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MERIT BEYOND MEASURE
NOTES ON THE MORAL (AND REAL) ECONOMY
OF RELIGIOUS PUBLISHING IN TAIWAN*

PHILIP CLART

1. Introduction

Every attentive visitor to Taiwan will notice the stacks of free religious literature that are placed in publicly accessible corners of temples and monasteries, railway and bus stations, hospitals and clinics. A cursory look at any one such collection will reveal a great diversity of slim booklets published and distributed by an equally great variety of religious organizations—Buddhist and Daoist associations, local temples, sectarian societies, and even individual philanthropists. Why do these organizations and individuals spend so much time and effort in producing and distributing this literature? And what is their overall impact on Taiwanese society and its values?

The overt purpose of these books is usually the exhortation of society to goodness (*quanshan*), which is why most of them are called *quanshanshu*—or simply *shanshu*. In addition, we may safely assume that most groups who also include their contact address and telephone number use these “morality books” to attract new members. These two concerns are the peripheral manifestations of a complex of religious beliefs and practices at the core of which lies the concept of “merit” (*gongde*). In this paper I will uncover this complex of beliefs and practices by means of an in-depth look at one such *shanshu*-producing organization, a spirit-writing cult or “phoenix hall” (*luan-tang*) in the central Taiwanese city of Taichung. The centrality of merit-making in the activities of such cult groups has been noted by Daniel Overmyer and David K. Jordan in their book *The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986], 277-280). The present article takes this insight as the starting point for a closer look at merit as a key concern of phoenix halls.¹

* The field research for this article was carried out from 1993 to 1994 with the support of the Center for Chinese Studies (National Central Library, Taipei), the Lin Pen-yüan Foundation (Taipei), Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of British Columbia, and the Institute of Ethnology at the Academia Sinica (Taipei).

¹ On Taiwanese phoenix halls, see Jordan – Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix*, and Wang

The Wumiao Mingzheng Tang (Temple of the Martial Sage, Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy) was founded in 1976 as an offshoot of another Taichung cult group, the Shengxian Tang (“Hall of Sages and Worthies”). Presently it is one of the most prolific phoenix halls in Taiwan, publishing through its associated Phoenix Friend Magazine Society (Luanyou zazhishe) a monthly magazine, *Luanyou* (The Phoenix Friend) and a large number of morality books. Many of these are produced by the cult itself through the mediumistic technique of spirit-writing. I conducted a field study of this religious group from 1993 to 1994, during which time I collected most of the data presented here.

2. Key Beliefs of Taiwanese Phoenix Halls

While to the outsider its production and distribution of spirit-written morality books may constitute the key characteristic of a phoenix hall, these undoubtedly important activities are closely linked to even more important internal functions of the cult. In particular, as a religious institution, it is concerned with the salvation of its members.

The production and dissemination of *shanshu* is the key expression of the Mingzheng Tang’s mission to “proclaim transformation on behalf of Heaven” (*daitian xuanhua*). Internally, these spirit-written morality books aid the cult members in their personal cultivation. Cultivation for a phoenix disciple consists primarily in a process of moral purification. Human nature is seen as heaven-endowed and therefore originally good; the purity of this original goodness, however, is sullied by the various impure emotions and desires attaching themselves to it when it is caught in a human body within the world of forms. Cultivation is the process of stripping away these impure accretions to one’s original nature, which have accumulated over many existences. Once they have been removed, the original nature will shine forth in its proper brilliance; freed from all worldly bonds, the original or “numinous” nature (*lingxing*) will then ascend to a higher level of existence beyond the world of forms and suffering. This transcendence is viewed as a process of deification through which the believer is able to join the ranks of gods and immortals. The particular method advocated by phoenix halls for achieving this objective is the cultivation of moral goodness in one’s daily life. The first

Zhiyu 王志宇, *Taiwan de Enzhugong xinyang: Ruzong Shenjiao yu feiluan quanhua* 臺灣的恩主公信仰: 儒宗神教與飛鸞勸化 [Belief in the Benevolent Lords in Taiwan: The Divine Teachings of the Confucian Tradition and admonition to moral reform by means of the flying phoenix] (Taipei: Wenjin, 1997). On the Mingzheng Tang specifically, see Philip Clart, “The Ritual Context of Morality Books: A Case-Study of a Taiwanese Spirit-Writing Cult” (Ph.D. diss., University of British Columbia, 1997).

