

Anchoring Guanyin: Appropriative Strategies in a New Phoenix Hall Scripture

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Abstract: The fact that scriptures play such a significant role in the supposedly mainly oral culture of Chinese popular religion raises a number of questions: Who writes them? How are they used? What religious ideas do they manifest? How do they appropriate and affect the cult of their protagonist deities? The present article seeks to address these questions using the case of *Guanyin's Lotus Sutra of the Marvellous Dao* (*Guanyin miaodao lianbua jing*), a text revealed between 1998 and 2000 by means of spirit-writing at a Taichung city phoenix hall, the Xuyuan tang. The analysis of the scripture's structure and rhetoric reveals that the Guanyin sutra represents a mode of popular and sectarian engagement with the Buddhist tradition that differs from and enriches the picture provided for us by Chün-fang Yü's studies of Guanyin and by Prasenjit Duara's notion of "superscription." While we are definitely looking at a layering of meanings, as Duara did by regarding the Guandi myth as "a palimpsest of layered meanings," the image of "superscription" does not accurately describe the way the Guanyin sutra does not so much *overwrite* but *underlay* Buddhist devotionality with phoenix hall notions of Dao cultivation. 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, thus allowing us to differentiate a distinct mode of the syncretic construction of religious doctrine in a popular sectarian context.

Key words: spirit-writing, Guanyin, superscription, popular scriptures, syncretism.

Introduction: Extracanonical Scriptures in Chinese Popular Religion

As the cult of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara/Guanyin spread beyond the Buddhist monastic context, numerous texts were produced that recorded and shaped the developing popular image of the bodhisattva. In her magisterial study *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*, Chün-fang Yü traces this textual lineage, which includes “apocryphal” sutras, precious scrolls, collections of miracle tales, and sectarian scriptures. The present paper seeks to extend this lineage into the present by introducing a newly revealed Guanyin scripture, *Guanyin’s Lotus Sutra of the Marvellous Dao* (*Guanyin miaodao lianhua jing* 觀音妙道蓮華經). It was written from June of 1998 until January of 2000 at a spirit-writing cult in the central Taiwanese city of Taichung 臺中. As a very recent phenomenon, this text can throw light on the mechanisms and religious context of popular scripture production in general, and on present-day interactions of Guanyin devotion with Chinese sectarian religions.

Scriptures and their recitation play an important role in the devotional life of popular religion in historical and contemporary Chinese societies. While some of these scriptures are fairly easily accessible to the scholar because they are part of major canonical collections, such as the Buddhist or Daoist Canons, the origins of others are more obscure. Anyone with an interest in the textual dimensions of, say, Taiwanese popular religion (to take the regional culture I am most familiar with), will become aware of the large numbers and diversity of scriptures in use and for distribution at temples all over the island. These include titles such as *Golden Scripture of [the Patriarch of the] Clear Stream* (*Qingshui jinjing* 清水金經) or the *Perfected Scripture of the Jade Thearch* (*Yubuang zhenjing* 玉皇真經), which are not to be found in any major canonical collection. Getting a good overview of this body of literature is not easy, as they are usually not sold through commercial bookstores, but are distributed free of charge by temples and individuals that have commissioned their

printing.¹ They are products of a grassroots religious publishing industry, which are rarely collected by libraries and tend to be limited to their intended ritual and devotional contexts. If you want to collect such texts, therefore, you need to go look for them in these contexts. This usually means that you need to visit temples and ask for copies of their scriptures. If you are lucky, a temple may contain in a corner a bookcase with free religious literature, including recitation texts. These days, you can also do some of that footwork in virtual space by visiting temple websites and downloading their scriptures. Either way, your degree of success depends on how thorough and lucky a text hunter you are; it is virtually impossible to arrive at a complete picture of the total body of scripture texts in circulation.

There exists a limited amount of scholarship on popular scriptures. First of all should be mentioned the laudable effort of Wang Chien-chuan 王見川 and his collaborators to publish two large collections of such texts from the Ming and Qing dynasties, thus making them accessible to scholar inquiry.² Lin Mei-rong 林美容 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.³ Then we have various studies of individual texts, usually in the context of a scholar's wider study of a temple or the cult of a deity. Two examples shall suffice: In the course of Gunter Diesinger's study

1. There are exceptions. The bookseller-cum-publisher Ruicheng Shuju 瑞成書局 in Taichung, for example, specializes in religious texts and has a number of popular scriptures for sale.

