

CONFUCIUS AND THE MEDIUMS: IS THERE A “POPULAR CONFUCIANISM”?

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In most areas of study it is the fundamental questions that tend to remain unresolved. Thus, scholars in religious studies have been amassing innumerable studies on specific religions, aspects of religious life, beliefs, doctrines and practices, but so far have not yet been able to agree on what “religion” actually is, what falls under this label and what does not. Likewise, students of Confucianism have not been able to solve such basic issues concerning their chosen subject matter as: Is Confucianism a philosophy or a religion? Should we even speak of it as an “-ism,” or should we call it more loosely “Confucian tradition” or “Confucian thought?”

The present article will deal with a related basic question that so far has not been resolved satisfactorily, namely, whether there is such a thing as a “popular Confucianism?” Or, put differently: are there sections of Chinese popular culture that can meaningfully be interpreted as “Confucian?” I approach this question not by imposing the label “Confucian” on likely elements of popular culture, but by examining the use of the label “Ru” 儒 among twentieth-century popular religious groups. As I will be dealing with religious groups that self-consciously use this label as an autonym, the question will not be: “Are these groups Confucian?”, but rather: “What do they

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mean by ‘Ru’ when they use the term as an autonym?” This method will supply us with an indirect approach to the question of popular Confucianism by providing insight into popular interpretations and uses of Confucianism. In this way it will be able to reveal one important aspect of what a “popular Confucianism” might comprise—Confucianism as appropriated by popular religion.

“Ru” in Taiwanese Popular Religion

Looking for things labelled “Ru” in Taiwanese popular religion, the first example one encounters is not one of doctrine, but of style—liturgical style, to be exact. Laurence G. Thompson, in an article published in 1981 on the Chaotian Gong 朝天宮, the temple devoted to Mazu 媽祖 in Beigang 北港, distinguished “popular” and “classical” as two modes of ritual performance.¹ Predominant at the Chaotian Gong are the typical popular observances associated with pilgrimages to a major Mazu temple, but twice a year a quite different set of observances is enacted. The “spring and autumn sacrifices” are performed as a closed ceremony by a group of men clad in “long gowns of plain hemp cloth, with black, thin cotton ‘riding jackets’.” While each step of the complicated ritual is announced by a “herald,” the officiants offer a sheep and a pig as well as incense, read out a “prayer” in praise of Mazu, perform a “threefold offering” and a “threefold libation,” and conclude by burning the prayer text. The stages of the ritual are punctuated by series of kowtows (the *sangui jūkou* 三跪九叩) and accompanied by the sounds of a drum, a bell, and a flute. Thompson does not tell us how the group of officiants was selected: in the prayer text they identify themselves in a stereotyped formula as “chief sacrificer N and associate sacrificers A, B, and C, together with the gentry and merchants and principal directors [of the temple]”—in other words, the local elite. Thompson does not use the term “Confucian” for this classical mode, but instead calls it “official-style” and sees it as stemming “from scriptural texts in the Confucian canon, and later prescriptions in the handbooks of the imperial government.”²

¹ Laurence G. Thompson, “Popular and Classical Modes of Ritual in a Taiwanese Temple”, *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Chinese Religions* 9, 1981, pp. 106-122.

² Thompson, “Popular and Classical Modes of Ritual”, p. 116. Prescriptive outlines of such rituals are reprinted in Chen Yundong 陳運棟, *Taiwan de Kejia lisu* 臺灣的客家禮俗 (Taipei: Taiyuan chubanshe, 1991), pp. 146-179.

Even though the general public does not participate in the “official-style” ritual, its main components are widely known and the style as a whole has been identified for me by informants as “Ru” (or sometimes as *zhengtong* 正統, meaning “orthodox”).³ Characteristic features are the so-called “scholarly” dress of the participants (long gowns with riding jackets), the “three kneelings and nine kowtows,” the use of a “herald” or announcer, the reading and burning of a prayer text (*zhuwen* 祝文), the threefold offerings and libations, the decorum of the procedure, and its peculiar hierarchical organization of ritual space. The most highly developed forms of this style are to be found, of course, in the ceremonies held at Taiwan’s Confucius temples, but these are largely artificial, state-sponsored occasions during which historicizing reconstructions of rituals are performed whose impact on the popular level is minimal. The importance of the Chaotian Gong example lies in the presence of the same style, albeit in simplified form, at community temples, where it is carried out on local initiative, rather than through government sponsorship. At the Chaotian Gong these sacrifices have been celebrated more or less continuously since Qing times.

In addition to community temples such as the Chaotian Gong, a similar Confucian liturgical style is also employed in ancestral temples of large lineages. As a liturgical option, it is more common than one would guess from its relative neglect in the ethnographic literature on Taiwan. Taiwanese scholar Lee Fong-mao recently began to study the roles played in community temples by specialists in this style (which he calls Confucian). He argues that these so-called “ritualists” (*lisheng* 禮生) have historically had a significant influence on ritual performances at local temples in Taiwan. In fact, he maintains that prior to the increasing influence of Buddhism after 1945, *lisheng* and Daoist priests (*daoshi* 道士) represented the most widely available groups of ritual specialists. The liturgical knowledge of the *lisheng* was codified, on the one hand, in printed ritual manuals such as Zhu Xi’s *Jiali* 家禮 and Lü Zizhen’s 呂子振 *Jiali dacheng* 家禮大成, and on the other hand in manuscripts that were passed on only within *lisheng* associations. The *lisheng* and *daoshi* sometimes competed with each other, but more commonly they were complementary. Thus, in the performance of complex rituals at community temples and at private funerals, the ritual sequence would be split up

³ I conducted fieldwork in central Taiwan from 1993 to 1994, focusing on a spirit-writing cult in the city of Taichung.

between the *lisheng* and *daoshi*, each being assigned particular segments depending on the nature of the rituals required. Indeed, this interaction provides fascinating insights into the interplay of diverse ritual traditions at the local level.⁴

Being connected with ritual manuals that used to be widely available throughout the Chinese empire, forms of ritual similar to those practised by the Taiwanese *lisheng* can be found outside of Taiwan. Kenneth Dean describes the “Confucian rites” performed by a local lineage in Fujian and links them with what he calls the “Confucian” ritual performed at Beigang’s Chaotian Gong. He emphasizes that such ritual is performed only by an elite, not by the community at large, and thus serves primarily to mark the officiants’ elite status.⁵ A similar function is visible in the ritual performances at the rebuilt Confucius temple of a Kong-surname village in Gansu province that was studied by Jun Jing in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Here, the ability to remember and master complex ritual language and procedures helped establish a group of lineage elders as religious authorities in the village. The ritual tradition in question shares many similarities with the *lisheng* rituals in Taiwan, including its elitist tendency of excluding the public from its performance or reducing them to mere onlookers.⁶

Another example comes from Hugh Baker’s study of a lineage in Hong Kong’s New Territories, made in the 1960s. Here the annual spring sacrifice ceremony (*chunji* 春祭) is conducted “partly in a speech foreign to the village, which is said by the villagers to be ‘Ch’ing dynasty officials’ language’, but which bears little resemblance to Mandarin.” Traditionally only lineage elders and degree-holders were eligible to participate, while everyone else was shut out of the hall. With the disappearance of the Qing dynasty degree system these requirements were somewhat relaxed, but the ritual as performed in the 1960s still had a markedly elitist character.⁷

⁴ Lee Fong-mao [Li Fengmao] 李豐楙, “Lisheng yu daoshi: Taiwan minjian shehui zhong liyi shijian de liang ge mianxiang” 禮生與道士：臺灣民間社會中禮儀實踐的兩個面向, in Wang Ch’iu-kuei 王秋桂, Chuang Ying-chang 莊英章 and Ch’en Chung-min 陳中民 (eds.), *Shehui, minzu yu wenhua zhanyan guoji yantaohui lunwenji* 社會、民族與文化展演國際研討會論文集 (Taipei: Hanxue yanjiu zhongxin, 2001), pp. 331-364.

⁵ Kenneth Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 158-159.

⁶ Jun Jing, *The Temple of Memories: History, Power, and Morality in a Chinese Village* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

⁷ Hugh D.R. Baker, *A Chinese Lineage Village: Sheung Shui* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1968), pp. 64-65.

Finally, I would like to address briefly an article by David Johnson, published in 1997, which partly inspired my present effort. There Johnson examines the *sai* 賽 temple festivals of Southeastern Shanxi, emphasizing their Confucian nature as expressed in mythological themes, values, and ritual style. Of the latter aspect he writes:

Their central rituals resembled in form and style the restrained and sober ceremonials of the ancestral hall and the Confucian temple more than the exuberant and emotion-charged worship of what we usually think of as popular village religion, as represented for example by the Taoist rituals of south-eastern China. There were many elements that certainly would not have found a place in the state cult or ancestral sacrifices, but the Confucian tone of the liturgy as a whole is unmistakable.⁸

While Johnson expresses his discomfort with the Confucian label, he argues for a recognition of its place in popular religion and makes a strong case for the *sai*'s "connection with what for lack of a better word I call 'Confucianism'."⁹

The work of all the scholars referred to above clearly indicates the presence in diverse geographical areas of the Chinese cultural sphere of a liturgical style that has suffered comparative neglect in the ethnographical literature on Chinese popular religion. One would surmise that this style appeared to many scholars as a moribund survival of religious practices controlled by the degree-holding class of the Qing period, and thus not really part of living popular religion. However, today, ninety years after the downfall of the Qing and almost a hundred years after the abolition of the traditional civil service examinations, it still is very much alive in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and is being revived on the Chinese mainland. Thus, further research into this liturgical tradition, its regional and local variations, its social carriers, and its links to the late Imperial state cult should yield insights of great interest into a hitherto underrepresented dimension of popular religious practice.

In the rest of this article I shall focus on the so-called phoenix halls (*luan-tang* 鸞堂)—Taiwanese spirit-writing cults that identify themselves explicitly as Confucian, with such terms as Rujiao 儒教, Kongjiao 孔教 or Ruzong shenjiao 儒宗神教,¹⁰ and that have de-

⁸ David Johnson, "'Confucian' Elements in the Great Temple Festivals of Southeastern Shansi in Late Imperial Times", *T'oung Pao*, 83 (1997), pp. 159-160.

⁹ Johnson, "'Confucian' Elements", p. 128.

¹⁰ David K. Jordan and Daniel L. Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 79, 149.

liberately adopted the liturgical style in question as their trademark characteristic.¹¹ The development of phoenix hall liturgy and doctrine furnishes an enlightening example of the appropriation of elements perceived as Confucian within popular religion for the purpose of inventing a tradition for a new religious movement and carving out for it a distinctive niche in the highly diversified religious marketplace of Taiwan. By examining this use of the label “Ru” for self-appellation, we will be able to get a first glimpse of popular forms of Confucianism in Taiwanese culture.

