

By order, the Perfected One of the Jade Cauldron 玉鼎真人 assumes the office of deity in overall charge of punishing evil and recording transgressions 罰惡記過總司神.

By order, the Heavenly Lord Wang, Open-Minded Efficacious Official of Former Heaven 先天豁落靈官王天君 assumes the office of deity in overall charge of supervising phoenix duties 督理鸞務總司神.

By order, the Ancient Buddha Daoji 道濟古佛 assumes the office of deity supervising propriety 司禮神.

By order, Nezha of Southern Heaven, the Third Prince 南天哪吒三太子, assumes the office of messenger deity 馳聘神.

⁸ The "Golden Gatetower" refers to the Jade Emperor's residence, the Precious Palace of the Pure Emyrean. Thus, again we find a central celestial government official relaying messages directly to the Hall of Illuminating the Correct. The spirit holding this office, identified as being surnamed Zhang*, is none other than Yongbi's paternal grandfather.

By order, Prince Guan Ping 關平太子 of the Hall of Illuminating the Correct, which is under the direct administration of Southern Heaven, assumes the office of deity in overall charge of duties pertaining to the [operation of the] Hall 督理堂務總司神.

By order, Valiant Stylus [Zhang Haoce*] assumes the office of principal phoenix disciple taking charge of writing 主著正鸞生.⁹

Be respectful and do not be negligent! Knock your heads and say thanks for [Our] grace.¹⁰

Now the preparations are complete and the stage is set for the writing of the actual scripture. Let us pause here for a moment to review and comment upon what has happened up to now, as well as to supplement the textual evidence with some ethnographic data extrapolated from my observations in the Hall of Illuminating the Correct in 1994. The first announcement of the imminent revelation of a new scripture is made by "Guan, the presiding deity of this temple" 本堂主席關 on the fifteenth day of the twelfth month. Guan is Prince Guan Ping, a son of the Three Kingdoms period hero Guan Yu 關羽. The Mingzheng Tang worships as main deities a group of five gods, known as the "Five Lords of Mercy" (Wu Enzhu 五恩主). This "quintity" consists of Guan Sheng Dijun 關聖帝君 (i.e., the deified Guan Yu), Fuyou Dijun 孚佑帝君 (a.k.a. Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓), Xuantian Shangdi 玄天上帝 (or Zhenwu 真武), Yue Wumu Wang 岳武穆王 (Yue Fei 岳飛), and Siming Zhenjun 司命真君 (the stove god). Chief among them is Guan Sheng Dijun (the "Imperial Lord, the Sage Guan"), in honour of whom the Hall also bears the alternative name "Temple of the Martial [Sage]" (Wumiao). Thus, the "presiding deity" of the temple is actually Guan Sheng Dijun. However, Guan Sheng

⁹ Actually, two sections of the Scripture were written by Bright Stylus 明筆, another medium of the Hall. The reason for this substitution is not clear.

¹⁰ *Luanyou* 307:9. The rationale for appointing these deities (and not any others) is not quite clear. A common point could be that most of them are involved in some way or other with spreading the Way among humans. Guangchengzi, Taiyi Zhenren, and Yuding Zhenren are disciples of Yuanshi Tianzun 元始天尊, entrusted with the propagation of the Way of Heaven. Huoluo Lingguan Wang Tianjun heads the Department of Phoenix Duties in Southern Heaven and is thus the direct supervisor of all spirit-writing halls. Nezha is Yongbi's spirit-familiar ("immortal teacher", *xianshi* 仙師), which may explain his involvement. Guan Ping, of course, represents the Hall of Illuminating the Correct. The appointment of Daoji Gufo, better known as Master Ji, the Living Buddha (Jigong Huofo 濟公活佛), on the other hand seems quite arbitrary.

Dijun's own spirit is not able to reside as principal deity in the Hall, since he is currently holding the office of Jade Emperor. Thus his son Guan Ping's spirit has been sent down to assume his father's office. The presiding deity is the highest permanently resident deity of the Hall and is responsible for all its affairs. It serves to underline the importance of the *Celestial Scripture* that for the supervision of its composition a group of higher deities is seconded. For "normal", i.e. non-scriptural revelations, all of these functions are executed by Guan and his subordinates to whom he delegates some of his duties; two of them, the earth god and the city god, we have seen being detached to meet the imperial carriage outside the hall. At the start of every spirit-writing seance, Guan descends first to announce the arrival of the revealing deity, as he is doing in the excerpts we have read above.

The dates mentioned have some significance: the announcements for the new scripture are made during the last days of the old year, shortly before the planchette is sealed (*fengbi* 封筆) for the time of the New Year's holidays. The writing of the scripture is to commence on the seventh day of the first month of the next year, when the "planchette is opened" (*kaibi* 開筆) for the first time in the new year, i.e., when spirit-writing resumes. This timing ties in with the idea expressed in the revealed message that the scripture is coming down into the world "in response to the [heavenly] cycles" 應運: the progression of the cyclical movement of Heaven from the year *xinyou* to the year *renxu* triggers the revelation of the *Celestial Scripture*. The date fixed for the presentation of the completed scripture (twenty-fourth day of the sixth month) is significant as well: it is the birthday of Guan Sheng Dijun, the present Jade Emperor, and the scripture is to be his birthday present.