function of morality books is to point out this need and to define what constitutes moral goodness for the benefit of the multitudes trapped within worldly confusion. Within the phoenix hall, they function as the gods' "textbooks" in their instruction of their disciples. A phoenix hall is frequently compared to a school where the gods are the teachers and the phoenix disciples are the students; the descent of a deity in a spirit-writing séance is thus like a lecture given to the assembled congregation, and the resulting morality books are collections of such lectures to be used by the disciples for review and more in-depth study.

Progress (or lack thereof) in one's cultivation is measured in units of merit and demerit. For this purpose many phoenix halls use so-called "ledgers of merit and demerit," lists of good and bad deeds with amounts of merits and demerits attached to them.² The balance of one's merit account, the "phoenix register" (*luanji*), established in Heaven once one becomes a cult member, determines one's post-mortem 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. The amount of accumulated merit determines the rank of deity one attains: lower, middle, or upper.

Thus, the accumulation of merit is a key concern for phoenix disciples in general, as it is for the members of the Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy. In fact, this Hall's entire belief system hinges on this central concept. Every activity of the Hall is designed to create merit for its participants, but none more than those connected with the production of morality books.

3. Merit, Money, and Morality Books at the Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy

The most meritorious deed is the printing and distribution of morality books, because it is the most effective way of "proclaiming transformation on behalf of Heaven," that is, of spreading the true principles of the Way and guiding other people to moral reform.³ A mid-nineteenth century morality book, the *Jiusheng chuan* (Boat for Saving Lives), already stressed that the dissemination of morality books is a more effective method of influencing one's contemporaries than public lecturing, because books can reach every

² 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). See Gary Seaman, *Temple Organization in a Chinese Village* (Taipei: The Orient Cultural Service, 1978), 58-62, for a discussion of ledger use in a central Taiwanese phoenix hall in the 1970s.

³ *Shiyi chandao lu* 釋疑闡道錄 [Records that Resolve Doubts and Expound upon the Way], vol. 7 (Taichung: Luanyou zazhishe, 1992), 54.

corner of the empire and be transmitted for many years, while “the usefulness of public lecturing is restricted to one place and one time.”⁴ This perception of the greater effectiveness of the written rather than spoken word still applies today. “The spoken word serves to admonish to goodness on one occasion, a book can admonish to goodness for a hundred generations”⁵—when asking phoenix disciples why they spend so much time, effort, and money on producing morality books, one will invariably get this or a similar answer. Widely disseminated in printed form, the words of the gods have a much greater impact than if they had merely been spoken in one temple on one evening. The actual impact of these texts is difficult to gauge. How many Taiwanese actually read the *shanshu* they find in temples, bus stations, clinics, and many other places? Further, if they do read them, what effect do they have on their moral thinking and conduct? I have no data at hand that would yield an answer to these questions, but it may well be that if a nation-wide statistic were to supply an answer, it would turn out to be quite disheartening for phoenix disciples. A study by Robert L. Chard throws some doubt on the conversionary effectiveness of morality books. Chard has compared the historically documented stove god rituals practised in late Imperial commoner households with the quite different worship pattern prescribed in the voluminous and widely circulating morality book literature on the stove god. He detected no significant influence of the morality books’ prescriptive model on actual ritual practice.⁶ While his study only addresses relatively easily observable variations in ritual patterns and does not attempt to deal with morality books’ potential influence on the readers’ moral values, Chard’s conclusions should at the very least caution us not to take the ideological claims of morality books’ effectiveness at face value.

The actual statistical success rate of morality books is, however, no major concern for the Mingzheng Tang’s phoenix disciples. True, some more reflective individuals do worry about this question and sometimes seek the gods’ advice. During the writing of the *Penglai xiandao youji* (Record of a Journey to the Penglai Isles of the Immortals) in 1991, for example, the following dialogue took place between the planchette medium Mingbi and his immortal teacher Han Xiangzi:

⁴ *Jiusheng chuan* 救生船, *leixu* 類敘, (n.p.: 1872), 2b.