The Early Spirit-Writing Movement in Taiwan and on the Mainland

The Taiwanese phoenix hall tradition began in 1853 when a planchette cult was established in Magong 馬公, the capital of the Penghu 澎湖 (Pescadores) Islands located between Fujian and Taiwan. In that year a group of Magong literati sent a prospective medium to the city of Quanzhou 泉州 in Fujian, there to be taught the use of the planchette by a “Society for Public Goodness” (Gongshan She 公善社). After the return of the medium in the same year, a “Society for Universal Exhortation” (Puquan She 普勸社) was founded in Magong with the purpose of carrying out spirit-writing, proclaiming (*xuanjiang* 宣講) the *Sacred Edict*, and admonishing the people to moral conduct. The activities of the Society dwindled over the years, however, until it completely ceased operation when French forces occupied the Penghu Islands in 1885 during the Sino-French war. Two years later, in 1887, funds were raised for the revival of the Society for Universal Exhortation under the leadership of a group of six government students (*shengyuan* 生員); the society was then renamed “Society for Complete Renewal” (Yixin She 一新社). It held regular public lecturing sessions given by carefully chosen “lecturers” (*jiangsheng* 講生), among whom we find such respectable persons as the eighth-rank button bearer Lin Sheng 林陞 and the Confucian students (*tongsheng* 童生) Guo Ezhi 郭鶚志, Xu Zhankui 許占魁, Gao Sheng 高昇, and Chen Bingheng 陳秉衡. The lectures expounded the *Sacred Edict* and such morality books as the *Amplified Instructions on the Sacred Edict* (*Shengyu guangxun* 聖諭廣訓), the *Tract on Action and Re-*

¹¹ There seems to exist a kind of elective affinity between *lisheng* (ritualists) and spirit-writing halls, as a significant number of the *lisheng* investigated by Lee Fongmao were at the same time members of phoenix halls. See Lee, “Lisheng yu daoshi”.

sponse (*Ganying pian* 感應篇), and the *Essay on Secret Virtue* (*Yinzhi wen* 陰鷲文)—stock texts for those concerned with public morality. In 1891 the Yixin She set up the “Hall of Taking Joy in Goodness” (Leshan Tang 樂善堂) as an organizational subunit that was to devote itself exclusively to the spirit-writing of new morality texts, presumably for use in the Society’s public lecturing activities; the texts composed between 1891 and 1903 were collected and published as one of the earliest spirit-written morality books produced in Taiwan, entitled *Selected Novelties of Enlightenment* (*Juewu xuanxin* 覺悟選新). At about the same time, similar activities were pursued by local literati in Ilan County 宜蘭縣 in the northern part of Taiwan proper. There, what was probably the earliest spirit-written morality book ever to be produced in Taiwan was completed in 1890. The Ilan planchette cults, led by local degree-holders, were extremely active and spawned new cult groups all over northern and central Taiwan.¹²

These late nineteenth century planchette cults were literati-led religious groups that tried to counter the perceived decline of traditional values by having the gods themselves reaffirm them through the planchette. The divine admonitions and moral lessons thus obtained were relayed to the general public through public lectures and morality books (*shanshu* 善書). These outward-directed activities are the most easily noticed ones, but planchette cults then and now also had internal functions—that is to say, functions pertaining to the spiritual needs of their own members. As religious institutions, in particular, they were and are concerned with their members’ salvation.

¹² This brief outline of the historical development of phoenix halls in the Penghu Islands and Taiwan follows mainly the published research of Sung Kwang-yu and Wang Chien-Ch’uan, as well as the new monographic studies by Li Shyh-Wei and Wang Zhiyu. See Sung Kwang-yu (Song Guangyu) 宋光宇, “Jiedu Qingmo yu Riju shidai zai Taiwan zhuanzuo de shanshu ‘Juewu xuanxin’” 解讀清末與日據時代在臺灣撰作的善書《覺悟選新》, in *Id.*, *Zongjiao yu shehui* 宗教與社會 (Taipei: Dongda Tushu, 1995), pp. 1-65; Wang Chien-Ch’uan (Wang Jianchuan) 王見川, “Qingmo Riju chuqi Taiwan de luntang—jian lun ‘Ruzong Shenjiao’ de xingcheng” 清末日據初期臺灣的鸞堂—兼論「儒宗神教」的形成, in *Id.*, *Taiwan de Zhajiao yu luntang* 臺灣的齋教與鸞堂 (Taipei: Southern Materials Publishing, 1996), pp. 169-197; Li Shyh-Wei (Li Shiwei) 李世偉, *Riju shidai Taiwan Rujiao jieshe yu huodong* 日據時代臺灣儒教結社與活動 (Taipei: Wenjin, 1999); Wang Zhiyu 王志宇, *Taiwan de Enzhugong xinyang: Ruzong Shenjiao yu feiluan quanhu* 臺灣的恩主公信仰—儒宗神教與飛鸞勸化 (Taipei: Wenjin, 1997). For an English language overview of the early history of phoenix halls in Taiwan, see Philip Clart,

Salvation, in the conception of Taiwanese phoenix halls, basically means deification.¹³ It is the cult member's—the "phoenix disciple's" (*luansheng* 鸞生)—aim to become a deity after his or her death. This aim is worked on in a long process of "cultivating the Way" (*xiudao* 修道). What constitutes "cultivating the Way" is taught by the gods in their planchette revelations. Although the concrete contents differ slightly from hall to hall, there are several common denominators: first, cultivation means primarily cultivation of everyday morality. It means realizing the basic virtues, such as benevolence (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 義), propriety (*li* 禮), and filial piety (*xiao* 孝), in one's everyday life. Once one has succeeded in incorporating this ethical pattern into one's daily life, one has reached a state of continuous sincerity (*cheng* 誠) as well as peace and purity of mind (*jing* 靜) that will make it possible to progress successfully in the cultivation of one's inner or "numinous" nature (*lingxing* 靈性).

Cultivating the Way is conceptualized as a path of learning. A phoenix hall is like a school, with the gods as teachers and the cult members as students. This understanding is reflected in cult terminology: phoenix disciples will address their cult's gods as "benevolent teachers" (*enshi* 恩師) while referring to themselves as "students" or "disciples" (*sheng* 生, *dizi* 弟子). Cult members are to devote diligent study to the messages received by the gods; these "sagely instructions" (*shengxun* 聖訓) are their textbooks. Progress (or lack thereof) in one's cultivation is measured in units of merit and demerit. For this purpose, many phoenix halls use the so-called "ledgers of merit and demerit," i.e. lists of good and bad deeds with amounts of merits and demerits attached to them.¹⁴ The balance of

"The Ritual Context of Morality Books: A Case-Study of a Taiwanese Spirit-Writing Cult" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1997), part I, chapter 2.

¹³ The following sketch of the phoenix hall belief system is based largely on my studies of modern halls in central Taiwan. However, I am stressing here those elements that show continuity with the beliefs of earlier cult groups as discernible in their morality books. Thus it can be taken as a description of the basic elements of the phoenix hall belief system since the late nineteenth century. It needs to be pointed out that the "phoenix hall belief system" outlined here is a sort of "official" version, propounded by cult leaders and reproduced in morality books. In practice, this model will overlap to a greater or lesser extent with the actual beliefs held by individual cult members, depending on the person and his or her degree of identification with the cult group.

¹⁴ On the history of these ledgers see Cynthia Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). Gary Seaman discusses ledger use in a central Taiwanese

one's merit account—the “phoenix register” (*luanji* 鸞籍) established in Heaven once one becomes a cult member—determines one's posthumous fate: one may fall into purgatory, be reborn as a human being, or ascend to Heaven. Ascension to Heaven requires a significant surplus of merit points, and the amount of accumulated merit determines the rank of deity one attains: lower, middle, or upper.

Even when one has attained divine status, however, one has to continue cultivating the Way in order to perfect oneself further. Spirit-writing journals are filled with accounts of virtuous people who after their death have become the earth god of some village. By continuing to cultivate themselves diligently and to fulfill their duties as earth gods in an unexceptionable manner, they manage after several years to rise to the position of city god. From there further cultivation will lead them to the position of, say, Guan Gong in an important Guan Gong temple. Finally, if they do not stray from the correct path, they will obtain a celestial office. By continuing with their cultivation, they will then gradually rise up through the various layers of the heavens. Thus, cultivation introduces a dynamic element into the celestial hierarchy of the popular Chinese pantheon: almost all names of deities become simply names of divine offices, which may be held by a series of different meritorious spirits. Even though the Chinese pantheon is large and varied, there are still not enough “reward positions” (*guowei* 果位) for the many virtuous souls coming out of spirit-writing halls who have “realized the Way” (*zhengdao* 證道). Therefore, spirit-writing halls tend continually to create new celestial offices to make space for them, meaning that one is likely to find many deities in spirit-written texts which are not mentioned anywhere else. The numbers of gods are further swollen by the practice of posthumously elevating one's ancestors to divine status: both members and non-members can transfer merit to ancestors who may still be caught in purgatory; this merit is credited to the ancestor's merit account and may help bring it up to a level qualifying him or her for rebirth or deification. As the easiest and most straightforward way of creating merit for this purpose is to donate money to the spirit-writing temple, soul-saving activities such as these are important sources of income for phoenix halls.

In a wider historical perspective, Taiwanese phoenix halls are a local variant of a type of religious organization that developed on

phoenix hall in the 1970s in his *Temple Organization in a Chinese Village* (Taipei: The Orient Cultural Service, 1978), pp. 58-62.

the Chinese mainland in response to the conditions of rapid social, political, and cultural change prevalent in the nineteenth century. This largely uncharted territory in the history of Chinese religions is the object of a research project in which I am currently engaged. My present hypothesis is that these planchette cults represent the fusion of two formerly distinct forms of religious organization patronized by local elites: the Daoist spirit-writing cult and the charitable society.

Since the Song dynasty, Daoist spirit-writing cults usually focused upon one particular immortal with whom the members communed at regular intervals by means of the planchette. The most popular planchette deities were Patriarch Lü (Lü Zu 呂祖), Zhang Sanfeng 張三丰, and the Divine Lord Wenchang (Wenchang Dijun 文昌帝君). The relationship between cult members and their patron deity followed the Daoist model of disciples and their perfected master, and the ultimate goal of cult membership was to obtain divine guidance in a project of religious cultivation that was to lead the disciples to becoming themselves immortals. Collections such as Wenchang Dijun's *Book of Transformations* (*Huashu* 化書), the *Collected Works of Patriarch Lü* (*Lü Zu huiji* 呂祖彙集), and the *Complete Collection of Zhang Sanfeng* (*Zhang Sanfeng quanji* 張三丰全集) consist principally of planchette texts composed by such cult groups.¹⁵

Charitable societies, on the other hand, were the late Imperial equivalent of the Rotary or Lions' Club: associations of wealthy gentry and merchants engaged in all kinds of charitable activities, such as, most commonly, free dispensation of medicine, coffins and burials for the poor, collection of discarded scraps of paper with

¹⁵ The secondary literature on these cults remains rather sparse. Relevant studies include: Anna Seidel, "A Taoist Immortal of the Ming Dynasty: Chang San-feng," in Wm. Theodore de Bary (ed.), *Self and Society in Ming Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), pp. 483-531; Huang Zhaohan 黃兆漢, *Mingdai daoshi Zhang Sanfeng kao* 明代道士張三丰考 (Taipei: Taiwan Xuesheng shuju, 1988); Terrence G. Russell, "Chen Tuan at Mount Huangbo: A Spirit-Writing Cult in Late Ming China," *Asiatische Studien*, 44 (1990), pp. 107-140; Terry F. Kleeman, *A God's Own Tale: The Book of Transformations of Wenchang, the Divine Lord of Zhitong* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994); Monica Esposito, "Longmen Taoism in Qing China: Doctrinal Ideal and Local Reality," *Journal of Chinese Religions*, 29 (2001), pp. 191-231; Mori Yuria, "Identity and Lineage: The *Taiyi jinhua zongzhi* and the Spirit-Writing Cult of Patriarch Lü in Qing China," in Livia Kohn and Harold D. Roth (eds.), *Daoist Identity: History, Lineage, and Ritual* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), pp. 165-184.

writing on them, as well as public lectures on, and the printing of, morality books.¹⁶

The new type of spirit-writing cults that appeared around the middle of the nineteenth century combined the internal structure of a Daoist cult with the conservative social reformism of the charitable society. They were driven by a millenarian sense of mission which was given pointed expression in a widely known myth. According to this story, the Jade Emperor was greatly enraged when he perceived the depths of moral depravity into which humans had fallen, and decided to bring about a great cataclysm destroying all of humanity. A group of deities led by Guan Sheng Dijun 關聖帝君 interceded, pleading with the Jade Emperor not “to burn the jade with the stones,” but to spare the good from his wrath; furthermore, they requested that the apocalypse be postponed until the gods had had a chance to exhort humans to moral reform. The Jade Emperor relented and allowed his subordinates to descend into the world by means of the planchette and attempt to transform humans by their teachings (*jiaohua* 教化). The gods then used the planchette to establish many spirit-writing cults which were to record the divine teachings and spread them by means of morality books and public lectures.