We may further flesh out our reconstruction of what happened in the Hall on that evening in January 1982 by extrapolating from the ritual procedures of receiving a jade decree, as observed by me at the Hall of Illuminating the Correct in 1994. The offering table that was ordered to be set up in the first message consists of a folding table set on top of another folding table¹¹; it is decked with a richly embroidered red cloth bearing the name of the hall, on which rest an

¹¹ This use of a two-tiered, raised offering table, placed outside the front entrance of the temple in veneration of the heavenly ruler, the Jade Emperor, has a parallel in general popular religion. On the ninth day of the first month private households erect a similar structure outside the front door, laden with offerings to Heaven 天公 (cf. Zheng Zhiming 1990:20).

incense burner and vegetarian offerings. It is placed just outside the main entrance of the hall. The disciples are clad in blue-coloured scholar's gowns (*changpao* 長袍), and are separated according to gender (the men on the stage-left or *yang* 陽 side, the women on the stage-right or *yin* 陰 side). They are lined up in rows, each holding one stick of incense and kneeling on a small, square *tatami* mat. Unlike the usual seances, the disciples do not face the altar, but face outwards from where the imperial emissary's carriage is expected. Upon the arrival of the chariot, marked by the crash of the planchette coming down upon the sand tray, everybody bows down, and (with the exception of the functionaries surrounding the medium in the hall's inner sanctum) remains with the forehead to the floor throughout the writing of the decree. The characters are first called out one by one by the "disciple who sings out the phoenix [characters]" (*changuansheng* 唱鸞生), who stands to the right of the medium; at the end of a paragraph the planchette pauses and one of the "disciples who record with the brush" (*bilusheng* 筆錄生) reads out the whole paragraph. The planchette will, if necessary, indicate mistakes in the manuscript by knocking on the sand tray and writing the correct character once more.

In the case of the *Celestial Scripture*, the deity assigned to write it down is the Heavenly Worthy of Primal Origin (Yuanshi Tianzun 元始天尊). He duly arrives on the appointed day to write a preface for the scripture:

Preface

Alas, the Way of Confucius and Mencius is difficult to practise in the world. [People] esteem [modern] civilization, but abandon morality, and view the three bonds and the five constant virtues as discarded shoes. Consequently, society is dark and dim without light, and great disasters are brought upon humanity, from which there is no escape.

But Heaven-on-High sympathizes with living beings, how can it sit and look on without [coming to] the rescue? It cannot but send in response to the heavenly cycles the *Celestial Scripture*, which for three cosmic eras has not yet descended into the world, down to humans on the precious island Taiwan, to be written through wielding the phoenix by the Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Illuminating the Correct.

This scripture is a precious canonical work with which the August Mother calls awake the original souls. Word for word it is to the point. If people of the world can recite it piously every day, receive it respectfully, and act according to it in obedience, then a world of great unity can be realized.

Preface written through the descending brush by the Heavenly Worthy of Primal Origin in the Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Illuminating the Correct, under direct administration of Southern Heaven, on the seventh day of the first month of the year *renxu* of the heavenly cycle.¹²

A week later, on 2 February 1982, the writing of the scripture's main text by Yuanshi Tianzun begins. In the following week, the Mysterious Woman of the Nine Heavens (*Jiutian Xuannü* 九天玄女)¹³ descends to write a section-for-section commentary and vernacular paraphrase for the first instalment of the scripture. As this had not been announced before, *Jiutian Xuannü* explains her task in the following terms:

I have received the Venerable Mother's imperial command to descend in my carriage to the Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Illuminating the Correct under direct administration of Southern Heaven, in order to wield the phoenix according to the Marvellous Method of the Golden Indicator 金指妙法, and annotate and translate the "Celestial Scripture of the Limitless". I hope that the

¹² *Luanyou* 307:9.

¹³ *Jiutian Xuannü* is a personal assistant to the August Mother and often serves as her commentator. She also is the "immortal teacher" (*xianshi* 仙師), or spirit-familiar, of "Master Ink-Immortal" (*Moxianzi* 墨仙子; see below), and makes frequent appearances in the writings of the Hall. While in the Hall of Illuminating the Correct she thus is playing only an auxiliary role, there exists in Taiwan an independent cult of this deity; the probably best-known *Jiutian Xuannü* temple in Taiwan is the "Palace of Assisting Efficacy" (*Xieling Gong* 協靈宮) on the Mountain of Immortals (*Xianshan* 仙山) in Miaoli county 苗栗縣, where it is associated with a healing source (*shenquan* 神泉). I have found two scriptures devoted to this deity: the "True Scripture of the Mysterious Woman of the Nine Heavens for Saving the World" (*Jiutian Xuannü jiushi zhenjing* 九天玄女救世真經) and the "True Scripture of the Mysterious Woman of the Nine Heavens for Controlling the Mind and Extinguishing Sin" (*Jiutian Xuannü zhixin xiaonie zhenjing* 九天玄女治心消孽真經).

people of the world will study and understand the scripture's meaning, and will reverently recite it, so as to obtain benefits without end.¹⁴

The medium for this commentary is not Yongbi, but "Master Ink-Immortal" (Moxianzi 墨仙子), Yongbi's father Zhang Yunchang*, who is also the chairman of the Hall. The Marvellous Method of the Golden Indicator refers to a variant form of spirit-writing, where the medium writes with a red felt pen directly on yellow paper. It is much faster, though less impressive, than the traditional method. The first two scriptures written by Yongbi in 1972, the *Sacred Scripture* and the *True Scripture*, were not originally accompanied by commentaries. These were added in 1974 through planchette revelations at the hand of the immortal Guangchengzi, probably through the mediumship of Yongbi. To have the scripture and its commentary revealed almost simultaneously is an innovation that was first introduced with the writing of the *Celestial Scripture*. Main scripture text and commentary were now being written on alternating Sundays.

As explained above, since this paper is about scriptural revelation and not about the doctrines expounded by the scripture, I will not describe the contents of the *Scripture* in any detail. Suffice it to say that it expresses devotion to the August Mother and the need for moral cultivation in order to return to one's origin, one's home (*guxiang* 故鄉), which is located in the realm of the August Mother, the "Heaven of the Limitless" 無極天. This sectarian, "motherist" leitmotif is interlaced with a strong emphasis on traditional morality as part of this process of self-cultivation.

The *Celestial Scripture* is finally completed on 13 June 1982, and its commentary on 15 June. On 20 June the Investigating Heavenly Lord of Southern Heaven (Nantian Jiancha Tianjun 南天監察天君)¹⁵ descends into the Hall to determine the next steps:

¹⁴ *Luanyou* 308:4.