2. See *Ming-Qing minjian zongjiao jingjuan wenxian* 明清民間宗教經卷文獻, Wang Chien-chuan 王見川 & Lin Wanchuan 林萬傳, eds.; *Ming-Qing minjian zongjiao jingjuan wenxian xubian* 明清民間宗教經卷文獻續編, edited by Wang Chien-chuan et al.

3. Lin Mei-rong 林美容, "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, edited by Lu Hwei-syin 盧蕙馨, Chen Tak Kwong 陳德光, Lin Chang-kuan 林長寬, pp. 21–49.

of the Guan Yu 關羽 cult he discusses two important popular Guanyin 關公 scriptures, the 17th century *Perfected Scripture Awakening the World* (*Jueshi zhenjing* 覺世真經) and the 18th century *Illustrious and Sagely Scripture of the Peach Garden* (*Taoyuan mingsheng jing* 桃園明聖經).⁴ Both texts still circulate widely in Taiwanese temples today. Kenneth Dean analyses two scriptures, devoted to the Great Emperor Who Protects Life (Baosheng Dadi 保生大帝) and the Reverent Lord of Broad Compassion (Guangze Zunwang 廣澤尊王) respectively, in his book on *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China*.⁵

Such popular scriptures raise a number of questions: Who writes them? How are they used? What religious ideas do they manifest? How do they appropriate and affect the cult of their protagonist deities? The present paper seeks to address these questions using the case-example of *Guanyin's Lotus Sutra of the Marvellous Dao*. I will proceed in the following manner: in the second section I describe the process by and the socio-religious setting in which this text was produced. Section 3 contains an analysis of the scripture's contents and structure, while the Conclusion pulls these strands together.

The Revelation of *Guanyin's Lotus Sutra of the Marvellous Dao*

Guanyin's Lotus Sutra of the Marvellous Dao was produced in séances at a spirit-writing cult ("phoenix hall," *luan tang* 鸞堂) in the central Taiwanese city of Taichung. 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 Enlight-

4. Diesinger, *Vom General zum Gott: Kuan Yü (gest. 220 n.Chr.) und seine "posthume Karriere,"* pp. 131–62.

5. Kenneth Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China*.

ened 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 1996.⁶ 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 lead to a quick and clean break between the two cult groups. The Xuyuan tang founders, in fact, continued their activities in the Mingzheng tang, while simultaneously developing the Xuyuan tang, with the objective of switching their allegiance over to the new group once it had become self-sufficient. A modest shrine was set up in a shop space at the ground level of a multi-storey building and a monthly magazine named *Xuyuan zazhi* 虛原雜誌 was started, in which the Xuyuan tang's spirit-written texts were published alongside calls for donations to acquire a more permanent worship space. The medium divided his time between séances held at Mingzheng tang and Xuyuan tang, 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

6. "The Ritual Context of Morality Books: A Case-Study of a Taiwanese Spirit-Writing Cult," PhD diss., University of British Columbia.

under way and everyone expected a complete split between the two halls within the foreseeable future. However, it took several more years before the formal separation of the two cult groups was concluded. When I visited the Mingzheng tang again in 2009, the split had already been finalized and the Mingzheng tang was operating with a new planchette medium.

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.⁷ 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

7. 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*. "Key activity" does not necessarily imply that spirit-writing is the main activity of a phoenix hall. In some independent temples, such as the Mingzheng tang, it does indeed take up much time in the liturgical timetable, though the cult also performs many other ritual functions (such as spiritual healing and counseling, scripture recitation, production and distribution of talismans etc.). In traditional-style, community-based phoenix halls the share of spirit-writing in the total schedule of activities may be much smaller, though even here I would argue that it is a "key activity" in the sense of being crucial to the identity of the cult group as a phoenix hall.

day-to-day operations of the hall and its publishing business.⁸ 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 *Xuyuan zazhi* 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):