This myth gave expression to the serious disquiet among members of the literate local elite about the decline of the traditional order, and legitimized a planchette cult movement devoted to the moral reform of their age by making it their duty to assist the gods in changing the wicked ways of the world in the face of an impending apocalypse. To serve this purpose, they were not content to hold séances for their membership alone, but actively disseminated their revelations by means of public lectures to the illiterate masses. They were less concerned with the esoterics of Daoist cultivation than with the reaffirmation and promotion of traditional standards of morality. This ethical aspect had also played an important role in the Daoist cults, but in the new cults it became their very purpose of being. This difference is apparent in the books produced by both groups: while Daoist cults tended to produce hagiographies

¹⁶ On Ming and Qing dynasty charitable societies see Joanna F. Handlin Smith, “Benevolent Societies: The Reshaping of Charity During the Late Ming and Early Ch’ing,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 46 (1987), pp. 309-337; and Liang Qizi 梁其姿, *Shishan yu jiaohua: Ming-Qing de cishan zuzhi* 施善與教化—明清的慈善組織 (Taipei: Lianjing, 1997).

and collected works of their patron immortals (including the Perfected One's poetry), essays on aspects of Daoist doctrine, and moralistic treatises, the new cults' books focused exclusively on the aspect of moral exhortation; both in name and in essence, they were spirit-written morality books. The same applied to the conception of "cultivation" maintained by these cults, which came to be understood as first and foremost moral in nature: immortality was to be achieved through the cultivation of virtue rather than through mystic methods. This shift found symbolic expression in the ritual focus of many of the new cults (including the vast majority of Taiwanese phoenix halls) on the "Martial Sage" (Wusheng 武聖), Guan Sheng Dijun, the leading figure in the cults' charter myth, rather than the immortals that had been the concern of their Daoist predecessors.¹⁷

The traditional moral norms propagated by such cults are commonly perceived to be part of the Confucian tradition; taken together with their worship of Guan Sheng Dijun, this has led many of them to define themselves and be perceived by outsiders as "Confucian."¹⁸ Interestingly, however, based on my present knowledge of

¹⁷ One among these, however, Patriarch Lü, also called the Divine Lord of Reliable Succour (Fuyou Dijun 孚佑帝君), retained a prominent position. In Taiwanese phoenix halls he is usually venerated as one of their benevolent masters, though clearly in a subordinate position to Guan Di. Still, in areas of mainland China with a strong Quanzhen Daoist tradition, such as in Guangdong, Patriarch Lü continues to play a more prominent role in planchette cults than Guan Di. See Bartholomew P.M. Tsui, *Taoist Tradition and Change: The Story of the Complete Perfection Sect* (Hong Kong: Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, 1991); Shiga Ichiko 志賀市子, *Kindai Chūgoku no shamanizumu to dōkyō* 近代中国のシャマニズムと道教 (Tokyo: Bensey Publishing, 1999); Shiga Ichiko, "The Manifestations of Lüzu in Modern Guangdong and Hong Kong: The Rise and Growth of Spirit-Writing Cults," in Kohn and Roth, *Daoist Identity*, pp. 185-209. The Qunying Tan, a Sichuanese planchette cult that published the morality book *Boat for Saving Lives* (*Jiusheng chuan* 救生船) in 1863, was devoted to Fuyou Dijun, whose revelations, however, made it clear that it was his duty merely to assist in the current movement to save humanity, which was in fact led by Guan Di. Cf. Clart, "The Ritual Context of Morality Books," part I, chapter 1. For a summary of the *Boat for Saving Lives* see Jordan and Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix*, pp. 49-50.

¹⁸ As is the case for many popular deities, Guan Sheng Dijun's "denominational" pedigree is far from unambiguous. See Barend J. ter Haar, "The Rise of the Guan Yu Cult: The Taoist Connection," in Jan A.M. De Meyer and Peter M. Engelfriet (eds.), *Linked Faiths: Essays on Chinese Religion and Traditional Culture in Honour of Kristofer Schipper* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000), pp.184-204. However, through the Ming and Qing dynasties he underwent a gradual "Confucianization" and in popular consciousness came to be paired as the Martial Sage with the Literary Sage (Wensheng 文聖), that is, Confucius. The Qing dynasty tried to co-opt this Con-

the sources the term “Confucian” (Ru) appears as an explicit autonym only in the early years of the Republic, when “Confucianism” had ceased to be part of the public order and had become a teaching among others that one had to specifically affiliate with. David C. Graham reports that planchette cults in Sichuan in the 1920s and 1930s called themselves “Confucian shrines” (Rutan 儒壇).¹⁹

The Divine Teachings of the Confucian Tradition

At the same time as the Confucian shrines were active in Sichuan, an influential northern Taiwanese planchette medium, Yang Mingji 楊明機 (1899-1983), established the name “Divine Teachings of the Confucian Tradition” (Ruzong Shenjiao 儒宗神教) for the religious system shared by the group of phoenix halls with which he maintained close relations. The term Ruzong Shenjiao, or rather its full version, “Divine Teachings of the Confucian Tradition, Authentically Transmitted Ritual Order Which Can Continue the Tradition of the Dao” (Ruzong Shenjiao Daotong Keshao Zhenchuan Famen 儒宗神教道統克紹真傳法門), was first conferred on the spirit-writing cult Zhicheng Tang 智成堂 (Hall of the Completion of Wisdom) in Sanzhi 三芝 (Taipei county) in 1919 by a message from the “Celestial Emperor” (Tiandi 天帝), but was not further explained. The Zhicheng Tang’s medium Yang Mingji later moved to Taipei where he helped found the phoenix hall Palace of Assistance in Cultivation (Zanxiu Gong 贊修宮). From this new base he cooperated with the Zhicheng Tang in Sanzhi on a project of compiling a liturgical manual for general use among halls accepting the designation Ruzong Shenjiao. This book, called the *Rumen kefan* 儒門科範 (Liturgical Regulations of the Confucian School), was published in 1937 and constitutes the first formal attempt to define in an authori-

fucianized deity by bestowing on him the title “Guan Fuzi” 關夫子, which put him again in a complementary relationship with Confucius (Kong Fuzi 孔夫子). See Gunter Diesinger, *Vom General zum Gott. Kuan Yü (gest. 220 n. Chr.) und seine posthume Karriere* (Heidelberg: Haag + Herchen, 1984), pp. 250, 252.

¹⁹ David C. Graham, “Religion of the Chinese in Szechwan”, *Chinese Recorder*, 66 (1935), pp. 363-369, 421-428, 484-490, 547-555; David C. Graham, *Folk Religion in Southwest China* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1967). These “Confucian shrines” have been experiencing a limited revival in recent years. See Yu Yi 于一, “Sichuan Liangping ‘Rujiao’ zhi kaocha” 四川梁平“儒教”之考察, *Minjian zongjiao*, 2 (1996), pp. 281-290.

tative manner a set of liturgical procedures and a canon common to all phoenix halls.²⁰

The *Rumen kefan* is divided into three sections named after heaven (天部), earth (地部), and humanity (人部), respectively. The Heaven section contains prefaces and general materials on the Ruzong Shenjiao (see below), as well as the texts of memorials (*biaowen* 表文) for the birthdays of key deities and other ritual occasions. The key deities include (in this order): the Jade Emperor (Yuhuang Shangdi 玉皇上帝), the Sanguan Dadi 三官大帝, Shakyamuni Buddha, Taishang Daozu 太上道祖, Confucius (Zhisheng xianshi Kongzi 至聖先師孔子), Guanyin (Guanshiyin dashi 觀世音大士), and the Five Benevolent Lords (Wu Enzhu 五恩主: Guan Sheng Dijun, Fuyou Dijun 孚佑帝君, Siming Zhenjun 司命真君, Huoluo Lingguan 豁落靈官, and Yue Wumu Wang 岳武穆王). The Earth section contains ritual texts (*shuwen* 疏文 or *diewen* 牒文) for use in *jiao* 醮 rites and other rituals performed for the benefit of the dead. The Humanity section contains “precious invocations” (*baogao* 寶誥) for a wide variety of deities, two *jiao* liturgies, and an abbreviated version of the *Esoteric Scripture of the Limitless* (*Wuji neijing* 無極內經), a text recorded between 1907 and 1921 by a spirit-writing cult in Xichang 西昌 (Sichuan). The *Esoteric Scripture*, a commentary on the Confucian classic *Doctrine of the Mean*, was first printed and distributed by the Yunnan chapter of the sect Tongshan She 同善社.

In addition to all of this, the *Rumen kefan* contains a prefatory section featuring sacrificial charts and liturgies for the worship of Confucius, apparently copied from another ritual manual, an adaptation of these rites for use in Ruzong Shenjiao temples, and prayer and sacrificial texts in honour of many deities including Confucius, Zhizi xianshi 制字先師, Wenchang Dijun, Guan Sheng Dijun, Zhu-yi Shenjun 朱衣神君, Fuyou Dijun, Zhu Xi (Ziyang Zhuizi 紫陽朱子), Dakui Shenjun 大魁神君, and Cangjie Sheng 倉頡聖.²¹

The *Rumen kefan* (hereafter *RMKF*) is a fascinating book in that it documents a new religious movement’s attempt to create a tradition for itself. To see how it does so, let us take a closer look at how this tradition of the Ruzong Shenjiao is constructed. On reading

²⁰ See note 28 on the edition used for this essay. On Yang Mingji and his activities see Wang Zhiyu, *Taiwan de Enzhugong xinyang*, pp. 51-56; Li Shiwei, *Riju shidai Taiwan Rujiao jieshe yu huodong*, pp. 122-125.

²¹ The third edition of the *Rumen kefan* contains an additional collection of assorted ritual texts.

through the prefaces and other materials in the first (Heaven) section, it immediately becomes obvious that its Confucian identity is understood not in a narrowly sectarian sense, i.e., in distinction from Buddhism and Daoism, but in an open, syncretic manner. All writers, human and divine, stress the harmony of the three teachings, based on the unity of the Dao underlying all of them. Pride of place, however, is given to the Confucian tradition, which Buddhism and Daoism are seen to be supplementing. The Three Teachings may merge into one, but they do so via the Confucian tradition. This Confucian primacy is depicted in the prescribed set-up of the Ruzong Shenjiao altar: the supreme position is given to the Heavenly Worthy of the Limitless (Wuji Tianzun 無極天尊), the personified Dao represented on the altar by a lamp. On the next level we find, in order of precedence, Confucius, Laozi, and Shakyamuni. Below them are set the images of the Five Benevolent Lords who lead the spirit-writing cults' effort at "instructing and transforming" (*jiaohua*) the world through their planchette revelations (*RMKF*, 34-35).

The text deplores that the Confucian school traditionally did not possess a complete set of liturgies, a circumstance attributed to the fact that it focused on "teaching humans to rectify their minds and cultivate their persons, overcome their selves and return to propriety, but never concerned itself with matters such as *jiao*, thanksgiving rituals, and rituals for the salvation of the dead" (*RMKF*, 30); these ritual services had been left to the Buddhists and Daoists, the former looking after the salvation of the dead, the latter after that of the living (*RMKF*, 29). However, the performance of *zhai* 齋 and *jiao*, and of rites asking for blessings and rites for the salvation of the dead, are necessary parts of human existence and must be provided by any religious system with a claim to completeness. Now that the Benevolent Lords are making a concerted effort to heal the spiritual and cultural rifts of modern times and lead all humanity back to the single Way by means of their ecumenical teachings dispensed via the planchette, a similar unifying effort is needed for the ritual performances necessary for the conduct of human life. In response to this call the *Rumen kefan* was compiled to provide the Divine Way within the Confucian School (Rumen Shendao 儒門神道) with a ritual order (*famen* 法門) of its own (*RMKF*, 34), which will fill in those areas to which the intentions of Confucius have not yet extended (*RMKF*, 30). In his spirit-written preface, Confucius himself concurs with this supplementary function of the *Rumen kefan*, "which will help secure the future of my teachings" (*RMKF*, 22). Laozi, for his part, praises

in his own preface the marvellous usefulness of the ritual texts in this book, which “will supplement what the Way of Confucius has not exhausted, reform bad customs and cleanse depraved habits. It will be of great benefit to the ways of the world and the minds of humans and will be a summoning call for religion and society” (*RMKF*, 23).