¹⁵ According to the *Tianjie chuanzhen*, the Nantian Jiancha Tianjun is a celestial official who heads the Department of Investigation (*jianchabu* 監察部), located in the first layer of Southern Heaven. This department, staffed with 3,000 immortal clerks (*xianli* 仙吏), supervises the observance of heavenly regulations (*tiantiao* 天條) in the heavens, on earth, and in the underworld. It produces reports on transgressions, and proposes punishments which are submitted for approval to the ruler of Southern Heaven, Wenheng Shengdi 文衡聖帝 [p.43].

Poem: Morality is in decline, it is truly sorrowful;
The benevolent and compassionate August Mother thinks
of her children.

The *Celestial Scripture* has descended into the world to
awaken the confused multitudes,
Calling upon them to cultivate [the Way] diligently and to
delay no more.

Sacred proclamation: The "August Mother of the
Limitless' Celestial Scripture for Awakening [the World]",
written in person by the Heavenly Worthy of Primal
Origin through the descending phoenix and the supported
brush (*jiangluan fubi* 降鸞扶筆), has been completed.
Now the Luanyou Publishing Society is printing
reverently a "recitation volume" 誦本 and a "commentary
and translation volume" 註譯本 for separate circulation,
and has respectfully fixed the twenty-fourth day of the
sixth month of the *renxu* year as the date for the
presentation of the scripture to the Celestial Court. The
scripture will serve at the same time to congratulate the
Mysterious, Efficacious, Lofty Emperor-on-High, the Great
Heavenly Worthy, the Jade Emperor, on his birthday. The
Temple of the Martial Sage and Hall of Illuminating the
Correct will on this day hold a one-day "dharma assembly
for presenting the scripture" (*jiaojing fahui* 繳經法會).
After the presentation, the scripture can be freely given
away to people of all walks of life for reading. Those who
aid in printing this scripture are proclaiming [the Way]
and transforming [humanity] on behalf of Heaven (*daitian
xuanhua* 代天宣化), and are thereby earning measureless
merit. They will definitely receive the compliments of the
Most High August Mother of the Limitless, and
furthermore their wishes will certainly be granted in
order to manifest the heavenly mind's love for living
beings. I hope that the people of the world will offer up
their sincerity and aid in the printing, so as not to lose a
good opportunity.

Further poem: It is the right time to create merit and
establish rewards;

Generously open your purses to relieve the crisis of the
world.

The *Celestial Scripture of the Limitless* has now
descended into the world,

To call awake the confused children, [so] that they may return to the Jasper Pool 瑤池.

Further proclamation: Those among the people of the world who intend to create merit and establish karmic rewards in order to expunge the karma of former existences, and to prepare blessings in the next life, have right now [the opportunity to obtain] immeasurable merit. [This they can achieve], if they are willing to open their purses charitably and sponsor the printing of scriptures and [morality] books, thereby to save [humanity] from the vast calamities in the world. The *Celestial Scripture of the Limitless* has now already descended into the world, to call awake the confused children of the world, [so that they may] quickly turn back, diligently cultivate the Way of Heaven, and return to the Jasper Pool, thereby to soothe the worries of the August Mother thinking of her children.¹⁶

The Hall's presiding deity Guan follows this message up with a short statement praising the *Scripture* and admonishing the disciples to continue exerting themselves for the School of the Sages (*shengmen* 聖門).

On 20 July, the August Mother of the Limitless descends in person to commend the Hall for its efforts, and to admonish and encourage her "children" to sponsor the printing of more copies of the scripture. After two *jueju*-poems she goes on to say:

Imperial proclamation: The *Celestial Scripture of the Limitless* has descended into the world of dust in response to the heavenly cycles. It was written by the Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Illuminating the Correct under direct administration of Southern Heaven, which had received a decree to wield the phoenix. Now the work is finished. This celestial scripture calls awake [my] confused children, [reminding them] that they must earnestly control and cultivate themselves, and walk towards the Great Way. Later their vast rewards will be very precious. I hope that the people of the world will believe, maintain, and cultivate it [= the teaching of the scripture].

¹⁶ *Luanyou* 317:7.

Further proclamation: For the purpose of proclaiming [the Way] and transforming [humanity] on behalf of Heaven, the Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Illuminating the Correct under direct administration of Southern Heaven, has received the decree to write the “August Mother of the Limitless’ Celestial Scripture for Awakening [the World]”. All persons having a consciousness of goodness [will] gladly aid in printing and donating [this scripture]; their merit will be able to move the Heavenly Court. Heaven-on-High will certainly bestow vast blessings upon those who accumulate merit, and will protect their offspring, making them numerous and prosperous. [Thus] this merit will in eternity transmit a fragrant reputation. I desire that the people of the world will not miss [this] good opportunity for creating merit, and will generously rejoice in aiding the printing and donation [of this scripture]. Then the merit rewards derived from proclaiming [the Way] and transforming [humanity] on behalf of Heaven will be without limit.¹⁷

This message, appearing roughly three and a half weeks before the dharma assembly for the presentation of the scripture, seems intended as a last attempt to boost donations. The printing process has to be completed before the dharma assembly, because it is the printed copies that have to be presented to Heaven. Also, at the presentation of new spirit-written book there have to be enough copies available for free distribution among the visitors present.

As already mentioned by the Investigating Heavenly Lord of Southern Heaven, the Hall produced two versions of the scripture: a large-type recitation copy, bound between two red, gold-engraved covers in accordion-style, and a less ostentatious slim paperback commentary volume.

Eventually, the dharma assembly takes place on the appointed date, the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month (13 August 1982), and the scripture is formally handed over to Heaven. We do not have much information on the proceedings of the *fahui*. We are told that it was attended by “several hundred people”, as well as many deities who descended to convey their birthday congratulations to the Jade Emperor by way of the planchette. There is unfortunately no

¹⁷ *Luanyou* 319:4.

description of the ritual involved in presenting the *Celestial Scripture* to Heaven, but if we can go by the rituals utilized by the Hall in 1994 for presenting a new "morality book" (*shanshu* 善書) to Heaven, its centrepiece would have been the reading of a memorial announcing the completion of the scripture to Heaven. Afterwards the scripture and the memorial would have been burned in order to convey them in the rising smoke up to the realm of the gods.