- *Guanyin's Lotus Sutra of the Marvellous Dao.*
- *Perfected Scripture of the Eight Immortals' Numinous Responsiveness* (*Ba Xianweng lingying zhenjing* 八仙翁靈應真經).
- *Commentary on the Sutra Spoken by the Buddha Concerning the Heavy Debt Owed to One's Parents* (*Quanshi Fosuo fumu enzhong nanbao jing* 詮釋佛說父母恩重難報經).
- *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

8. 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 in Chinese Religions in Honour of Daniel L. Overmyer*, edited by Philip Clart & Paul Crowe, pp. 127–42.

a Buddhist apocryphal sutra and the *Most High's Treatise on Action and Response* (*Taishang ganying pian* 太上感應篇). The first two, however, are original creations. As stated above, the Guanyin scripture was composed within a little more than eighteen months from 1998 to 2000. The Eight Immortals scripture took almost two years to complete, from January of 2001 until January of 2003.⁹ 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).¹⁰ Beyond these key figures, however, both Halls also worship a profusion of other deities, with emphases shifting over time among 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.

9. On this text see Clart, "The Eight Immortals between Daoism and Popular Religion: Evidence from a New Spirit-Written Scripture," in *Foundations of Daoist Ritual: A Berlin Symposium*, edited by Florian C. Reiter, pp. 84–106.

10. Worship of the August Mother and spirit-writing represent commonalities of some Taiwanese phoenix halls with the Xiantian dao groups studied by Shiga and Yau & Ngai in their articles in the present volume. However, Taiwanese phoenix halls were not originally part of the Xiantian dao tradition and came under its influence only after the Yiguandao 一貫道 arrived on the island after the Second World War. On this process, see Clart, "The Phoenix and the Mother: The Interaction of Spirit-Writing Cults and Popular Sects in Taiwan," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 25:1–32.

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 buanxing 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.¹¹ The second scripture to be written was *The Thearch Shun's Scripture Admonishing to Filial Piety* (*Sbun 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*

11. 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," *British Columbia Asian Review* 8:174–203.

pubua 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 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 韓湘子, had become his spiritual teacher. 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 immortal teacher 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.¹² 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 devotionality in Taiwanese popular culture. Guanyin also fits in with a relative (though by no means exclusive) emphasis in the Xuyuan tang on Buddhist deities. A significant portion of its texts are 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 Kṣitigarbha 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 scripture's writing before I proceed to analyse its contents and structure. On 30 May 1998, a Saturday, the Xuyuan tang's presiding deity, the Benevolent Lord Guan revealed through the planchette that the altar should be prepared the following Saturday for the reception of an imperial mandate from Vast Heaven (*baotian yuzhao* 昊天玉詔). And indeed, seven days later, on 6 June, the imperial emissary and great minister, High Minister Zhuge of the Golden Palace 欽差大臣金闕諸葛上相 descended to proclaim the Jade Thearch's mandate for the Xuyuan tang and its medium Xubi to compose two texts that were to aid in the moral reform of human beings: the Guanyin scripture to be authored by Guanyin, and a book titled *Tract on Action and Response Awak-*

12. On the role of Guanyin in Taiwanese popular religion see Cheng Chih-ming 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, pp. 48–68; Lin Mei-rong 林美容 & Su Ch'üan-cheng 蘇全正, "Taiwan de minjian Fojiao chuantong yu 'giam-a' de Guanyin xinyang zhi shehui shijian 臺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: 2–34; Lin Mei-rong, "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, edited by Tam Wai Lun 譚偉倫, pp. 15–31.

ening to the Clear Brightness of Conduct (*Wuxing qingming ganying pian* 悟行清明感應篇), to be written by the Divine Lord Wenchang of Zitong 梓潼文昌帝君. These two works were to be composed on alternating weekends. On 20 June, the Xuyuan tang's "deity in charge of rituals" (*silisben* 司禮神) ordered that the writing of the two mandated texts should commence the following day. And really, the next day, the Buddha Śākyamuni descended into the planchette to write the sutra's preface, in which he praised the compassion of Guanyin and the efficacy of her sutra