There is a certain apologetic undertone to this justification for adding clearly non-Confucian elements such as *zhai* and *jiao* rites to a liturgical manual aimed at the Confucian school. In a number of places in the “Heaven” section this apologetic concern becomes explicit. One of these is a proclamation by Wenchang Dijun explaining that the original petition for writing the *Rumen kefan* had been held up for a long time in the celestial bureaucracy out of concern that such a work might attract criticism from the Buddhists and Daoists, who might condemn it as heretical given the traditional Confucian abstention from “matters such as *jiao*, thanksgiving rituals, and rituals for the salvation of the dead” (*RMKF*, 33). Indeed, one of the criticisms the Ruzong Shenjiao claim for a Confucian identity has frequently been, and still is, subjected to, is that Confucius himself was unwilling to speak of strange things and spirits—an attitude in blatant contrast to the phoenix halls’ central concern with gods appearing in séances where they produce revelations dealing with strange phenomena like purgatory, immortals, and karmic retribution.

This critique is answered both directly and obliquely in the *Rumen kefan*. The direct response is found in Confucius’s preface to the *Rumen kefan*, where he rejects the modern interpretation of the famous *Analects* passage that “the Master never discussed strange phenomena, physical exploits, disorder, or spiritual beings” (*Analects* 7. 20). According to the spirit-writing Confucius, the passage should be read as “the Master never discussed strange powers and disorderly spirits,” leaving open the possibility of his interest in other kinds of supernatural phenomena, such as “orthodox” deities. Obliquely, it is pointed out in many texts that modern are different from ancient times and hence require different approaches. It is the severity of the modern world’s crisis that necessitated the gods’ descent to earth in order to instruct humanity in the correct Way. The *Book of Changes* spoke of “establishing the teachings by means of the way of the gods” (*yi shendao she jiao* 以神道設教)—a canonical support for an approach that is unavoidable and at the same time uniquely appropriate under modern conditions if one wants to change the ways of

the world and the minds of human beings. This *Yijing* passage is one of the most often quoted canonical supports for the religious approach of the Ruzong Shenjiao; as a matter of fact, the “shenjiao” part of the name is directly derived from it.²²

Having established the basically syncretic nature of the *Rumen kefan*'s endeavour to complement those areas traditionally not covered by Confucianism, let us now take a look at some of the actual rituals described in the text. The book opens with two programmes for the spring and autumn sacrifices (*dingji* 丁祭) celebrated at Confucius temples. These elaborate ritual procedures are then simplified into a sacrificial rite specifically for use among Ruzong Shenjiao temples (*RMKF*, 9-11). While the basic structure of the spring and autumn sacrifices is retained, the sacrifices are reduced to three offerings of incense, three libations, and three offerings of silk. A number of elements of the original ritual, such as the offering of hair and blood and the hand washing, have been removed and are declared in the concluding paragraph to be optional (*ke you ke wu, bu bi ju ye* 可有可無, 不必拘也). The modifications are explicitly declared to be simplifications aimed at making the rite easier to learn and perform.

The placement of this simplified Confucian-style rite in the prefatory section together with the material on the full-scale spring and autumn sacrifices is significant as it makes a claim to the Ruzong Shenjiao's Confucian identity at the very beginning of its liturgical manual—a claim that needed all the more to be placed in this prominent position since the other liturgies described in the manual are clearly derived from non-Confucian traditions. The rituals for

²² *Book of Changes*, *guan* 觀 hexagram. See variant translations in Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes (trsl.), *The I Ching or Book of Changes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 486; Z. D. Sung, *The Text of Yi king (and Its Appendixes): Chinese Original with English Translation* (Shanghai: China Modern Education Co., 1935; reprint: Taipei, Wenhua tushu gongsi, 1983), pp. 91-92. Throughout the history of the Taiwanese phoenix halls, the problem of Confucius' avoidance of “spirits” has been dealt with in a variety of creative ways. A common strategy was to look for instances of shamanistic or divinatory activity that could be tied to the ancient sages. See for example Chen Nanyao 陳南要 (Chen Jing'an 靜庵), *Ruzong Shenjiao de kaozheng* 儒宗神教的考證 (Taichung: Luanyou zazhishe, 1974), pp. 28-29. In 1980 a particularly interesting approach was taken in a planchette revelation that credited Confucius with the invention of spirit-writing and the formation of the first spirit-writing cult, consisting of himself and his disciples—a nice illustration of the planchette's ability to produce “instant mythology.” Cf. Clart, “The Ritual Context of Morality Books,” pp. 238-240.

the salvation of the dead (*RMKF*, 192-228) are copied from a ritual manual of the Longhua sect, one tradition among Taiwan's so-called "vegetarian halls" (*zhaitang* 齋堂).²³ The *jiao* and *zhai* rituals in the *Rumen kefan*'s "Earth" section are obviously derived from a Daoist model whose exact textual source I have been unable to trace, but which (if it can ever be identified precisely) will probably turn out to be a ritual manual circulating among local Daoist priests with whom Yang Mingji and his collaborators would have had contact.²⁴

If the bulk of the liturgical material contained in the *Rumen kefan* is of Daoist and popular sectarian origin, does this mean that the Confucian material in the prefatory section and the claims to Confucian heritage made in the "Heaven" section are merely a ploy intended to provide a veneer of Confucian orthodoxy to a syncretic sect? To be sure, the authors of the *Rumen kefan* maintain an explicitly syncretic religious worldview. Within this worldview, however, Confucianism is not placed on the same level as Daoism and Buddhism. The authors' claim of "taking Confucianism as their tradition" (*yi Ru wei zong* 以儒爲宗) is meant quite seriously and is expressed in the arrangement of the Ruzong Shenjiao altar, in the emphasis on Confucian themes in the prefatory and "Heaven" sections of the book, and by the inclusion of the *Esoteric Scripture of the Limitless* in the "Humanity" section. Furthermore, it needs to be kept in mind that

²³ There is significant overlap between the *RMKF* versions of the rituals for the salvation of the dead and those found in the Longhua sect's manual *Longhua keyi* 龍華科儀 (Taichung: Minde Tang, 1992). However, the *Longhua keyi*—or rather the earlier *Dacheng zhengjiao mingzong baojuan* 大乘正教明宗寶卷, from which this section of the *Longhua keyi* was compiled—was not the direct source for the *RMKF* editors. A better candidate is another manual widespread among Longhua vegetarian halls, the *Xianghua keyi* 香花科儀. A description of its relevant section, which I found in a secondary source, makes it appear likely that in fact it was one version of this manual that served as the principal source for the *RMKF*'s liturgies for the departed. See Lin Meirong 林美容 and Zu Yunhui 祖運輝, "Zaijia Fojiao: Taiwan Zhanghua Chaotian Tang suo chuan de Longhua Pai Zhajiao xiankuang" 在家佛教：臺灣彰化朝天堂所傳的龍華派齋教現況, in Jiang Canteng 江燦騰 and Wang Chien-Ch'uan 王見川 (eds.), *Taiwan Zhajiao de lishi guancha yu zhanwang* 臺灣齋教的歷史觀察與展望 (Taipei: Xin wenfeng, 1994), pp. 191-252.

²⁴ Some of the "precious invocations" included in the *Rumen kefan* are identical with *baogao* found in the Quanzhen Daoist liturgical manual *Taishang xuanmen risong* 太上玄門日誦 (Taipei: Zhonghua Minguo Daojiao hui Taibei shi fenhui, 1986). Various ritual passages in the *RMKF* are also found in Ôfuchi Ninji's collection of Daoist liturgical texts, but I have not been able to find an exact match for a complete ritual. See Ôfuchi Ninji 大淵忍爾 et al., *Chûgokujin no shûkyô girei* 中国人の宗教儀禮 (Tokyo: Fukutake shoten, 1983).

the various Daoist and Longhua rituals are performed only on demand, whereas the Confucian sacrificial rite precedes the spirit-writing séance, in other words, the central and regularly scheduled ritual event of a phoenix hall. Thus, the Confucian components still are the most visible, the “trademark” elements in the liturgical repertoire of the Ruzong Shenjiao, and they serve to distinguish that repertoire clearly from the Daoist priests and the Longhua sectarians from whom a good deal of it was borrowed.

This distinctiveness in liturgical style is a result of the Ruzong Shenjiao’s roots in the spirit-writing cult movement begun in Taiwan in the late 19th century by members of the local gentry, whose dress and liturgical preference for a dignified official/Confucian style were continued by phoenix halls in the Japanese period. By that time the membership structure had changed significantly: the traditional gentry was dying out and its leadership position was taken over by local elites made up of merchants, entrepreneurs, prosperous farmers, and school teachers; but they continued to adhere to the inherited Confucian style for, I believe, two reasons. First, it provided an opportunity to partake of and support what they saw as China’s core tradition in the face of growing pressures for “Japanization” from the colonial administration;²⁵ in this respect it is particularly significant that teachers of classical Chinese, who operated private schools (*shufang* 書房) outside the Japanese public school system, played an active role in phoenix halls.²⁶ Secondly,

²⁵ “Self-conscious popular participation in the Chinese ‘great tradition’” continues to be a major motivating factor among phoenix disciples in Taiwan today: see Jordan and Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix*, p. 8.

²⁶ On the relationship between Taiwanese phoenix halls and traditional schools (*shufang*) and academies (*shuyuan* 書院), and the link of *Hanwen* 漢文 (classical Chinese in literary Hokkien pronunciation) education with the Japanese-period phoenix hall movement, see Sung Kwang-yu (Song Guangyu) 宋光宇 and Li Shyh-Wei (Li Shiwei) 李世偉, “Taiwan de shufang, shuyuan ji qi shanshu zhuzuo huodong—cong Qingdai dao xianzai” 臺灣的書房、書院及其善書著作活動—從清代到現在, in *Di yi jie Taiwan Ruxue yanjiu guoji xueshu yantaohui lunwenji* (Vol. 2) 第一屆臺灣儒教研究國際學術研討會論文集 (下冊) (Tainan: Tainan Shi Wenhua Zhongxin, 1997), pp. 1-75; and Li, *Riju shidai Taiwan Rujiao jieshe yu huodong*, pp. 369 ff. The preservation of *Hanwen* continued to be a concern for phoenix halls after retrocession under Guomindang policies to discourage the use of the Taiwanese dialect (Jordan and Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix*, p. 13). The phoenix hall which was at the centre of my field research—the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang in Taichung (see below)—at first sight seemed to put less emphasis on this issue as it conducted its séances in Mandarin. However, every now and then a group of younger phoenix disciples would gather around the temple’s chairman and have him explain to them

their Confucian trademark provided Ruzong Shenjiao halls with a corporate identity that allowed them to distinguish their ritual services from those of other providers and enabled them to compete with the latter—even while adopting their liturgies. This became most relevant in the Ruzong Shenjiao's competition with Longhua vegetarian halls (*zhaitang*) that in some areas of Taiwan have traditionally held a significant share of the market for death rituals. Being firmly identified as Confucian, spirit-writing cults could offer to perform Longhua rituals without blurring their own corporate identity and weakening their competitive position towards the Longhua sect.²⁷

The Hall of the Sainly Sages and the *Sacred Statutes of the Phoenix Halls*

Yang Mingji's efforts to unify Taiwanese spirit-writing cults under the banner of the Ruzong Shenjiao were not immediately successful. At first only a limited group of interrelated phoenix halls in northern and central Taiwan accepted Ruzong Shenjiao as their appellation and the *Rumen kefan* as their guidebook. After the retrocession of Taiwan in 1945, the label of Ruzong Shenjiao attracted wider adherence and the *Rumen kefan* went through two revisions that incorporated new material and introduced the Eternal Mother (Wuji Laomu 無極老母) to the Ruzong Shenjiao pantheon—a result of Yang Mingji's intensive contacts with Yiguan Dao 一貫道 missionaries.²⁸ In 1978 representatives of over five hundred phoenix halls

the proper way of chanting classical poetry in literary Hokkien. The temple's chairman and founder is the classically well-trained son of a Japanese-period *shufang* teacher in the traditional-minded harbour town of Lukang 鹿港.