Eight days after the dharma assembly (21 August), the Jade Emperor descends in person to praise the scripture, urge people to recite it mornings and evenings, practise its teachings, and sponsor its printing.¹⁸ The same issue also carries a similar evaluation of the *Celestial Scripture* by a human author, and — as evidence of faithful acceptance of the text — a letter from the manager of the Old People's Society 老人會 of an unnamed town who is asking for 50 copies of the scripture to be distributed and studied in his group.¹⁹

Now the production process is concluded. A new scripture has been revealed, printed, and disseminated in the world. After its first printing in 1982, the Hall reprinted the recitation volume twice, in 1987 and in 1992. It did not, however, gain wide currency. During my field research, I have not come upon another temple that would regularly recite the *Celestial Scripture*. I did find, however, some privately reprinted versions of the scripture. In the Zhinan Gong 指南宮, in the Muzha 木柵 district of Taipei 台北市 on 14 May 1994, I discovered a private reprint of the text, of which according to the impressum, 1,000 copies were produced in November 1993 by a print shop in Chaozhou township 潮州鎮 (Pingdong county 屏東縣); the names of 20 donors sponsoring the printing are listed in the back. I also came upon an advertisement by a Taipei publisher (Zhenxian chubanshe 真獻出版社) for a reprint of the *Celestial Scripture*, bound together in one volume with six other texts, four of which are devoted to the Venerable Mother of the Jasper Pool 瑤池老母, and two to Maitreya 彌勒佛. This reprint was published in 1986. Finally, in another Taichung phoenix hall, the Chongsheng Tang 重生堂, on 29 April 1994, I found an undated, though obviously brandnew reprint of the scripture bound together with the *Jade Emperor's Sacred Scripture for Universal Salvation*, which was sponsored by an anonymous "benefactor" (*shanshi* 善士) from Dali 大里 (Taichung county 台中縣). As far as collective recitation is

¹⁸ *Luanyou* 321:11.

¹⁹ *Luanyou* 321:26f.

concerned, however, the *Celestial Scripture* seems to remain limited to the Hall of Illuminating the Correct.²⁰ There it is currently recited every first and fifteenth day of the lunar month. On these days, the August Mother descends in person into the Hall to instruct her "children". As the *Celestial Scripture* teaches devotion to Wuji Huangmu 無極皇母, or simply "Mother" (*muniang* 母娘), to call her by her more intimate appellation, it is fitting to show such devotion through recitation of this scripture on the occasions of her visits.

III. THE NATURE AND FUNCTIONS OF SCRIPTURAL REVELATION

After this chronicle of the *Celestial Scripture*'s revelation, let us now try to extract from it the recurrent themes, its main messages. We shall focus on three points: the nature of the *Celestial Scripture*, the process of its revelation, and its merit-related functions.

a. The primordial nature of the scripture

The scripture is claimed to be "a precious canonical text made of primordial ether" (*hongmeng baodian* 鴻蒙寶典), which through three cosmic eras had not yet been divulged to humanity. Now the right point in cosmic time has come for it to be bestowed upon the Hall of Illuminating the Correct, which has proven itself to be a worthy executor of Heaven's will. This notion of scripture as preexistent to the world has a Daoist origin. In the Daoist tradition, sacred scriptures are supposed to have been in existence since the

²⁰ While the *Celestial Scripture* thus so far has not had a strong impact outside the Hall of Illuminating the Correct, other mediumistic scriptures, usually of greater vintage, have come to play an important role outside the producing group, influencing folk-religious practice. Examples are the "True Scripture of the Imperial Lord Sage Guan for Awakening the World" (*Guan Sheng Dijun jueshi zhenjing* 關聖帝君覺世真經) and the "Scripture of the Peach Orchard Illuminating Sageliness" (*Taoyuan mingsheng jing* 桃園明聖經) which can be commonly found in temples devoted to the cult of Guan Gong 關公 all over Taiwan (for a discussion of these two scriptures cf. Diesinger 1984:132-162). A similar role is played by the "Scripture of the Sagely Mother in Heaven" (*Tianshang Shengmu jing* 天上聖母經) in Taiwan's widespread Mazu 媽祖 cult; this scripture was supposedly produced through *fuji* by a group of Buddhist monks in the year 1752. In describing the symbiosis of Daoism and folk religion in the province of Fujian, Kenneth Dean [1993:32] points out that at an advanced stage of development, a folk religious cult is often supplied by local Daoist priests with a "Daoist scripture". Some of these scriptures are spirit-written, including, it seems, the "True Scripture of the Imperially Enfeoffed Reverent Lord of Broad Compassion" (*Chifeng Baoan Guangze Zunwang zhenjing* 敕封保安廣澤尊王真經), which plays an important role in the Guangze Zunwang cult and is translated in full by Dean [1993:162-168].