⁵ *Luanyou* 鸞友 362 (1984): 27. A saying also quoted in the writings of the “Hall of the Wondrous Dharma,” a phoenix hall studied by Jordan – Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix*, 109.

⁶ Robert L. Chard, “Rituals and Scriptures of the Stove Cult,” in *Ritual and Scripture in Chinese Popular Religion. Five Studies*, ed. David Johnson (Berkeley: Chinese Popular Culture Project, 1995), 3-54.

Mingbi: “Since I, your disciple, completed my training as a planchette-medium, I have received mandates to write a considerable number of books. In each of these sacred books or scriptures, the sages, deities, immortals, and Buddhas have explained and discoursed untiringly, and admonished and guided patiently. But I do not know if they have any effect. I have my doubts.”

The immortal old man: “Where do these doubts come from? Scriptures and sacred books that are sent down into the secular world definitely are effective in saving people. You must have no doubts about that. They will continue to save people.”

Mingbi: “Of course, about this point I am not very clear, because I cannot see it; I merely receive mandates and write one book after another.”

The immortal old man: “This is as it should be. ‘Concern yourself only with the ploughing, not with the harvest’⁷ — this is what ‘proclaiming transformation on behalf of Heaven’ means.”

Mingbi: “This I have now understood. There will always be some that are saved and transformed by probably every sacred book or scripture descending into the secular world!”

The immortal old man: “Right. If [books and scriptures] did not have at least some effectiveness in saving and transforming [people], why would the gods bother to enter into union with humans and descend upon the phoenix to write books *séance* after *séance*?”⁸

“To concern themselves only with ploughing, not with the harvest”—this advice is invariably given to phoenix disciples who voice their doubts about the meaningfulness of their work. This advice is accepted because its plausibility lies beyond concerns with statistics: The living community of the phoenix hall stands as an ever present witness to the effectiveness of *shanshu* publishing. The majority of the Mingzheng Tang’s core adherents came to the cult through reading its magazine and books and every one of these disciples is living proof to the others, and to him or herself, that *shanshu* have a morally transformative effect on humans.⁹ Furthermore, most of these core adherents have remained avid *shanshu* readers after becoming phoenix disciples, confirming in this way again to themselves and to others that there exists a readership for these books.¹⁰

⁷ *Zhi wen gengyun, bu wen shouhuo* —a Chinese proverb.

⁸ *Penglai xiandao youji* 蓬萊仙島遊記 (Taichung: Luanyou zazhishe, 1991), 206.

⁹ 60.3% of respondents to my questionnaire survey of the Hall’s membership in 1994 indicated that they first came to the Mingzheng Tang after reading its books or magazine.

¹⁰ The questionnaire indicates that 33.3% of valid respondents read morality books

Moreover, while a *shanshu* is supposed to work for the moral reform of contemporary society, this is only one of its functions. It is at the same time a source of merit for everyone involved in its production and dissemination. A general belief in the effectiveness of these books as means for inducing moral transformation is clearly very important and yet often the most immediate motivation for printing a *shanshu* is the merit gained. The concrete merit amounts are determined by the gods of the Mingzheng Tang in some detail, and in the following the relevant rules and practices are summarized.

Merit is created (1) by aiding in the writing of a morality book, (2) by sponsoring its printing, (3) helping with its distribution, and (4) by the conversion of people through the book. Let us take a look in turn at each of these phases in the life of a *shanshu*.

Simple attendance at the séances devoted to the writing of a morality book counts as participation in the project. The Mingzheng Tang's merit ledger *Wenheng Shengdi gongguolü* (The Sacred Emperor Wenheng's Statutes of Merit and Demerit) rules that one merit unit (*gong*) is assigned for each participation at any activity of the Hall. Attendance at séances devoted to the writing of a morality book is worth two *gong* per séance. *Luansheng* enjoy the privilege of receiving a special reward of merit when attending all séances devoted to the writing of a morality book, but if they miss sessions, their merit is calculated as the sum of the merit units gathered by attending the individual séances. If the absences are due to a lack of determination on the phoenix disciple's part, he or she is assigned five demerits for each missed séance.¹¹ To clarify the merit received by all participants, the gods usually reveal the concrete merit amounts after the completion of a *shanshu*. Thus, for the writing of the *Wangsicheng youji* (Records of a Journey to the City of the Wrongfully Deceased), one *daogong* ("merit of the Way," equal to 10,000 *gong*) was granted to anyone who had participated in at least two thirds of the séances devoted to the writing of this book. Otherwise five *gong* were calculated per séance.¹²