²⁷ In his study of a Nantou County phoenix hall in the 1970s, Gary Seaman stresses the importance of the cult's group for performing funeral services (Seaman, *Temple Organization in a Chinese Village*, p. 69). In Nantou county this was a market in which Longhua vegetarian halls had traditionally played an important role. Unfortunately, Seaman does not name the liturgical manual used by this phoenix hall, but as the hall seems to have been part of the Ruzong Shenjiao network it is not unlikely that it would have used the *Rumen kefan*.

²⁸ The various versions of the *Rumen kefan* were reprinted several times by different temples. In my own collection I have a 1973 printing of the 3rd edition, distributed by the Keming Gong 克明宮 in Zhushan 竹山 (Nantou county), one of the phoenix halls involved in the compilation of the original *Rumen kefan* in the 1930's. My copy of the 2nd edition was published in 1973 by the Fuxing Gong Daoyuan Tang 福興宮道元堂 in Douliu 斗六 (Yunlin county). In addition to these

decided to set up an association called “The Republic of China Assembly of the Divine Teachings of the Confucian School” (Zhonghua Minguo Ruzong Shenjiao Hui 中華民國儒宗神教會), thus formally establishing Ruzong Shenjiao as a general designation for the religious system represented by a large portion of Taiwanese phoenix halls.²⁹

By that time, however, the creative impulse had passed from the older, rural halls that had first formulated the Ruzong Shenjiao to a spate of “new-style” halls, the most influential of which were located in the central Taiwanese city of Taichung: they were the Shengxian Tang 聖賢堂, the Chongsheng Tang 重生堂, the Shengde Baogong 聖德寶宮, and the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang 武廟明正堂. The Shengxian Tang, first founded in 1962, was the pioneer from which the other halls mentioned above split off at different times. In the liturgical realm, the Shengxian Tang had a major impact on the Ruzong Shenjiao by designing in 1979 a new ritual manual, the *Sacred Statutes of the Phoenix Halls* (*Luantang shengdian* 鸞堂聖典, hereafter *LTSD*), which was to replace the by now rather dated *Rumen kefan*.³⁰ Written in simple, vernacular language, the *Luantang shengdian* reduced the number of ritual patterns to two: one for regular spirit-writing séances (*LTSD*, 12-13) and one for special sacrifices, such as on the birthday of Guan Sheng Dijun (*LTSD*, 24-

editions which were distributed free of charge at temples, I also discovered in a Taichung bookstore a commercial edition published in 1988 in Tainan under the title *Zhengzong daomen keyi* 正宗道門科儀 that sold for NT\$200.

²⁹ This was just one of several attempts to establish an umbrella organization for Taiwanese phoenix halls. In 1969 already an association called the “Taiwan Provincial Association of the Sagely Teachings” (Taiwan sheng Shengjiaohui 台灣省聖教會) had been founded. After a long period of dormancy it metamorphosed into a new association that registered in 2000 with the central government in Taipei as the “Chinese Association of Confucian Teachings” (Zhongguo Rujiaohui 中國儒教會). See Li Shyh-Wei (Li Shiwei), “Zhongguo Rujiaohui’ yu ‘Dayi Jiao’” 「中國儒教會」與「大易教」, *Taiwan zongjiao yanjiu tongxun*, 1 (2000), pp. 93-99. Apparently in the same year a separate association named “Chinese Association of the Sage Guan’s Divine Teachings of the Confucian Tradition” (Zhongguo Guan Sheng Ruzong Shenjiaohui 中國關聖儒宗神教會) was also set up. See *Shengxiu zazhi* 聖修雜誌 (Yunlin xian Kouhu xiang Pu’nan cun: Shengxiu zazhishe, 2000, reprint of 1999 edition). Such attempts at unifying phoenix halls in higher-level associations have so far been short-lived. It is probably the autonomy of each phoenix hall and its legitimation through its own oracles that tend to counteract any upwards delegation of power to an island-wide representative leadership for phoenix halls.

³⁰ See *Luantang shengdian*, Taichung: Shengxian zazhishe, 1989.

26). Both are much simplified and stripped down versions of the liturgies described in the *Rumen kefan*, which in turn had been simplifications of a more complex original model. However, the *Luantang shengdian* versions still retain the basic liturgical structure marking them out as Confucian. The Daoist and Longhua rituals of the *Rumen kefan* were omitted completely, as the new urban halls tended not to involve themselves with the performance of public or private rituals in the local community.³¹ Instead they saw their mission as twofold: to provide a place for phoenix disciples to cultivate themselves, and to work for the moral betterment of society as a whole through the writing, printing, and distribution of morality books. The self-understanding of the “new-style” phoenix halls as defined by the Shengxian Tang is perhaps best illustrated by the *Luantang shengdian*’s set of ten “hall regulations” (*Luantang tanggui* 鸞堂堂規) to be adopted by all Ruzong Shenjiao halls:

Hall Regulations for Phoenix Halls

- (1) This hall takes Confucianism as its tradition, and the gods as [the source of its] teachings (本堂以儒爲宗、以神爲教). It relies on the flying phoenix to awaken the human mind. It uses filial piety, brotherly love, loyalty, and trustworthiness as the basis of establishing the self, and propriety, righteousness, frugality, and the sense of shame as the root of purifying it. All who enter under the phoenix as phoenix disciples must uphold and practise [these principles].
- (2) All phoenix disciples of this hall should be tidy and neat in their dress, courteous and dignified. When they enter or leave the hall, they must perform three bows to give proper weight to propriety and ceremonial.
- (3) All phoenix disciples of this hall should obey the instructions of the sages, respect their teachers, honour the Way, and be deferential to their superiors. Phoenix friends should be close to each other, help each other in difficulties, admonish each other over their failings, and get along harmoniously.
- (4) This hall takes it as its mission to proclaim and promote the morality of Confucius and Mencius, to revive Chinese culture, to guide the lives of the people, and to lead people towards goodness so that they may be good citizens.
- (5) This hall pursues absolutely no commercial or heterodox purposes. It

³¹ However, the *Luantang shengdian* still provides a selection of patterns for memorials and petitions to be used in such rituals. These are part of a collection of ritual texts compiled in 1972 by the phoenix hall Xingxiu Tang 醒修堂 in the northern harbour city of Keelung, which was appended *in toto* to the *Luantang shengdian*. In the 1970s this collection circulated separately under the title *Prayer Texts for the Sages, Buddhas, Immortals, and Deities* (*Shengfo xian shen zhuwen* 聖佛仙神祝文, Keelung: Xingxiu Tang, 1976).

- does not permit to borrow the name of the gods while committing evil. [Instead] one should rely on the name of the gods to do good.
- (6) All phoenix disciples of this hall should obey the laws of the nation, control themselves and be content with their lot. They are severely forbidden to engage in falsehood, lustfulness, gambling, and robbery. They are not allowed to stir up arguments and sow ill feeling by harbouring grudges.
 - (7) At séances, the phoenix disciples should assist with piety and sincerity. When the sages and deities ascend the phoenix or when the sagely instructions are lectured upon they must stand at attendance quietly and with reverence, and listen respectfully.
 - (8) All mediums of the hall carry the duty to proclaim transformation on behalf of Heaven. They should be true and consistent from beginning to end, exert themselves, create merit, uphold and practise [the divine teachings] through their whole life, without ever turning their back on their vow. If they deliberately commit violations and stray from the proper path, they will bring Heaven's punishment upon themselves.
 - (9) All phoenix disciples of this hall must create merit and work towards their karmic rewards, cultivate their self and establish their character. They must exhaust their sincerity and rely on the gods to cancel their transgressions and bestow blessings, so as to avoid the cycle of birth and death. Do not speak of useless efforts without benefit, or abandon your resolve and engage in wilful conduct, which will [only] result in sorrow after your death.
 - (10) If phoenix disciples of this hall violate its regulations or do not attend at the hall for one full year, a memorial will be submitted to Southern Heaven that their phoenix register be annulled, unless there existed circumstances that were beyond the control of the phoenix disciple. (*LTSD*, 26-27)

If we try to extract a belief system from these regulations, I think it may be summarized as follows. It is the mission of phoenix halls to promote the Confucian teachings. These teachings are the “tradition” (*zong*) in which the phoenix halls stand and they represent the core of Chinese culture. Their propagation will therefore lead to the revival of Chinese culture. The core of the Confucian teachings is “the morality of Confucius and Mencius,” more specifically the Eight Virtues (*bade* 八德) listed in Article One. The halls are the means by which the general population is guided toward the good and the phoenix disciple establishes and purifies his self, does good, creates merit, and ultimately avoids the cycle of birth and death.³²

³² It is interesting to note that the *Luantang shengdian* offers two affiliations for phoenix halls. On the one hand, there is the Confucian claim as affirmed in the *Hall Regulations*; but elsewhere in the manual the Daoist origin of the technique of spirit-writing is acknowledged and the Phoenix Teachings are categorized as Daoism's “Branch of the Way of Accumulating Goodness” (*jishan zhi daopai* 積善之道派) (*LTSD*,

If we go beyond the *Luantang shengdian* and examine other writings of the Shengxian Tang, we easily find explicit statements of this programme:

That this hall is called a “phoenix hall” means that it adheres to the Confucian tradition and the teachings of the gods. Therefore it is called “Divine Teachings of the Confucian Tradition.” Because it is a sacred place that has received a mandate from Heaven to transform living beings, save the world, deliver the masses, and admonish people to do good, the following name was bestowed upon it: “Taichung Hall of Sages and Worthies, Phoenix Hall under the Direct Administration of Southern Heaven” (Taizhong nantian zhixia luantang Shengxian Tang 台中南天直轄鸞堂聖賢堂).

Our teachings have a long history, being China’s orthodox teachings of the Sages. Setting up a sand-tray and using a peach branch as a pen, we use the gods’ numinous power to wield the phoenix and expound the teachings. We write poetry and prose to warn the human mind to keep the three relationships and the five constant virtues, to obey the four bonds and the eight virtues, to reform heresies and heterodox doctrines, to extirpate heterodox teachings, to break superstition and return to the correct Way. Thus the phoenix school wields the phoenix to promote widely the Way and the virtue of Confucius and Mencius, calling up the spirit of our people, lovingly protecting the nation, and exhorting the masses to abandon evil and follow the good. To help out where the government’s efforts at establishing order and peace do not reach is this hall’s main objective.³³

To better assess the Confucian content of this programme, in the following section I will try to expand this nutshell version of the Ruzong Shenjiao belief system by referring to a doctrinal summa produced by the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang, one of the Taichung cult groups derived from the Shengxian Tang.

13). This interpretation has been adopted as its own by the Daoist Association of the Republic of China, which describes the branch in question as consisting of those who “rely on the *Taishang ganying pian* and the *Wenchang Dijun gongguo ge* for their cultivation of the Way.” See Zhonghua Minguo Daojiaohui 中華民國道教會, *Women dui Daojiao ying you de renshi* 我們對道教應有的認識 (Taichung: Cide Cihui Tang 慈德慈惠堂, 1991), p.66. Not only does the *Luantang shengdian* acknowledge the Daoist link somewhat grudgingly (“it cannot be denied that”), but in the next sentence it immediately swings back to the perceived Confucian roots of the phoenix hall teachings. What we seem to be looking at here is a compromise between two factions at the Shengxian Tang, one insisting on the Ruzong Shenjiao tradition, the other arguing for a Daoist affiliation. One of the persons advocating the Daoist position was a Shengxian Tang phoenix disciple who was heavily involved with its magazine, *Shengxian zazhi* 聖賢雜誌, and at the same time served as a functionary of the Taichung Daoist Association whose office is located next door to the Shengxian Tang (interview, 23 April 1994).