beginning of time. They are manifestations of primordial ether, which lie hidden in the Heavens or in mountain chambers until their time comes to be revealed to humanity. This is the theory behind the Shangqing 上清 revelations, an early corpus of Daoist scriptures revealed to Yang Xi 楊羲 between the years 364 and 370.²¹ Here too, the scriptures are claimed to be made of “original ether” (*ziran zhi qi* 自然之氣), of the very matter which constitutes the world; when a new cosmic era commences, they are transmitted to humanity represented by worthy individuals who “have moved Heaven” by their “attractive virtue of an active faith”.²² In their syncretic way, spirit-writing cults such as the Hall of Illuminating the Correct can be seen as modern successors to the Daoist tradition of scriptural revelation. This succession is not simply located in the realm of ideas, however, but there also exist concrete historical connections between spirit-writing and Daoism. While much has been said about the popular Confucian aspects of spirit-writing cults, it must not be forgotten that the “phoenix was wielded” for purely Daoist purposes as well. Some branches of the Quanzhen 全真 Daoist tradition engaged in spirit-writing, producing for example in the late 17th and early 18th centuries hagiographical works like the *Lü Zu quanshu* 呂祖全書 (“Complete Book of Patriarch Lü”) and the *Zhang Sanfeng quanshu* 張三丰全書 (“Complete Book of Zhang Sanfeng”).²³ Bartholomew Tsui, in his study of Quanzhen Daoism, describes how in Guangdong province during the Qing dynasty, Quanzhen monastic communities gradually transformed themselves into spirit-writing cults, and dates the introduction of *fuji* to Quanzhen circles to the late Ming and early Qing dynasties.²⁴ Kristofer Schipper supplies some data that suggest an even earlier date for the Daoist adoption of *fuluan*: the Ming canon (published in 1445) contains a scripture by the title of *Taishang wuji zongzhen Wenchang dadong xianjing* 太上無極總真文昌大洞仙經, which according to its preface was revealed in 1168, i.e., during the Southern Song dynasty, to a certain Liu Ansheng 劉安勝 by the deity Wenchang 文昌, who “had descended onto the phoenix terrace” (*jiang yu luantai* 降於鸞臺), a clear reference to spirit-writing.²⁵ He also points out a scripture from the Ming canon, in which Yuanshi Tianzun speaks of “saving the world

²¹ Cf. Robinet's discussion (Robinet 1984).

²² Robinet 1984:112.

²³ Cf. Seidel 1970:509ff.

²⁴ Tsui 1991:73f.

²⁵ Schipper 1993:16f. On the background of Liu Ansheng and this scripture see Kleeman 1994.

through the flying phoenix" (*feiluan jiushi* 飛鸞救世).²⁶ The technique of "supporting the phoenix" thus seems to have been well established in some branches of the Daoist tradition by the Ming dynasty at the latest. It may therefore well be that conceptual similarities of modern-day spirit-written scriptures to those of Daoist revealed scriptures may not simply be the result of eclectic borrowing, but of a direct genealogical relationship.²⁷

b. The bureaucratic structure of revelation

The revelation of the *Celestial Scripture* has nothing in common with the ecstatic, visionary experience that the average Western reader would associate with "revelation". Rather, it is an orderly, quasi-bureaucratic process. Emissaries come and go, mandates and decrees are proclaimed, high deities arrive in chariots, greeted with all the privilege accorded in Imperial times by local magistrates to travelling central government officials.

In sum, here we see the "imperial metaphor" of Chinese popular religion in action.²⁸ This "imperial metaphor", however, is not a static model, but a realm of discourse. It provides a vocabulary that permits the expression of a variety of meanings. It has already been pointed out that the proper bureaucratic procedure, where every action has to proceed through the appropriate hierarchical channels from top to bottom, is overruled in several instances by a mechanism which we may call "hierarchical intensification": the functions of lower bureaucratic units are taken over by higher units. This serves to emphasize the importance of the present project: it warrants direct supervision by the highest gods. This happened when the Jade Emperor's mandate was transmitted not by a

²⁶ Schipper 1993:14.

²⁷ The Daoist Association of the Republic of China actually claims phoenix halls as part of Daoism. According to a manual published by the Association, they are part of the "Jishan Dao pai" 積善道派 ("Branch of the Way of Accumulating Goodness"). This branch of Daoism is said to also embrace all groups which "rely on the *Taishang ganying pian* 太上感應篇 and the *Wenchang Dijun gongguo ge* 文昌帝君功過格 for their cultivation of the Way", including the Overseas Chinese religions Dejiao 德教 and Zhongjiao 鐘教 [Zhonghua Minguo Daojiao Hui 1991:66]. While this claim clearly has more ideological than historical value, concrete connections do exist between phoenix halls and mainstream Daoism — for example in the field of liturgical practice. Thus, for example, many incantations (*shenzhou* 神咒) used in the Hall of Illuminating the Way are identical to those prescribed for the morning liturgy in the Quanzhen liturgical manual *Taishang xuanmen risong* 太上玄門日誦.

²⁸ The term "imperial metaphor" was coined by Stephan Feuchtwang [1992].

messenger from Southern Heaven (which is the direct superior of the Hall of Illuminating the Correct), but by the highest executive official of Central Heaven 中天, Supreme Councillor Zhuge. The same mechanism appears when high deities take over supervisory duties from resident spirits of the Hall for the writing of the *Celestial Scripture*. The very self-definition of the Hall is a further example: it situates itself within the hierarchy of popular religion, i.e., it does not make a claim of absolute difference from popular religion, but it uses bureaucratic discourse to elevate its own position in the hierarchy by claiming for itself the status of being under the "direct administration of Southern Heaven" 南天直轄, that is, outside the usual hierarchy of territorial temples and shrines. This implies, for example, that the Mingzheng Tang does not come under the jurisdiction of its location's earth god (*fude zhengshen* 福德正神) and city god (*chenghuang ye* 城隍爺); in fact, as we have seen, the Hall possesses its own earth and city gods, who act as subordinates of the presiding deity Guan. Being under the direct administration of Southern Heaven, however, does not merely define jurisdiction, it also emphasizes the Hall's consciousness of having received a mandate to "proclaim and transform on behalf of Heaven" (*daitian xuanhua*), and of being Heaven's principal mouthpiece in this missionary effort. Here, the revelation of the *Celestial Scripture* fits in as a special honour conferred by Heaven on the Hall as its favourite representative on earth. It is at the same time a reward for the high moral status of the group, a recognition of its elevated status in the divine hierarchy, and a precious instrument designed to aid the Hall in the execution of its mandate.

c. The importance of merit

"Merit" (*gong* 功 or *gongde* 功德) is the one key term upon which the whole religious system of the Hall of Illuminating the Correct hinges.²⁹ Virtually all activities of the Hall eventually create merit for the actor. Its missionary ideology ("enlightening confused living beings", "proclaiming and transforming on behalf of Heaven") seems designed to produce effects in the general society outside the cult proper, and it certainly has this aspect. But one must not overlook that each outward-going act of charity also has as an intended internal effect the accumulation of merit. This appears very

²⁹ In this importance placed upon "merit", the Mingzheng Tang is not unique. Merit is a common theme in many forms of Chinese religions. Seaman [1978] describes its role in a spirit-writing cult in Nantou county; there are many similarities to its conception and functions in the Mingzheng Tang.

clearly in the gods' messages translated above: each praise for the beneficial effects of the scripture for humanity as a whole is accompanied by a reminder to the believer of the great merit that he or she can obtain by sponsoring the printing of this scripture.