On 5 July, the Bodhisattva Guanyin descended herself to begin the writing of the sutra. During this and the next six sessions, she revealed the sutra's prefatory materials (hymns, mantras, a vow, and a gatha), before opening the first chapter of the sutra's main text on 11 October. Each session revealed a portion of sutra text in parallel classical Chinese, which was then followed by notes (*zhu* 註) on difficult technical terms, and a paraphrase (*shiyi* 釋意) in modern Chinese. It took altogether 42 séances to write the sutra, from its preface on 21 June 1998 to its concluding mantra for the dedication of merit (*buixiang zhenyan* 迴向真言) on 30 January 2000. The revelations of each séance were serialized in the Xuyuan tang's monthly magazine, *Xuyuan zazhi*. The first instalment covering the séances of 21 June and 5 July was published on pages 8 and 9 of the magazine's issue no. 21, which was published on 2 September 1998. The same issue carried (on page 12) the first of many calls for donations to help in the printing of the sutra. The sutra is described as a heaven-sent opportunity to obtain the bodhisattva's mind-seal (*xinyin* 心印), helping everyone to cultivate their spiritual rewards and proceed to the Western Paradise. Each copy of the hardcover, harmonica-style recitation edition was to cost NT\$80, while the paperback edition that also included the notes and paraphrases was to go for NT\$30 per copy. Donations were to be sent to a postal bank account with clear indications of the book title for which they were intended and the prayers that one wished to have answered through this donation. All such donations would be announced to Heaven in a written memorial. Donations had already begun to come in before that formal announcement and picked up considerably afterwards. They ranged in amount from

NT\$ 200 (US\$ 6) to NT\$ 50,000 (US\$ 1,500). 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.¹³ After the completion of the sutra, both editions were printed and bound. On 27 May 2000, they were ceremonially presented to Heaven (*jiaosbu tianting* 繳書天廷) during a full-day event that was to include scripture recitation, spirit-writing, the presentation of the morality book that had been written in alternation with the Guanyin sutra, and a communal lunch.¹⁴ 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 sutra and the morality book. 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 sutra was composed were to receive three *daogong* 道功 (= 30,000 *gong*). The same effort on behalf of the morality book only garnered the faithful 1.5 *daogong*. Those who had attended less than three fourths of the séances were to receive fifty *gong* per séance.¹⁵ The Benevolent Lord Guan continued by promising the fulfilment of their wishes to the sponsors of the texts' print editions and bestowed a laudatory poem on the visiting delegation from a Pingdong county phoenix hall, the Guangming dadao yuan 光明大道院. Then the planchette was taken over by Guanyin herself to express her appreciation of the Xuyuan tang's efforts to transmit this sutra to the world. She explained that the time for its revelation had actually not yet come, but during the writing of the morality book *The Sorrow of Living Beings* the bodhisattva had wit-

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

14. *Xuyuan zazhi* 40:1.

15. On the phoenix hall system of merit assignation see Clart, "Merit beyond Measure: Notes on the Moral (and Real) Economy of Religious Publishing in Taiwan."

nessed the great piety of the Xuyuan tang's membership; consequently she had asked Southern Heaven for special permission for the scripture's early revelation. She then proceeded to bestow special praise on particularly meritorious individuals. The whole family of Mr. Huang Zhengzhong of Kaohsiung 高雄 had donated tens of thousands of New Taiwan dollars for the printing of morality books, starting with Guanyin's *The Sorrow of Living Beings*. His requests would definitely be granted. Mr. Zeng Huolong, a member of the Xuyuan tang, had economized ever since the writing of the sutra began so that he could donate more money for its printing. Such determination was praiseworthy and would find its reward. The Xuyuan tang's vice-chairman Lü Wenlong and his wife had been reciting the sutra ever since its completion and had raised money for its printing in many places. They were to receive a special additional reward of half a *daogong*. Guanyin then promised her protection and assistance to all who sponsored the printing of the sutra. Finally, she called on everyone to cherish the sutra, honour it at the household altar, and ideally chant it mornings and evenings. Finally, she "transformed" (*chibua* 敕化) the sutra, i.e., charged it with divine efficacy.¹⁶

The sutra has remained in print ever since and still attracts printing sponsors. The most recent issue of *Xuyuan zazhi* in my possession (No.121, January 2007) lists 24 donors who within about one month had donated a total of NT\$27,600 (US\$840) for the printing of the sutra. Thus the sutra maintains a following seven years after its completion. In addition to sending money to the Xuyuan tang for its reprinting, some faithful have taken it on themselves to spread the sutra in cyberspace by inputting and uploading it on the web. Several sites now carry the text of the sutra.¹⁷ It is unclear how far the text has come into use beyond the temple where it was revealed, but its presence on the web indicates a spread beyond its context of origin.