³³ *Shengxian zhenli* 聖賢真理 (Taichung: Shengxian zazhishe, 1989), vol. 1, p. 3.

The Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy and the *Mysterious Meaning of the Celestial Way*

Our emphasis on the *Rumen kefan* and the *Luantang shengdian* as ritual manuals has led us so far to consider the issue of popular Confucianism mainly as one of liturgical style, rather than of doctrinal content. While the use of such a style in itself would be sufficient to accept the self-designation “Confucian,” I would like to push the question further and ask whether the belief system of the Ruzong Shenjiao can be characterized as Confucian as well, and if so, in what sense.

In a very general sense, phoenix disciples see their religious endeavour as Confucian because of its strong focus on moral cultivation, i.e., on the cultivation of the traditional Eight Virtues considered as the essence of the “morality of Kongzi and Mengzi,” as we just saw in the *Hall Regulations for Phoenix Halls*. This emphasis was one of the key features that distinguished the new spirit-writing movement of the nineteenth century from its Daoist predecessors: the belief that the only precondition for immortality was the merit accruing from moral conduct, without any need for meditation or esoteric practices. This view was very nicely put in a revelation by the guardian deity of a mid-nineteenth century spirit-writing cult in Sichuan, who proclaimed that he “had not refined the golden elixir and had not practised meditation,” but still “had been made a deity because of [the merit accruing from his] public lecturing.”³⁴ The same primacy of moral cultivation is still advocated by Taiwanese phoenix halls today. In fact, it is central to their self-understanding and could not be compromised without abandoning their denominational identity.³⁵

The question that arises here is, of course: Is moral cultivation or even the concept of the Eight Virtues specifically Confucian? From an “emic” perspective they are indeed affirmed to be so, but the historian of religion would have no difficulty demonstrating that we find equivalent ideas in both Daoism and Buddhism. And in fact, if

³⁴ *Jiusheng chuan* 救生船, *leixu*, p. 1a. See Clart, “The Ritual Context of Morality Books,” p. 33.

³⁵ See my discussion of this issue with reference to the relationship of Taiwanese phoenix halls with the sectarian Yiguan Dao: Philip Clart, “The Phoenix and the Mother: The Interaction of Spirit-Writing Cults and Popular Sects in Taiwan,” *Journal of Chinese Religions*, 25 (1997), pp. 1-32.

we look at phoenix hall writings we find the project of cultivating the Eight Virtues shot through with ethical concerns of clearly non-Confucian origin, such as vegetarianism and a return to simplicity. It might therefore be that the morality whose cultivation is the concern of phoenix disciples is less specifically Confucian in nature than really a syncretic ethical consensus, a “traditional Chinese morality” agreed upon in the sphere of popular religion. Such an interpretation would account for the obviously syncretic nature of the phoenix hall belief system, which is openly acknowledged in spirit-written texts; but it does not do justice to the phoenix disciples’ continued insistence on anchoring this syncretism in the Confucian tradition (*Ruzong*)—an insistence that is not merely rhetorical but is followed up with systematic reference to Confucian canonical writings.

In his book *Transformations of the Confucian Way*, John Berthrong defines a Confucian in the following way:

Confucians become Confucians by the reading, interpreting, and living out of these canonical texts. The range of how they understand these texts runs from the purely pragmatic to the obviously spiritual; in fact, for many Confucians none of this reading makes any sense at all without the religious encounter with the ultimate or transcendent referent indicated in the text by terms such as the “Tao” or the “Supreme Ultimate.” [...]

To be Confucian, let me stress again, means being dedicated to the canon and its interpretation rather than to any one philosophical or religious reading of the text.³⁶

Creative interaction with the canon is thus a defining feature of a Confucian; and we do find it among phoenix halls as well as sectarian traditions. Most spirit-written exegeses of the Confucian canon limit their attention to two texts: the *Doctrine of the Mean* and the *Great Learning*, as these fairly brief texts are believed to contain the quintessence of the Confucian Way. The reader may remember that the *Rumen kefan* included a spirit-written commentary on the *Doctrine of the Mean* (the *Esoteric Scripture of the Limitless*), which was produced in the early years of the Republic by a Sichuanese spirit-writing cult with links to the sectarian Tongshan She. Two other spirit-written commentaries in my collection are (1) the *Verifications and Explanations of the Great Learning* (*Daxue zhengshi* 大學證釋), a text linked to the sectarian Jiushi Xinjiao 救世新教 and first published around 1926;³⁷ and (2) the *New Commentary in Simple Language on the*

³⁶ John H. Berthrong, *Transformations of the Confucian Way* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), pp. 6-7.

³⁷ *Daxue zhengshi*, Taipei: Shijie Hong Wanzi hui Taiwan sheng fenhui 世界紅卍字會台灣省分會, no date.

Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean (*Xue-Yong qianyan xinzhū* 學庸淺言新註), datable to 1947.³⁸ These texts are still being reprinted and circulate among temples and sectarian groups in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and overseas Chinese communities.³⁹

For the purposes of the present article, I shall focus on a text produced within the Taiwanese Ruzong Shenjiao tradition, an extremely influential doctrinal work that is widely regarded as possibly the most ambitious summary of phoenix hall beliefs: this is the *Mysterious Meaning of the Celestial Way* (*Tiandao aoyi* 天道奧義), a spirit-written work produced between 1981 and 1982 at the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang in Taichung.⁴⁰

The Wumiao Mingzheng Tang 武廟明正堂 (Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy) is an offshoot of the Shengxian Tang. After its separation from the mother temple in 1976, it was influenced by the Yellow Emperor Religion (Xuan Yuan Jiao 軒轅教)⁴¹ and by the Yiguan Dao; but in its conception of the Dao and its cultivation it still remained squarely within the Ruzong Shenjiao tradition.⁴² This is evident in the following definition of the “Phoenix School,” put forward in 1980, which breathes the same spirit as the earlier programmatic statement of the Shengxian Tang:

The Phoenix School (Luanmen 鸞門) is also called School of the Sages (Shengmen 聖門), Confucian School (Rumen 儒門), or halls of the Sages (*shengtang* 聖堂), or phoenix halls. The Phoenix School carries on [the work of] Heaven in response to the cyclical movement [of the ages]. Taking Confucianism as its tradition and the gods as [the source of its] teachings, it wields the phoenix

³⁸ *Xue-Yong qianyan xinzhū*, Hong Kong: no publisher, 1991.

³⁹ For studies of these texts see Chung Yun-ying (Zhong Yunying) 鍾雲鶯, “Shilun ‘Xue-Yong qianyan xinzhū’ dui ‘gewu zhizhi’ zhi quanjie” 試論《學庸淺言新註》對「格物致知」之詮解, *Zhonghua xueyuan*, 53 (1999), pp. 203-226; and *Id.*, *Minguo yilai minjian jiaopai Daxue Zhongyong sixiang zhi yanjiu* 民國以來民間教派大學中庸思想之研究 (Taipei: Xuanton g wenhua, 2001).

⁴⁰ *Tiandao aoyi*, Taichung: Luanyou zazhishe 鸞友雜誌社, 1984. For the first discussion of this work in the scholarly literature, see Zheng Zhiming 鄭志明, “Pinglun Taiwan minjian luanshu *Tiandao aoyi* de xingshang lilun” 評論臺灣民間鸞書《天道奧義》的形上理論, in *Id.*, *Taiwan minjian zongjiao lunji* 臺灣民間宗教論集 (Taipei: Taiwan Xuesheng shuju, 1984), pp. 151-173. My approach differs from that of Zheng in its narrower focus on the *Tiandao aoyi*’s interpretation of works in the Confucian canon.

⁴¹ On the Xuan Yuan Jiao see Christian Jochim, “Flowers, Fruit, and Incense Only: Elite versus Popular in Taiwan’s Religion of the Yellow Emperor,” *Modern China*, 16:1 (1990), pp. 3-38.

⁴² For more detail on the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang see Clart, “The Ritual Context of Morality Books,” and *Id.*, “The Phoenix and the Mother.”

to arouse the human mind to abandon evil and follow the good, to reform heterodoxy, to extirpate superstition, and to return to the correct Way. Therefore the Phoenix School's teachings expound the true principles of the Celestial Way to enlighten the human mind, so that [humans] may rectify themselves, establish virtue, do good, cultivate themselves, save others, transform vulgar habits, change the customs, and create a wholesome and happy world.

Thus, all rituals of the Phoenix School are derived from the Confucian teaching of rites. Entering the Phoenix School as a disciple under the phoenix is just like enrolling in a school (*xuetang* 學堂) as a student; [the student] has to honour the teachers and respect the Way. Honouring the teachers means honouring and respecting the sages and gods as teachers, obeying their instructions, studying the teaching of rites, researching the sagely instructions, and taking them as examples of virtue in one's personal cultivation. Respecting the Way means respecting the principles of the Way of the sages and emphasizing morality so that one's conduct does not swerve from its prescribed track and one's mind is correct and without heterodoxy.⁴³

In 1982 the blossoming cult group published the *Tiandao aoyi* (hereafter *TDAI*) as a summary of its beliefs. The revealing deity was the Eternal Mother (Wuji Laomu), a clear indication of Yiguan Dao influence on this phoenix hall, also apparent in the text's incorporation of the characteristic sectarian mythology centring on the Eternal Mother. But this mythological theme is integrated into a more fundamental structure derived from the exegesis of a number of classical texts, including most prominently the *Doctrine of the Mean*, the *Daode jing*, the *Great Learning*, the *Book of Changes*, and the *Analects*.

The purpose of the book is to expound the Way of Heaven (*tian-dao*), that is to say, both the nature of Heaven and the human obligation to walk its path. Among the various classical sources referred to, the *Doctrine of the Mean* and the *Daode jing* are the crucial texts, the *Daode jing* supplying a model of the cosmos and the *Doctrine of the Mean* the integration of human existence in that cosmos. The *Tiandao aoyi* is divided into 24 chapters, each dealing with one important issue or concept. Within the limitations of the present article I will focus on the work's use of canonical terminology, in particular as derived from the *Doctrine of the Mean*. Cheng Yi's labelling of the *Zhongyong* as the "central way" (*xinfa* 心法)⁴⁴ of Confucianism is, I

⁴³ "Dahan tiansheng" 大漢天聲, *Luanyou* 鸞友, 267, p. 9. This definition was reiterated in very similar phrases two years later (*Luanyou*, 324, p. 19). Both the Shengxian Tang and the Mingzheng Tang statements were revealed by the same medium, Valiant Stylus (Yongbi 勇筆), who had gone over to the Mingzheng Tang in 1976.

⁴⁴ As translated by Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 97.

believe, partly responsible for its great popularity with popular religious virtuosi, who throughout late Imperial China and to the present day have shown a preoccupation with identifying esoteric formulae as the *xinfa* of ultimate truth. The *Tiandao aoyi* is no exception as it constructs a “line of transmission of the Way” (*daotong* 道統) as a line of transmission of a Confucian *xinfa*:

When the Way of Heaven was about to be transmitted in the world, High Heaven first sent down and gave birth to the Yellow Emperor, the sagely ruler Xuanyuan (Shengzhu Xuanyuan Huangdi 聖主軒轅黃帝). The Yellow Emperor battled Yuwang 榆罔 and vanquished the wizard Chiyou 蚩尤. He unified the empire and founded the Middle Kingdom. During a life of more than 300 years, he cultivated the Way of Heaven for more than 100 years and attained the Way; at Dinghu 鼎湖 he mounted a dragon and ascended to Heaven in broad daylight.

The Yellow Emperor passed the throne and the tradition of the Way on to his sagely grandson Zhuanxu 顓頊. Instructing him, he said: “There is a Great Circle (*dayuan* 大圓) above and a Great Square (*daju* 大矩) below. If you are able to make them your model, you will be as father and mother to the people.”⁴⁵ The Great Circle is Heaven, the Great Square Earth. If one emulates Heaven and Earth, one can put the people in order.