Merit, in the conception of the Mingzheng Tang, is quantifiable: it can be measured in units, as can be its opposite, transgressions or "demerit" (*guo* 過). Traditionally, systems of merit quantification were developed in so-called "ledgers of merit and demerit" (*gongguo ge* 功過格). These are inventories of good and bad deeds together with the merit or demerit quantities attached to them. The religious practitioner is supposed to use these ledgers to keep track of his or her moral development. Ideally, of course, merits should outweigh demerits; any such merit surplus will then be rewarded in some form by supernatural agencies.³⁰ One of these ledgers, the 18th century *Wenchang Dijun gongguo ge* 文昌帝君功過格 ("Ledger of Merit and Demerit of the Imperial Lord Wenchang") is still fairly common in Taiwan. It assigns to the sponsoring of scriptures (*jingshu* 經書) a merit value of 100 merit units (*gong* 功).³¹ In this it is on a par with such good deeds as adopting an orphan or a cripple, saving a drowning child, burying a masterless coffin, or for a geomancer to give his clients honest advice for thirty years. The Mingzheng Tang itself produced in 1985 through its medium Bright Stylus a new ledger of merit and demerit, titled *Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lu* 文衡聖帝功過律 ("The Sacred Emperor Wenheng's Statutes of Merit and Demerit"). This work provides a more consistent and sophisticated system of spiritual accountancy than its predecessor, the Wenchang ledger. Since the *Statutes* were written three years after the *Celestial Scripture*, their rather detailed instructions are not directly relevant to the *Scripture's* revelation. However, they do mirror the general ideas on merit and demerit prevalent in this cult, and can therefore shed some light on the conceptions held three years earlier. Also, the *Statutes* would have been applicable to the later reprintings of the *Scripture*.

The *Statutes* assign to the sponsor of "morality books" (which here includes scriptures) one *gong* for every NT\$100 donated. For single donations of NT\$1,000 or over, a bonus of five *gong* is added to

³⁰ An authoritative study of these ledgers has been written by Cynthia J. Brokaw [Brokaw 1991].

³¹ *Wenchang Dijun gongguo ge*, chapter 6. By contrast, slandering a scripture earns the culprit 100 demerits, destroying one 20 demerits, sullyng one 10 demerits, and leafing through it with dirty fingers one demerit [ibid.].

the cumulative amount thus earned. In the case of single donations of over NT\$10,000, a bonus of fifty *gong* is added. In the case of a scripture, the sponsor furthermore gets 10% of the merit of a person who is converted by this scripture. All persons present at the spirit-writing of a morality book get, according to circumstances, one or two *gong* for each seance attended. Phoenix disciples are in the privileged position of being granted more merit for the same deeds than ordinary believers. In the case of morality book sponsoring, a phoenix disciple is assigned double the merit amount.³²

The merit earned is a kind of "moral capital", which the believer can put to use for several purposes. He can use them for his own spiritual advancement: a surplus of five "merits in the Way" (*daogong* 道功), the equivalent of 50,000 basic merit units (*gong*), at the time of death guarantees the virtuous individual an appointment as a low-level deity (e.g., an earth god). Fifteen merits in the Way will make him a medium-level deity, twenty a high deity, and one-hundred merits in the Way guarantee his ascension to the "principle heaven" (*litian* 理天), the realm of the August Mother, removed from the cycle of reincarnations.³³ He can also "buy" specific blessings with his store of merit, or he can transfer (*huixiang* 回向) his merit for the benefit of others; often this is done to free ancestors from purgatory: the transferred merit cancels out their transgressions. If enough merit is transferred, the ancestor may be given an office in the divine hierarchy. A good example is the Censor Zhang* of the Golden Gate tower, whom we had encountered above as an emissary of the Jade Emperor, involved in the writing of the scripture. As we have already noted, he is the spirit of Zhang Yunchang's* father (and Yongbi's grandfather), who was promoted to this high position due at least in part to the meritorious activities of his son and grandson,

³² *Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü*, chapter 11. The process of becoming a phoenix disciple, called "entering the phoenix" (*ruluan* 入鸞), includes the establishment in Heaven of a "phoenix register" (*luanji* 鸞籍) where the disciple's merits and demerits are recorded separately from those of other mortals. The privilege of higher merit rewards for phoenix disciples is somewhat balanced by their added duties. For example, a phoenix disciple is expected to attend every seance; every absence is penalized with five demerits. An ordinary believer, by contrast, is not duty-bound to attend seances; if he does so, he earns merit, but if he does not, he is not assigned any demerits [*ibid.*].

³³ *Wenheng Shengdi gongguo lü*, prolegomenon. The use of the sectarian term "Principle Heaven" 理天 instead of its equivalent "Heaven of the Limitless" 無極天 is indicative of a strong "Unity Sect" 一貫道 influence on the Hall of Illuminating the Correct.

after having previously served as the city god of Lugang 鹿港鎮, his hometown, and as the city god of the province of Taiwan (台灣省城隍).

It is an important function of a phoenix hall to afford its members opportunities for merit cultivation. The voluminous output of "morality books" by cults such as the Mingzheng Tang is to a good part an outcome of this pressure for merit-creating opportunities. Each new *shanshu* is a new chance to earn merit by sponsoring its printing and distribution. A new scripture is an especially good opportunity, as the allotted merit is larger than that for non-scriptural morality books.³⁴ As against the latter, a scripture also offers the additional advantage of being recitable. Each recitation again earns the practitioner merit, which is usually devoted to the reciter's own spiritual progress. A transfer formula (*huixiang zhenyan* 回向真言) to that effect occurs at the end of the *Celestial Scripture*; it is part of the scripture text and is chanted at each recitation.