16. *Xuyuan zazhi* 43:4–6.

17. See for example, <http://tcstreet.com/Book/buddha/wahlin/wahlin.htm> (an individual's homepage, accessed February 16, 2007) and <http://www.baoder.org.tw/mf.htm> (a temple homepage, also accessed February 16, 2007).

A sign of the success of a new scripture is its reprinting by other temples; as far as I can tell that has not happened in the case of the Guanyin sutra yet (if we discount the electronic versions). However, it has only been around for ten years, so it is still early days.

The Structure and Contents of the Sutra

The recitation version of the sutra is printed on beige harmonica-style paper between two yellow cloth-bound covers. I own the first edition published in 2000. The sutra starts out with the séance texts recording the proclamation of the imperial mandate authorizing the revelation of the sutra. This is followed by Śākyamuni Buddha's preface. Then, on page 5, the sutra proper begins with a series of short, ritual texts that effect the purification necessary prior to the chanting of the sutra's main text:

- (1) Hymn on Offering Incense (上香讚)
- (2) Hymn on the Purifying Water (淨水讚)
- (3) Mantra on Purifying Mouth Karma (淨口業真言)
- (4) Mantra on Purifying Thought Karma (淨意業真言)
- (5) Mantra on Purifying Body Karma (淨身業真言)
- (6) Vow to Extend [the Dao] (弘願文)
- (7) Gatha for Opening of the Sutra (開經偈)

These find their echo in the sutra's concluding sections which consist of:

- (1) Verses praising the efficacy of the sutra.
- (2) Hymn on Concluding the Sutra (完經讚)
- (3) Mantra for the Dedication of Merit (迴向真言)

This pattern of opening and concluding hymns, mantras, and gathas is fairly uniform among popular religious scriptures. Hymns (*zan*) in the Guanyin sutra consist of 29 characters in a 4/4/7/5/4/5 pattern; the same pattern can be found in all other scriptures produced by the Xuyuan tang and its immediate predecessors, as while as scriptures produced by other cult groups. Each mantra consists of four lines of

six characters, followed by an invocation of Guanyin. That pattern is a little different from the other scriptures of the Xuyuan tang and linked phoenix halls, where we usually have a pattern of four times four lines, followed by three invocations of the deity. It is not clear why the 4x6 pattern is used here. The vow also is a unique feature of the Guanyin scripture. In its case it seems clear that it relates to the central importance of vows in the cult of Guanyin.

The main text of the sutra is sandwiched between these ritual formulae and is organized into six chapters (*zhang* 章).

Chapter 1: The Responses to Calling the Name [of Guanshiyin] 稱名感應章第一

Chapter 2: Manifesting Herself to Expound the Dharma 現身說法章第二

Chapter 3: Maintain Humanity and Compassion 存仁慈悲章第三

Chapter 4: Illuminate the Mind and See the Nature 明心見性章第四

Chapter 5: The Barge of Compassion and Universal Salvation 慈航普度章第五

Chapter 6: Cultivation and Completion 修持圓滿章第六

Each chapter is divided into a first section of 36 rhyming lines of seven characters, and a second section of either 16 or 24 rhyming lines of five characters. In the recitation, the change in line length is matched by a change in chanting rhythm. In terms of content, chapters one and two obviously take their inspiration from the 25th chapter of the Lotus Sutra, the famous *Pumen pin* 普門品. Chapter 1 extols the miraculous efficacy of the invocation of Guanyin's name, a practice that will resolve the chanter's problems and fulfil his or her wishes. Chapter 2 imitates the *Pumen pin's* description of the Bodhisattva's many manifestations in accordance with the needs of suffering beings. Compare the following lines:

<p>Guanyin sutra: 願以佛身得度者。佛身說法度人 人。 For those who wish to be delivered by a Buddha / She takes on the body of a Buddha to expound the Dharma and deliver human beings.</p>	<p><i>Pumen pin:</i> 若有國土眾生，應以佛身得度者，觀世音菩薩即現佛身而為說法。 “If there are living beings in the land who need someone on the body of a Buddha to be saved, Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World’s Sounds immediately manifests himself in a Buddha’s body and preaches the Law for them.”¹⁸</p>
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In effect, the first section of chapter 2 is a rhymed and abbreviated paraphrase of this section of the *Pumen pin*. The second section of chapter 2, in 16 lines of five characters in turn uses some of the five-character verses of the *Pumen pin*. Compare the following texts. Guanyin sutra passages with close parallels in the *Pumen pin* are underlined:

<p>Guanyin sutra: 觀音妙尊相。智力廣施為。 十方諸國土。現身度四夷。 發大清淨願。說法正其宜。 宏誓似海深。萬劫世所師。 正法妙功德。護持道心隨。 無量大慈悲。圓滿濟艱危。 超脫諸惡業。罪孽盡去離。 明通菩薩道。苦海度迷兒。</p>	<p><i>Pumen pin:</i> 世尊妙相具。我今重問彼。 佛子何因緣。名為觀世音。 具足妙相尊。偈答無盡意。 汝聽觀音行。善應諸方所。 弘誓深如海。歷劫不思議。 侍多千億佛。發大清淨願。 · · · 十方諸國土。無利不現身。</p>
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18. Burton Watson, trans., *The Lotus Sutra*, p. 301.

We find scattered fragments from the *Pumen pin* in the five-character verses of chapter 1 as well, and in other areas of the Guanyin sutra. Only chapters 1 and 2, however, are clearly modelled after the *Pumen pin*. They link the sutra with the key text of Guanyin devotionalism, before the following four chapters switch over to a perspective that owes more to phoenix hall theology than to Buddhist piety; they shift the emphasis from devotion to the other-strength of the bodhisattva to the self-strength of the individual taking spiritual cultivation into his or her own hands. What is stressed here is the individual's duty of moral cultivation, which will produce merit, clear one's spiritual nature, and will be rewarded by ascension into the ranks of gods and immortals. While the text is shot through with Buddhist terminology, in its system of doctrine it clearly does not propagate a consistently Buddhist perspective, but the merit and morals focused syncretism typical of Taiwan's phoenix halls. It provides a Buddhist variation on themes that in other phoenix hall texts (including other scriptures written by Mingbi/Xubi) may be presented in Daoist or Confucian terms.¹⁹

After chapter 6 are inserted two canonical Buddhist texts linked with Guanyin: the Heart Sutra 般若波羅蜜多心經 and the Great Compassion Dharani 千手千眼無礙大悲心陀羅尼. These are followed by the concluding ritual formulae described above. To visualize the structure of the sutra, we could use three concentric circles. The outermost circle contains the ritual formulae at the beginning and end of the scripture; the second circle the Buddhist sections (the *Pumen pin* paraphrase of chapters 1 and 2, the Heart Sutra and the Great Compassion Dharani); while the core circle would contain chapters 3 through 6, which are dominated by phoenix hall theology. The outermost circle thus signals that the reader is in the presence of a sacred scripture, the second circle links it to Buddhist Guanyin devotion, and the innermost third circle carries the phoenix hall message of

19. For more information on the doctrinal system of Taiwanese phoenix halls, see Clart, "The Ritual Context of Morality Books," chapter 5; Clart, "Confucius and the Mediums: Is There a 'Popular Confucianism?'" *T'oung Pao: International Journal of Chinese Studies* 89.1-3: 1-38.

deification through moral cultivation.

The text amount in the circles is fairly evenly distributed. If we take the page numbers of the paperback version it roughly looks like this:

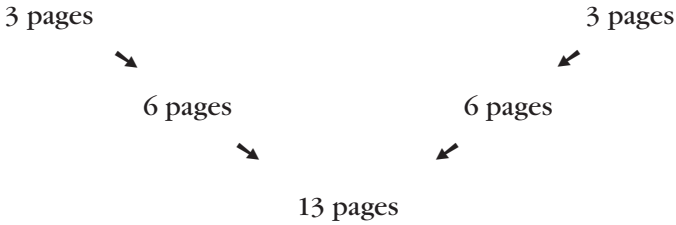


Figure 1: Text distribution in the Guanyin sutra.