At the time of my field research a consistent pattern of merit assignment had established itself. The following is an example of divine merit assignment occurring during my visit to the Hall, on April 17th, 1994:

[The Benevolent Teacher Guan] reveals: "All [phoenix disciples] who have attended the writing of this sacred book [*Wangsicheng youji*] with com-

every day and another 42.6% at least twice a week. Into this group of "regular *shanshu* readers" thus fall more than 75% of the Mingzheng Tang's core adherents.

¹¹ *Wenheng Shengdi gongguolü* 文衡聖帝功過律, vol. 1 (Taichung: Luanyou zazhishe, 1986), 33-34.

¹² *Luanyou* 385 (1985): 15.

plete diligence shall have one *daogong* recorded. Those who have attended at least three quarters of the séances shall also be rewarded with one *daogong*. All other participants shall receive twenty *gong* per attendance, but the total sum is not to exceed half a *daogong*.¹³

As posthumous ascension to the rank of a low-level deity only takes five *daogong* and as the great majority of séances at the Mingzheng Tang is devoted to morality book writing, the granting of one *daogong* to every phoenix disciple participating in at least three quarters of the séances for a new morality book constitutes a strong incentive for regular attendance. The generosity of this reward is justified by reference to the great morally transformative power inherent in morality books.¹⁴ Once the book is completed, it is ceremoniously presented to Heaven with the reading of a memorial and the subsequent burning of a copy of the book together with the memorial. Participation in this ceremony is also rewarded with a small merit bonus, usually between five and ten *gong* per participant.

The next merit opportunity offered by a new *shanshu* is its printing. For the printing of morality books, varying merit amounts were fixed by the gods on a case-by-case basis in the early years of the cult. For the sponsoring of the *Phoenix Friend* magazine, originally one merit unit was calculated for each copy.¹⁵ For morality books produced by the cult, initially individual merit amounts were determined by the gods for each book. Thus the two scriptures written in the Shengxian Tang by the medium Yongbi were set at six merit units per copy sponsored,¹⁶ the *Tianjie chuanzhen* (True Description of the Celestial Realm) at three units per copy,¹⁷ and the *Dadao kangzhuang* (The Great, Majestic Way) at five units per copy.¹⁸ The *Dadao kangzhuang* appears to be the last morality book to have been assigned a specific merit amount per copy by the gods. After that, the merit earned by the sponsor of a *shanshu* is described stereotypically as being “beyond measure” (*gongde wuliang*). This does not mean, however, that fixed merit amounts were no longer assigned to the printing of morality books; a general rule was probably applied for the calculation of this merit. In the *Statutes of Merit and Demerit*, written in 1985, such a general rule for assessing the merit value of morality book (and scripture) sponsoring was made explicit. According to this rule, merit was no longer calculated on a per copy basis, but rather

¹³ *Luanyou* 565 (1994): 9.

¹⁴ *Shiyi chandao lu*, vol. 5 (Taichung: Luanyou zazhishe, 1990), 68.

¹⁵ *Luanyou* 50 (1971): 3. At this time the price per copy was NT\$2.

¹⁶ *Luanyou* 73 (1972): 19; *Luanyou* 91 (1973): 13.

¹⁷ *Luanyou* 155 (1975): 11.

¹⁸ *Luanyou* 233 (1979): 13.

based on the total amount of money donated.¹⁹ Thus, for every NT\$ 100 spent, one *gong* was assigned; every NT\$1,000 were converted into fifteen *gong* (ten times the merit of a NT\$100 donation, plus a “bonus” of five *gong*); every NT\$10,000 came to 200 *gong* (ten times the merit of a NT\$ 1,000 donation, plus a bonus of fifty *gong*).²⁰ The *Statutes* may be viewed as an attempt to rationalize the Hall’s merit management through replacing the former case-by-case arrangements by a single, generally applicable set of rules.²¹ The sponsoring of a *shanshu* is announced to Heaven by means of a memorial read and burnt at the Mingzheng Tang. It states the amount of money donated, the person to whom the merit is to be transferred (this could be the sponsor him or herself, or any other person), and the purpose for which it is to be used.