If we trace back the Tradition of the Way, we find that it always has had its [legitimate] source. Ever since the Yellow Emperor Xuanyuan attained the Celestial Way and ascended to Heaven, the Tradition of the Way was continually passed on down to the Emperor Yao 堯帝, who passed it on to the Emperor Shun 舜帝. Shun passed it on to the Emperor Yu 禹帝. Yu passed it on to King Tang 湯王. King Tang passed it on to King Wen 文王. King Wen passed it on to the Duke of Zhou 周公. The Duke of Zhou passed it on to Laozi 老子. Laozi passed it on to Confucius 孔子. Confucius passed it on to Zengzi 曾子. Zengzi passed it on to Zisi 子思. Zisi passed it on to Mencius 孟子. From Mencius onwards it was continually passed on in one line until today. In the period from the Yellow Emperor to Emperor Yao the true explication of the central method of the Heavenly Way was [formulated in] the four-character phrase: “Sincerely holding fast the mean” (*yunzhi juezhong* 允執厥中).⁴⁶ From Emperor Shun onwards the true explication of the central method of the Heavenly Way was [formulated in] the sixteen-character phrase: “The mind of man is restless (prone to err) (*renxin wei wei* 人心惟危); its affinity for the right way is small (*daoxin wei wei* 道心惟微). Be discriminating, be undivided (*wei jingwei yi* 惟精惟一), that you may sincerely hold fast the Mean (*yunzhi juezhong*).”⁴⁷ Therefore, later generations called this

⁴⁵ Cf. *Lü shi chunqiu*, “Xuyi 序意”. Translation by John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, *The Annals of Lü Buwei* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 272.

⁴⁶ *Book of Documents*, “Da Yu mo” 大禹謨. Translation by James Legge, *The Chinese Classics* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), vol. 3, pp. 61-62.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

sixteen-character phrase the “sixteen-character true explication of the central method of the Heavenly Way” (*Tiandao xinfa shiliu zhenquan* 天道心法十六真詮). Thus China’s traditional culture continues the tradition of the Heavenly Way. (*TDAY*, 15-16)

In its general outline this version of the *daotong* follows Zhu Xi’s preface to the *Zhongyong* and accords with Neo-Confucian *daotong* thought. The major exception is the insertion of Laozi as the teacher of Confucius, thus expressing the harmony between Daoism and Confucianism stipulated by the *Tiandao aoyi*’s syncretic approach and justifying its combination of both the *Daode jing* and the *Zhongyong* as main sources. Further on in the same chapter, the *daotong* is extended to the present day, where it has been received by the “Phoenix School” (Luanmen 鸞門) which “transforms humans by relying on the teachings of the gods, and guides people’s hearts toward the good by means of the flying phoenix.” (*TDAY*, 17)

As the carrier of the Confucian *xinfa* the *Zhongyong* becomes the vehicle for human salvation, which is charted as the Way of Heaven, the “bridge between Heaven and Humanity” (*TDAY*, 22). The bridge is needed because although humans are descended from Heaven as the children of the Eternal Mother, they have become mired in selfishness and depravity and do not see that they can return to their original heavenly home. The bridging of the gulf between Heaven and Humanity is couched alternately in Daoist terms (pursuit of immortality) and sectarian terms (return of the original spirits to the Eternal Mother); but for charting the path that leads back to Heaven the author of the *Tiandao aoyi* has recourse again to the Confucian tradition. “Innate knowledge” (*liangzhi* 良知) and “innate ability” (*liangneng* 良能) are defined as the human potential to bridge the divide between Heaven and Humanity; of the two, innate ability is privileged over innate knowledge as deeds count more than thoughts, and practical merit accumulation more than spiritual practice (*TDAY*, ch. 4). With this heavenly endowment as their nature—the famous opening sentence of the *Zhongyong* is cited several times—humans are ready to embark on the Way of Heaven, which involves prominently the threefold practice of “nature” (*xing-gong* 性功), “teaching” (*jiaogong* 教功), and “concentration” (*qugong* 曲功), derived from chapters 21 to 23 of the *Zhongyong*:

The *Doctrine of the Mean* is a heavenly book. It says, “When sincerity arises from intelligence, it is due to instruction. But if there is sincerity, there will be intelligence, and if there is intelligence, there will be sincerity” (自明誠謂

之教，誠則明矣，明則誠矣).⁴⁸ Therefore the disciple of the Way has three routes, namely, the exercises of “nature,” “instruction,” and “concentration.”

1. The exercise of one’s nature (*xingong*): “Fulfilling principle and one’s nature to arrive at destiny” (窮理盡性，以至於命).⁴⁹ The exercise of one’s nature is important in cultivating the Heavenly Way. “When intelligence arises from sincerity, it is due to one’s nature”⁵⁰—this refers to sudden enlightenment, [such as happens when] hearing one word, one becomes awakened to the Way. Confucius’ hearing of the Way in the morning also is a kind of sudden enlightenment.⁵¹ [The capacity for] sudden enlightenment is mostly congenital. Those with the “roots of the Way” [only need to hear] one word and are greatly enlightened and directly penetrate Heaven. This of course is fast and convenient, but it cannot be forced.

2. The exercise of instruction (*jiaogong*): “When sincerity arises from intelligence, it is due to instruction.” [This refers to] using a method of cultivation and nourishment to recover numinous brightness. “Numinous brightness” is the splendour of the Way. The gleam of spiritual brightness [signifies] advancement on the Way. The exercises of cultivating the Way all [consist in] cultivating brightness, with an emphasis on lessening selfishness and diminishing desires. If human nature is darkened, one [walks] the way of the demons and falls into purgatory. For the cultivation of the Way a discipline has been fixed that should be kept by the disciples of the Way. By means of this [discipline one can] rectify the mind and expunge selfish desires. When desires are pure, bright virtue appears. Therefore the exercises of cultivating the Way depend on “brightness.” If one brightens bright virtue, one is close to the Heavenly Way.⁵²

3. The exercise of concentration (*qugong*): “Next is he who arrives at concentration.”⁵³ Concentration means embracing the One. With a focused spirit recite: “Venerable Mother of the Limitless, Great Honoured One, Mother of Heaven.” No matter whether you are walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, recite it whenever you have time, recite it with a concentrated mind. In the beginning your voice [should be] loud, then becoming ever lower, until there is no sound and you arrive at stillness. The exercise of concentration

⁴⁸ *Doctrine of the Mean*, chapter 21. Cf. Legge’s variant translation in *The Chinese Classics*, vol.1, pp. 414-415.

⁴⁹ *Book of Changes*, “Shuo gua” 說卦, chapter 1. Cf. variant translations in Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, p. 262; Z. D. Sung, *The Text of Yi king*, p. 339.

⁵⁰ *Doctrine of the Mean*, chapter 21. Cf. variant translation in Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol.1, p. 414.

⁵¹ Cf. *Analects* 4.8. Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol.1, p. 168.

⁵² Cf. *Great Learning*, chapter 1. Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol.1, p. 356.

⁵³ Another quote from the *Doctrine of the Mean*, chapter 23. “Next” means next to the innately sincere person, mentioned in the preceding passages of the *Doctrine*. The meaning of the character *qu* in this passage is one of the trickier problems faced by exegetes over the centuries, because its usual meanings do not fit very well into this context (see the translation and discussion by Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 1, p. 417). For my translation I have simply followed the present text’s understanding and definition of the term.

is easy to practise. It is a pity that worldly people do not understand the use of embracing the One.

By the routes of nature, instruction, and concentration one can reach the sphere of sincerity. The efficacy of “sincerity” has six stages: “Sincerity produces form; form produces manifestation; manifestation produces bright understanding; bright understanding produces motion; motion produces change; change produces transformation. Only the world’s utmost sincerity can bring about transformation.” (誠則形，形則著，著則明，明則動，動則變，變則化，惟天下至誠，為能化).⁵⁴

1. Form (*xing* 形): “To advance on the Way” (進於道) is the first step of the Way of Humanity. This “form” does not mean “having form” [as opposed to formlessness]. The Way is the primordial chaos, born before Heaven and Earth, inaudible, invisible, and indistinct. Laozi says of it, “Shape without shape, form without form” (無狀之狀，無物之象).⁵⁵ [Thereby] we can know the subtleness of the Way; seeking it depends on one’s use of understanding.

2. Manifestation (*zhu* 著): “Virtue enriches the self” (德潤身)⁵⁶—this describes the maturing of the Way. The maturing of the Way depends on the changes and transformations of vital energy and substance. The changes of vital energy and substance depend upon forceful cultivation and nourishment; only then can one progress in virtue and cultivate merit.

3. Understanding (*ming* 明): “Comprehension is wide and understanding great” (含弘光大).⁵⁷ This is an important exercise in cultivating the Way. With understanding one sees through the hidden and subtle, differentiates good and bad, and attains the state where one is not confused [any more].

4. Motion (*dong* 動): “The Way is constantly shifting, changing and moving without rest, flowing everywhere through the Six Voids” (為道者，屢遷，變動不居，周流六虛).⁵⁸ The motions of the Way are natural revolutions. When cultivating the Way one must not exclusively utilize the exercise of stillness, but also pay attention to the exercise of motion. It is a very subtle thing that stillness and motion are complementary.

5. Change (*bian* 變): Motion brings about change. By change the ten thousand phenomena are spread out in confusion and the present world [came into being]. “The Way is spoken of in wonder at the ten thousand things” (道也者，妙萬物而為言者也). From the changes and transformations of the ten thousand things, one realizes the subtleness of the universe. Change [however] is an illusion. Only non-change is truly real.

⁵⁴ *Doctrine of the Mean*, chapter 23. Cf. variant translation in Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 1, p. 417.

⁵⁵ *Daode jing*, chapter 14. Cf. variant translation in Lau, *Lao Tzu*, p. 70.

⁵⁶ *The Great Learning*, chapter 6. Cf. variant translation in Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 1, p. 367.

⁵⁷ *Book of Changes*, *kun* 坤 hexagram. Cf. variant translations in Wilhelm and Baynes, *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, p. 386-387; Z. D. Sung, *The Text of Yi king*, pp. 15-16.

⁵⁸ *Book of Changes*, “Xici” 繫辭, section 2, chapter 8. Cf. variant translations in Wilhelm and Baynes, *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, p. 348; Z. D. Sung, *The Text of Yi king*, p. 328.

6. Transformation (*hua* 化): Changes lead to transformations. “He who assists Heaven and Earth in their transforming nourishment, ranks as one with them” (贊天地化，與天地同參). This is the stage of union between Heaven and Humanity, also called “ascension and transformation” (*shenghua* 昇化). Transformation is also a return to the Way. The Way is the ruler who created the universe and the ten thousand things. Returning to the Way means becoming one with the ruler. This is the stage of transformation, the highest aim of Way cultivation.

Nature, instruction, and concentration are the great routes of cultivating the Heavenly Way. The disciples of the Way should keep to these three routes and make them their standard [of conduct]. If you wholeheartedly aspire [to the Way], you will be delivered from the sea of suffering. You will reach the other shore and ascend to blissfulness. Those who do not know how to cultivate themselves can hardly avoid walking onto a wrong path or falling into an abyss. I hope that all you who live in confusion will quickly awaken! (*TDAY*, 82-84)

This discipline is harmonized with a six-stage model derived from the *Great Learning*: “Resting (*zhi* 止), becoming firm (*ding* 定), becoming still (*jing* 靜), becoming calm (*an* 安), practising contemplation (*lü* 慮), attaining (*de* 得).” In the interpretation of the *Tiandao aoyi*, “resting” means to find a way of putting the mind at rest, shielding it from the disturbances of everyday life. This is achieved through faith in the Way of Heaven and embracing the One. “Firmness” means to make body and mind unmoving, which is achieved by purifying one’s *qi* through breathing exercises and diet. “Stillness” is achieved through reducing desires and selfishness, “calmness” through a natural, spontaneous manner. One contemplates the mysteries of the Dao and ultimately attains the Dao and returns to one’s native place, the blissful Heaven of the Limitless (*TDAY*, ch. 14). The *Zhongyong* and *Daxue* sequences are harmonized as follows:

Resting—from rest [there arises] form. Form means establishing. The Way forms in the centre.