Considering the great importance of merit accumulation, it is no surprise that the writing of a new *shanshu* is accompanied by an advertising campaign calling upon the faithful to donate money. The Mingzheng Tang is in the enviable position of possessing its own magazine, *Luanyou*, which is used to publish spirit-written texts produced at the Hall and to run advertisements for its publishing ventures.

In the issue of *Luanyou* that carried the first announcement of the coming revelation of the *Celestial Scripture*, we already find an advertisement calling upon the faithful to donate money for the eventual printing of the scripture — NT\$25 per set of one recitation and one commentary volume. Each donation is made known to Heaven by means of a written memorial (*shuwen* 疏文), which is

³⁴ In the case of the *Celestial Scripture* no figures are given for the amount of merit accruing to the donor. The two earlier scriptures by Valiant Stylus were followed up by special dispensations of merit to all who participated. Such a special dispensation is not recorded for the *Celestial Scripture*. However, the general idea doubtlessly is that sponsoring a scripture is more meritorious than sponsoring a non-scriptural morality book. When the *Mysterious and Marvellous Scripture* was produced by the Mingzheng Tang in 1987, the gods again emphasized that the merit for its donation was "particularly great" (*you da* 尤大). The rationale for this high valuation of the *Mysterious and Marvellous Scripture* was its great effectiveness in leading humans towards attaining the Way.

read out in the Hall and then burnt. The donor may dedicate the merit earned through his donation to a stated purpose of which the advertisement gives a list:

1. All people who have done wrong, but who are able to sincerely repent and reform, and become a new person, will have their past demerits wiped out and will be given good retribution.
2. In order to commend particularly loyal ministers of the nation, and filial sons in the families, their blessings, prosperity, and life-span will be increased.
3. Those diligently cultivating the Way of Heaven, will be permitted to attain the Way earlier, and their spiritual nature will be brilliant.
4. If a petition is made for deceased parents' or ancestors' blessings in the underworld, they will after consideration of the circumstances be permitted to rise up [out of the underworld].
5. All who make a vow and ask for their parents' health and longevity, or for the alteration of their fate (*gaiyun* 改運), the resolution of [bad] karma (*jieye* 解業), or for the resolution of sickness and calamities, will be granted after consideration an increase in blessings and life-span, and the removal of [bad] karma and calamities.
6. Other matters.

There follows a form for a written memorial announcing the sponsoring of the printing of the *Celestial Scripture*, which I will give here in full translation:

Petitionary Memorial of a Person Sponsoring the Printing
of the *Celestial Scripture of the Limitless*

Bowing down I recognize that
The virtue of Heaven is majestic, / all living beings are
touched by this virtue.
The mercy of the Emperor is vast, / the common people
receive the benefit of this mercy.
Now the Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Illuminating
the Correct under the direct administration of Southern
Heaven has received order to support the phoenix, [so as
to allow] the Heavenly Worthy of Primal Origin to
descend in person into the profane world to wield the

brush and write a recitation volume of the *Celestial Scripture of the August Mother of the Limitless for Awakening [the World]*. Now [the Hall] has received a jade decree to the effect that those among the worldly people who make a vow to sponsor the printing of recitation volumes of the "The August Mother of the Limitless' Celestial Scripture for Awakening [the World]" so as to proclaim [the Way] and transform [humanity] on behalf of Heaven, will have their respectful requests granted if they are sincere. This shall be proclaimed and placed on record. Accordingly, the person who vows to sponsor the printing makes a petition as follows:

Fragrant name of the sponsor:.....

Number of copies [sponsored]:.....

Matter requested:.....

Address:.....

As expressed above, it is asked respectfully of the Jade Emperor in his compassion, which is rooted in a mind and sentiment of love towards his children, to grant the request, blessings, prosperity, longevity, auspiciousness and good luck in the four seasons, success in all affairs, a hundred blessings for males, a thousand auspicious signs for females. Reverently I present [this memorial] to the presiding deity of the Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Illuminating the Correct under the direct administration of Southern Heaven, the Lord of Mercy, the Imperial Lord and Sage Guan 關聖帝君恩主 to pass it on, presenting it

before the palace of the Lord of Mercy, the Sacred Emperor Wenheng of Southern Heaven 南天文衡聖帝恩主,

before the dharma seat of the Heavenly Worthy of Primal Origin,

before his Majesty, the Mysterious, Efficacious, Lofty Emperor-on-High, the Great Heavenly Worthy, the Jade Emperor of the Golden Palace of the Vast Heavens 昊天金闕玉皇大天尊玄靈高上帝, and

before her Majesty, the Celestial Mother, Utmost Worthy, the Venerable Mother of the Limitless 天母至尊無極老母.

Their gracious granting of all requests will earnestly be prayed for with utmost gratitude. Reverently I present up this memorial.

The sponsor of the printing and cultivator of merit knocks his head a hundred times.

Xth day of the xth month of the *xinyou* year of the heavenly cycles.³⁵

This memorial will be written in red on a broad sheet of yellow paper which is folded up narrowly in accordion-style and held together with a red paper band. It is read out in the Hall by a functionary of the temple (during my time of field observation, this duty was looked after by one of the eight deputy chairpersons 副堂主 of the Hall). Every mention of a god's name is marked with a bow and a strike of the bell, located at the right hand of the reader. Having concluded the reading of the memorial, it is then burnt in a small, red, portable tin oven, such as are used all over Taiwan for burning spirit money, placed for this purpose outside the Hall's main entrance, to the stage-left side of the main incense-burner.

Luanyou carried announcements such as the one above in five issues from 1 February to 1 April 1982, but the campaign was continued right up to the dharma assembly with smaller-scale advertisements, essays on the *Scripture* by human authors, and messages from gods (including, as we have seen, one from the August Mother herself), praising it and urging believers to donate funds for its printing.