One could extend this analysis to the scripture’s title: *Guanyin miaodao lianhua jing*. Starting from the end, the outermost circle marks it as a *jing*, the second circle links it to the Buddhist Lotus Sutra (*lianhua*) tradition, while the innermost circle thematizes the “marvellous Dao” (*miaodao*) of the phoenix hall tradition. All three circles are connected by the figure of Guanyin as the sutra’s author.

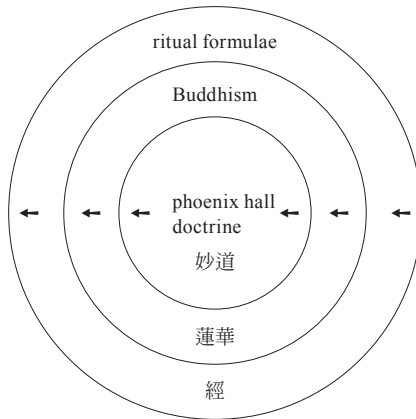


Figure 2: Textual layers in the Guanyin sutra. Arrows indicate the sequence of the recitation.

Let it be made clear that this is my own analysis—I have not found a similar reading in any of the Xuyuan tang's publications. However, it seems a plausible interpretation of the sutra's structure. If I am correct in this analysis, the Guanyin sutra presents a fascinating example of layered packaging of religious ideas. It creates a sacred mental space by the surrounding ritual formulae, uses the texts of the Buddhist great tradition as a specific entry point, before arriving at the phoenix hall perspective on spiritual cultivation, which is deemed to be the shared foundation of all three of China's great traditions. The reciter moves first from the outside in, before returning from the centre back to the outermost circle. This movement exemplifies the relationship that phoenix halls stipulate for their Dao with the Three Teachings: it underlies and unifies them. A pious Buddhist would be seen to practise at the level of the second circle, while this new scripture provides access to the inner circle in which Buddhist devotion finds ecumenical completion and fulfilment in the marvellous Dao that is beyond the *jiao* 教 of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, yet embraces them all. Hence the appearance of *dao* 道 in the sutra's title where its famous model has *fa* 法: *miaodao lianbua jing* 妙道蓮華經. And hence the sutra's statement:

The subtle Lotus preaches the meaning of the Dao;
By diligently chanting the sutra will you receive deep mysteries.
微妙蓮華說道義。經文勤誦獲玄機。²⁰

Conclusion

Beyond its intrinsic interest, the case example of *Guanyin's Lotus Sutra of the Marvellous Dao* may contribute to three fields of inquiry in the study of Chinese religions.

First, it modifies Kenneth Dean's hypothesis that Daoist priests have been instrumental in providing scriptures for popular religious cults.²¹ The Guanyin sutra is just one of scores of recitation scriptures

20. *Guanyin miaodao lianbua jing* (paperback edition), p. 56.

21. See his *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China*, p. 32.

composed by planchette revelation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as earlier during the Qing dynasty. Planchette cults must therefore be taken seriously as agents engaged in the written codification of popular cults. This does not contradict Dean's findings, but adds to them and thus enriches our picture of the religious dynamics of Chinese popular religion.²²

Second, the Guanyin sutra reveals a mode of popular and sectarian engagement with the Buddhist tradition that enriches the picture provided for us by Yü's study. The Ming and Qing dynasty texts discussed by Yü typically take a narrative approach and seek to redefine the figure of Guanyin in a sectarian context, e.g., by making her an emissary of or identifying her with the Venerable Mother. The appropriation of Guanyin happens in the telling of a story in the course of which Guanyin becomes a mouthpiece for sectarian doctrine.²³ This process is comparable to what Prasenjit Duara has termed "super-scription:" the adding of a new level of meaning to the cult of Guanyin without abandoning its previous significance.²⁴ Yet this term does not quite seem to capture what is happening in the case of our Guanyin sutra, which is not a narrative text. While we are definitely looking at a layering of meanings, as Duara did by regarding the Guandi myth as "a palimpsest of layered meanings,"²⁵ the image of "super-scription" does not accurately describe the way the Guanyin sutra does not so much *overwrite*, but *underlay* Buddhist devotionism with phoenix hall notions of Dao cultivation. The effect is not to su-