Firmness—from firmness [there arises] manifestation. Manifestation means maturing.

Stillness—from stillness [there arises] understanding. Understanding is shining brilliance.

Peace—from peace [there arises] motion, which follows its natural course.

Contemplation—from contemplation [there arise] changes. [The term] “changes” refers to the immeasurability of *yin* and *yang*.

Attainment—from attainment [there arises] transformation. Transformation means transcending life and ending death. (*TDAY*, 72)

This approach to cultivation is not to be understood as merely an internal practice, but should combine “sageliness within and king-

liness without” (*nei sheng wai wang* 內聖外王). These notions are succinctly defined as follows:

“Sageliness within” consists in overcoming one’s self. First one [has to] overcome one’s self so that one is pure and not half a selfish desire remains. Selfishness means being held by one’s self; desire means being held by material things. Only when material things and self have both been forgotten can one “manifest the pure and embrace simplicity” (*xian su bao pu* 見素抱樸).⁵⁹ One should start this practice by arriving at innate knowledge. Humanity originally possesses innate knowledge. Unfortunately it is obscured by material desires. One only needs to remove selfish desires and innate knowledge will appear by itself. This is what is called “fulfilling one’s nature” (*jin xing* 盡性). Innate knowledge is the nature. To recover one’s original nature is to arrive at innate knowledge. Therefore, consciousness, uprightness of the mind, cultivation of the self all belong to the way of inner sageliness, which is [also called] cultivating inner rewards.

“Kinglyness without” consists in saving the world and sacrificing one’s own advantage to help others. It is thus the spirit of “love without distinction” (*jian’ai* 兼愛). The “outer king” is able to advance on the Way because he raises innate ability. Innate ability is the kinetic energy of the universe. This kind of kinetic energy is great and constant to the utmost. A “vast correct vital energy” (*haoran zhi zhengqi* 浩然之正氣), it fills the universe. In every instance when personal advantage is sacrificed to help others, this innate ability manifests itself. The greater the sacrifice, the greater, necessarily, the manifestation of innate ability. Simply expressed, it involves creating merit by giving alms, rescuing from distress, and taking delight in helping; it is [the same as] creating outer merit. (*TDAI*, 41-42)

Outer kingliness and inner sageliness need to go together. Ultimately, however, success in the cultivation of the Way of Heaven is measured by the extent to which the adept extends his or her “virtue” (*de*) outwards to other human beings and to society as a whole. The standards of measurement are the Five Virtues and the Sevenfold Way of Goodness. The Five Virtues (*wu de*) range from virtue cultivated in oneself to virtue extended to family, village, nation, and the world.⁶⁰ The Sevenfold Way of Goodness (*qi shandao* 七善道) involves doing good deeds in the local community, having a profoundly good mind, associating with good friends, being good and trustworthy in speech, using good policies in government, pursuing one’s affairs with goodness, and taking action in a timely (“good”) way.

The excerpts given above are mere fragments from an extremely involved discourse that would merit much closer and more detailed

⁵⁹ *Daode jing*, chapter 19. Cf. variant translation in D.C. Lau, *Lao Tzu*, p. 75.

⁶⁰ Adapted from *Daode jing*, chapter 54. See Lau, *Lao Tzu*, p. 115.

attention—a task I hope to tackle in the near future. In the present context, their purpose is not to give a complete overview of the system of thought underlying the *Tiandao aoyi*, but merely to emphasize the seriousness of the endeavour to make the Confucian tradition a resource for the religious path propagated by phoenix halls. If being a Confucian truly means, as John Berthrong maintains, being committed to “the reading, interpreting, and living out” of Confucian canonical texts, then the *Tiandao aoyi* is clearly a Confucian project. At the same time, the excerpts demonstrate the syncretic character of this endeavour: the readings of the *Zhongyong* and the *Daxue* that they reveal are often unorthodox and clearly inspired by Daoist thought. In fact, one of the intriguing aspects of this work is the way in which Confucian texts are interpreted through a Daoist code, while Daoist texts in return are subjected to a Confucian reading (such as in the case of the Five Virtue concept derived from chapter 54 of the *Daode jing*); such an approach is justified implicitly by making Laozi a part of the Neo-Confucian “line of transmission,” so that the *Daode jing*, the *Zhongyong*, the *Daxue* and the *Yijing* can be read as speaking of the same Dao, and thus throwing light on each other.

The same ingrained syncretism is evident in the Mingzheng Tang’s rituals, which show a pattern similar to the one we saw in the *Rumen kefan*: a predominance of simplified Confucian patterns in the core area of the spirit-writing séance and in sacrifices at the birthdays of deities, but a much greater diversity in secondary ritual spheres. The syncretic multifocality of the Hall’s ritual system is perhaps best exemplified in the “spring and autumn sacrifices” introduced in 1988: while at their centre we find a Confucian-style sacrificial rite, they have come to include also ancestral sacrifices, *shanshu* presentation ceremonies, bushel veneration, numinous healing séances (*lingliao* 靈療), and a full-scale Buddhist *pu* 普度 ceremony.⁶¹ The Mingzheng Tang’s Confucianism is therefore just one facet of the rich religious mosaic that makes up this phoenix hall—but it is a defining facet. It is that part of its heritage that its mem-

⁶¹ The old phoenix hall connection with the Longhua sect is also still discernible in the Mingzheng Tang, whose sutra recitation group trains under a teacher standing in this tradition. Further evidence for this ongoing relationship was the visit to the Mingzheng Tang’s 1994 spring sacrifice by a group from the Huide Gong 惠德宮, an older phoenix hall in Caotun 草屯 (Nantou county). These phoenix disciples contributed to the celebration a ritual that was performed directly from a copy of the *Longhua keyi*.

bers choose to emphasize as a mark of their religion's identity vis-à-vis the many religious alternatives available in modern Taiwanese society. Its Confucian-style rituals and the moralistic message of its *shanshu*, which is harmonized with the Confucian classics through a particular reading of them, define the Mingzheng Tang as part of a recognizably distinct religious tradition and give it the secure autonomy that allows it freely to interact with and borrow from competing traditions.

Conclusion

Are Taiwanese phoenix halls, then, Confucian in any meaningful sense of the word? I propose that there are three possible answers to this question. (1) From the viewpoint of Confucian orthodoxy the answer would have to be “no”: their emphasis on shamanistic practices, concern with deities and deification, unorthodox interpretations of the Confucian canon, and general syncretism would disqualify them. (2) From the “emic” viewpoint of phoenix halls, the answer is “yes”, because they practise Confucian rituals, cultivate the Eight Virtues, define their Dao with reference to the Confucian classics, and call themselves Confucian. (3) From the perspective of the scholar studying them, the answer can also be “yes,” but only if one adds the qualifying adjective “popular” to the designation “Confucian.” We are dealing with a popular Confucianism because phoenix halls bring a syncretic approach to their reading of the Confucian classics, and embed their religious beliefs and practices in a popular framework that refuses to treat the Confucian tradition as separable from Daoism, Buddhism, and sectarian teachings. It may be China's core tradition, but it is not complete without the others. Just as Confucian rites need to be supplemented with Daoist and Longhua rituals, so do the Confucian classics reveal their full import for the one Dao only when read through the other traditions of China.

My use of the concept of “popular Confucianism” overlaps to some extent with the terms “religious Confucianism” (*zongjiaoxing rujiao* 宗教性儒教) and “religionized Confucianism” (*zongjiaohua ru-xue* 宗教化儒學) proposed respectively by Taiwanese scholars Li Shyh-Wei and Sung Kwang-yu in their discussions of the Taiwanese phoenix hall tradition.⁶² I prefer the qualifier “popular” to “reli-

⁶² Sung Kwang-yu (Song Guangyu) 宋光宇, “Qian-Qing yu Riju shidai Tai-

gious” or “religionized” for two reasons: first, because it points to the fact that Confucian ideas and practices are appropriated through specifically popular readings of them; and second, because distinguishing a popular form of Confucianism by labelling it “religious” would imply—incorrectly—the absence of religious aspects from other forms of Confucianism.

On the basis of the evidence adduced in this essay I propose, in conclusion, that we can safely use the concept of “popular Confucianism” for those syncretic religious groups that make a deliberate and conscious effort to place an emphasis on Confucian teachings and ritual forms.⁶³ Let me add that I would also like to call for further studies using the approach advocated in this article: namely, to start out from popular usages of the term Ru rather than from prefabricated definitions of popular Confucianism, so as to arrive at a delineation of the cultural field we call Confucianism that would

wan de zongjiaohua Ruxue” 前清與日據時代台灣的宗教化儒學, in *Id.*, *Tiandao chuandeng* 天道傳燈 (Zhonghe, Taipei County: Wang Qiming 王啓明, 1996), pp. 307-313; Li, *Riju shidai Taiwan Rujiao jieshe yu huodong*, p. 87. Cf. also Wang Chien-Ch’uan’s description of the spirit-writing of early Taiwanese phoenix halls as a “popularization and ‘religionization’ of Confucianism” (*Rujia de tongshuhua, zongjiaohua* 儒家的通俗化、宗教化). Wang Chien-Ch’uan, “Qingmo Riju chuqi Taiwan de luantang,” p. 187.

⁶³ Beyond phoenix halls, the appellation “popular Confucianism” might also be applied to a sect like the Yiguan Dao, whose pronounced predilection for Confucian themes has attracted some scholarly attention. See Tang Yinan 唐亦男, “Shikan Taiwan Yiguan Dao dui Rujia de ronghe yu yunyong” 試看臺灣一貫道對儒家的融合與運用, in *Di yi jie Taiwan Ruxue yanjiu guoji xueshu yantaohui lunwenji* (Vol.2) (Tainan: Tainan Shi Wenhua Zhongxin, 1997), pp. 77-95; Christian Jochim, “Understanding Sectarian Popular Confucianism: The Way of Unity (Yiguan Dao) in Postwar Taiwan” (paper presented at the Sixth Annual North American Taiwan Studies Conference, Harvard University, 16-19 June 2000); Christian Jochim, “Popular Lay Sects and Confucianism: A Study Based on the Way of Unity in Taiwan” (paper presented at the conference “Religious Thought and Lived Religion in China,” University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C., Canada, 14-15 September 2002). In the case of the Yiguan Dao, however, this Confucian emphasis seems to be characteristic mainly of its later stages of development, so that Malaysian scholar Soo Khin Wah has spoken of its “Confucianization.” See Soo Khin Wah, “A Study of the Yiguan Dao (Unity Sect) and Its Development in Peninsular Malaysia” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1997), chapter 6. While speaking of “sectarian popular Confucianism” in his study of the Yiguan Dao, Christian Jochim uses this term for the sect’s approach to the Confucian classics rather than for the sect as such. This, I think, represents a viable terminological compromise in the case of such a religious tradition that has taken on a Confucian orientation only fairly late in its historical development.

be less arbitrary. Some scholars in Taiwan are already working on related issues: as mentioned above, Lee Fong-mao, for example, studies the tradition of the “ritualists” (*lisheng* 禮生),⁶⁴ while Lee’s student Chung Yun-ying has given us fascinating studies of sectarian interpretations of the *Great Learning* and the *Doctrine of the Mean*.⁶⁵ More studies like these will help us assemble a clearer picture of the scope of meanings that the term “Ru” has in Taiwanese—and Chinese—popular religion. On the basis of these data we may hope to arrive eventually at a better understanding of the scope of Confucianism in Chinese culture.

⁶⁴ Lee, “Lisheng yu daoshi.”

⁶⁵ Chung, “Shilun ‘Xue-Yong qianyan xinzhū’ dui ‘gewu zhizhi’ zhi quanjie,” and *Minguo yilai minjian jiaopai Daxue Zhongyong sixiang zhi yanjiu*.