How successful was the campaign? If we go through the donations for the printing of the *Scripture* recorded in these and later issues of the magazine, we find that between 1 February and 1 September 1982, altogether 893 donations were received, which came to a total of NT\$730.338. This was an appreciable sum in 1982, which leads us to consider the economic aspects of *shanshu* publishing.

It was said above that providing opportunities for merit accumulation was an important function of the Mingzheng Tang. It is also, however, its main source of income. One perspective social scientists use to interpret religious organizations, is that of a "religious economy": religious bodies are viewed as commercial enterprises, producing and selling specifically religious articles, such as beliefs, salvation etc. I shall try to apply one such model in the "Conclusion" of the present paper. At this point, I would just like to

³⁵ *Luanyou* 307:37.

point out the possibility of viewing "merit" as such a product, which is exchanged within a religious economy. The sponsoring of morality books and magazines is the economically most important "merit product" sold by the Hall; other sources of merit utilized by the Hall include periodical "life-releasing assemblies" (*fangsheng hui* 放生會), "dharma assemblies", the carving of new god images, and charities to the poor.

The Hall of Illuminating the Correct is a representative of a new kind of phoenix hall that started to appear in the late 1960s. The traditional Taiwanese spirit-writing hall is a local-based, volunteer-run cult usually attached to a community temple.³⁶ An example is the spirit-writing cult of "Pearl Mountain Village", in the Puli township 埔里鎮 of Nantou county 南投縣, studied by Gary Seaman between 1970 and 1973.³⁷ The literary output of such traditional cults is relatively meagre. Most *luanwen* 鸞文 remain in manuscript form, and are never circulated outside the cult. In comparison, the publishing activities of "new-style phoenix halls" such as the Mingzheng Tang are truly overwhelming. During the year 1982, while the *Celestial Scripture* was being written, the Hall of Illuminating the Correct was working with altogether four mediums on no less than eight other book-length *shanshu*, all of which were eventually published and circulated.

Such productivity is made possible by a professional management of the cult along commercial lines. The Hall of Illuminating the Correct and its Luanyou Magazine Society employ a number of full-time employees for the day to day running of the publishing concern, and, in 1982, at least two of the four mediums were working full-time for the temple. It is a completely self-contained organizational entity with no contact to local temples or support by the local community, catering to believers all over Taiwan.³⁸ Such an enterprise needs to generate income to keep going,

³⁶ For this reason, many of the older Halls have names after the pattern "so-and-so Hall of the so-and-so temple". The name of the "Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Illuminating the Correct" is an echo of this tradition. This traditional pattern of attaching a private spirit-writing cult to a public community temple has been described for the Penghu 澎湖 islands by Ishii Masako [1992].

³⁷ Seaman 1978. In this case, however, the spirit-writing cult is not attached to the community temple, but is the community temple.

³⁸ Its status as "under the direct administration of Southern Heaven" symbolically expresses this independence.

income which takes the form of donations by believers. In order to attract such donations, the Hall has to organize on a continuous basis merit-creating projects to which people are willing to donate money. The great productivity and activism of new-style phoenix halls, of which there exist several in the city of Taichung alone, is thus conditioned as much by economic motives, as it is by religious fervour.³⁹

IV. CONCLUSION

The *Celestial Scripture* is a multi-faceted text. In nature it resembles a Daoist scripture; its teachings are a mixture of traditional morality and sectarian motifs. It was revealed by a divine bureaucracy whose language is used by the cult to define its own high position in the supernatural hierarchy and to affirm its consciousness of being under the mandate of Heaven. The *Celestial Scripture* fulfills many functions: it is designed to "awaken the world", to convert humanity to morality, and to remind them of their divine origins; it serves as an object of study and a guide for those on a religious quest; it provides for the believer an excellent opportunity for merit accumulation through printing and reciting, and for the Hall a best-selling "merit product"; it reaffirms the Hall's status as Heaven's favourite representative on earth, and thereby potentially increases the "selling value" of all of its products. The *Celestial Scripture's* revelation is thus embedded in a social context shaped by the close interaction of religious and economic factors. To the Western observer, accustomed to thinking in antagonistic terms about "God" and "Mammon", this close intertwining of religious and economic concerns appears suspicious at first sight. However, viewed from a religious economy perspective such as that developed by Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, every religion's primary function is "to create, maintain, and exchange supernaturally based general compensators", a compensator being a substitute (such as a belief) for something not attainable in this life (such as immortality).⁴⁰ This describes very well what the Hall of Illuminating the Correct is engaged in. The compensator it sells is merit, which it creates through activities such as morality book printing, releasing living beings, charities etc., maintains through a

³⁹ New-style phoenix halls are good examples of the general trend towards an increasing commercialization of religion in Taiwan, observed by local scholars since the end of the 1960s (cf. Sung Kwang-yu 1985).

⁴⁰ Stark & Bainbridge 1985:172.

belief system that correlates merit with supernatural rewards, and which it exchanges for money and good deeds. The merit sold by the Mingzheng Tang also possesses a quality that allows us to refine Stark's and Bainbridge's model. The latter posits the existence of two different kinds of compensators: general, truly religious, compensators which can be redeemed only in the afterlife, and specific, magical compensators which bring benefits in this life. While Stark's and Bainbridge's model interprets religious exchange as a kind of barter trade where you buy either one or the other of these two different and mutually inconvertible products, the Mingzheng Tang has progressed into a "religious money economy": merit is basically a compensatorial currency which can be put to use for both "general" and "specific" purposes, i.e., for deification in the afterlife and worldly blessings in this life.

In using religious economy terminology to interpret the functions of the Hall of Illuminating the Correct, I am imposing an "etic" model; it is not the metaphor the Hall's disciples would use to describe what they are doing. They would rather describe their Hall as a "school" or "academy", where "phoenix disciples" are studying and cultivating the Way under divine guidance and instruction, with the *Celestial Scripture* as one of the key textbooks. Yet, I think that a religious organization such as the cult in question can and should be viewed from different angles, which, though each limited on its own, together show the rich complexity of the whole.

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