22. See also Lin Mei-rong, "Cong minjian zaojing chuantong de shenming jingshu lai fenxi shenshengxing de suzao."

23. So in the case of the *True Scripture of Guanyin's Original Vow of Salvation* (*Guanyin jidu benyuan zhenjing* 觀音濟度本願真經), a 17th century text of the Xiantian Dadao 先天大道 sectarian lineage. See Yü, *Kuan-yin*, pp. 463–65, et passim; Yu Songqing 喻松青, "Jiexi Guanyin jidu benyuan zhenjing 解析《觀音濟度本願真經》," in *Minjian mimi zongjiao jingjuan yanjiu* 民間祕密宗教經卷研究, pp. 251–71.

24. Duara, Prasenjit, "Superscribing Symbols: The Myth of Guandi, Chinese God of War," *Journal of Asian Studies* 47.4: 778–95.

25. Duara, "Superscribing Symbols," p. 780.

persede 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. This approach of the Xuyuan tang resembles the inclusivism of the Way of Unity (Yiguandao 一貫道), a sectarian movement that had a profound impact on Taiwanese spirit-writing cults.²⁶ The Yiguandao holds a similar view of the Dao as prior to and foundational for all religion (*jiao*). Often the relationship is illustrated by a hand whose palm is the Dao from which the fingers of the Five Major Religions grow.²⁷ 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 devotion arising out of and remaining rooted in the unitary Dao that underlies and gives meaning to all religious practice.

Third, and finally, the complex structure of the Guanyin scripture reminds us that the concept of "syncretism" marks a beginning of the study of popular religious thought, not its end. While I am comfortable inserting Taiwanese cases such as the one presented

26. See Clart, "The Phoenix and the Mother."

27. See my investigation of Yiguandao inclusivism with regard to Christianity: "The Image of Jesus Christ in a Chinese Inclusivist Context: I-kuan Tao's Christology and its Implications for Interreligious Dialogue," in *Zongjiao, wenxue yu renshe* 宗教·文學與人生, edited by Chung Yunying 鍾雲鶯, pp. 279–313.

here into the wider comparative field of the study of syncretisms,²⁸ the latter term does not in and by itself make any meaningful statement about the specific type of mixing and matching represented by this text. As I tried to show in the previous paragraph, even just within the Chinese and Taiwanese sectarian contexts we find a number of different appropriative strategies that might be construed as subtypes of syncretism and thus help us to differentiate this often somewhat indiscriminately employed concept. This promises to become a fruitful field of future inquiry.

28. For a recent state of the field overview see *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader*, edited by Anita Maria Leopold and Jeppe Sinding Jensen.

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錨定觀音： 一部新的鸞堂經文的借用策略

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摘要：在中國民間信仰被認為多是口頭相傳的情況下，經文的作用不可小覷。與此相關也產生了一系列的問題：經文作者為何人？應用如何？內中為何宗教觀點？如何獲得並影響其內所主導的神靈信仰？本文通過以《觀音妙道蓮華經》作為個案研究，來試圖對上文提出的問題作以闡釋。這篇經文是在1998年到2000年間由臺中市的一家鸞堂，即虛原堂，扶乩得來。通過對本篇經文的結構和語言修辭的研究可以發現，這篇觀音經文代表了一種民間信仰、民間教派與佛教傳統相結合的模式。這樣既不同於于君方對觀音的研究，也不同於杜贊奇(Prasenjit Duara)「多層書寫」的理念，但卻豐富了我們對於民間教派思想體系形成的認識。杜贊奇把關帝神話的發展看作是「在羊皮紙上層疊相加的多次書寫」原本無可厚非，但如果我們試圖尋找有關觀音的多次「書寫」的痕跡，就會發現，這種「多層書寫」的理念並不能適用於這部觀音經文，因為它並沒有被作為新的「書寫」出現在觀音神話發展的「羊皮紙」上，而是將鸞堂的修道觀點作為一種深層基礎置於佛教觀音信仰的聖殿之下。實際上，這篇觀音經文通過一系列的鸞堂個人修道觀念展現了詳盡的觀音信仰活動的包容性的再錨定，因而給我們提供了一種在民間教派的大環境下宗教教義融合的獨特形式。

關鍵詞：扶乩，觀音，多層書寫，民間信仰經文，融合主義。