Next, merit can be created by distributing the new book. Every phoenix disciple is encouraged to help distribute the books and magazines in public places and at least some are very active in this respect. I met a very pious believer who carried books and magazines from a number of phoenix halls around with him all the time, depositing them wherever he went: banks, supermarkets, phone booths, temples, railway stations, government offices.

¹⁹ On one occasion, after the promulgation of the *Wenheng Shengdi gongguolü*, a per copy merit amount was again decreed: on December 5th, 1987, the Venerable Mother (Wuji Laomu) decided that for the printing of a collection of her lectures given at the Hall, one *gong* per copy should be assigned (*Luanyou* 448 [1987]: 13). In monetary terms this meant that, at a price of NT\$15 per copy, one could earn almost seven *gong* per NT\$100, instead of the one *gong* fixed by the *Wenheng Shengdi gongguolü*. This immediately caused some confusion among the phoenix disciples who asked a Benevolent Master to confirm the accuracy of the transmission of the Mother’s message. The Benevolent Master explained this exception from the rule as a special grace conferred by the Venerable Mother. See *Luanyou* 451 (1988): 14; *Shiyi chandao lu*, vol. 3 (Taichung: Luanyou zazhishe, 1988), 80.

²⁰ *Wenheng Shengdi gongguolü*, vol. 1, 32.

²¹ The equation, NT\$100 equals 1 *gong*, harmonizes with the Wenchang ledger’s assignation of one *gong* to 100 cash spent on printing a morality book. See *Wenchang Dijun gongguoge* 文昌帝君功過格 [Wenchang Dijun’s Ledger of Merit and Demerit] (Taichung: Shengxian zazhishe, 1989), 120 (reprint of a 1921 edition published in Shanghai). This is in conflict, however, with the *Yülü jinpian*’s regulation that for the printing of “scriptures” three *gong* shall be assigned *per copy*, irrespective of the size of the sponsored text. See *Yülü jinpian* 玉律金篇 [Golden Book of Jade Statutes] (Taichung: Shengxian zazhishe, 1987), 22. When a reader of the *Phoenix Friend* pointed out to one of the Benevolent Masters that the merit amounts in the morality books of some other phoenix halls are at variance with the regulations of the *Statutes* and inquired which was to be considered accurate, he was told laconically that the *Statutes* are the correct standard. See *Shiyi chandao lu*, vol. 2 (Taichung: Luanyou zazhishe, 1987), 53.

He even revisited the locations after a few days to check up on the books; if they had gone, he placed more in the same place; if they were still there, he removed them and put them in a better place.²² Although everyone is encouraged to contribute “effort” (*li*) for the physical distribution of morality books, it is particularly recommended as a merit-creating method for the impecunious who cannot afford to contribute “wealth” (*cai*) for the printing of these books.

Apparently the Mingzheng Tang has no fixed merit amounts for the distribution of morality books. Neither are there fixed amounts for the so-called consecutive merit (*houxu zhi gong*) accruing from morality books; still, although difficult to measure, this “consecutive merit” is often adduced as proof of the great effectiveness of *shanshu* as an instrument of merit creation. The principle behind this concept is that the sponsor (and also, to a lesser extent, the distributor) of a morality book gains a share of all merit created as a consequence of his or her good deed. For every day that a morality book stays in circulation, the sponsor earns merit. Should a morality book actually succeed in converting a person to goodness, the sponsor of the book is assigned additional merit.²³ Thus, sponsoring the printing of a morality book is an investment that does not merely give an immediate return in the form of the merit assigned for the actual printing of the book, but may in the future bring additional, as yet uncalculated merit, produced by the transformative action of the book. In the case of the sponsoring of scriptures, similar “consecutive merit” is reaped by the sponsor whenever someone is converted through this scripture; in addition, a sponsor obtains 10% of the merit every time one of the sponsored volumes is recited.²⁴ Such consecutive merit continues to be booked to the sponsor’s merit account even after his or her death, and may assist in saving him or her from purgatory by progressively balancing the soul’s karma.²⁵

This long-term effect of books, however, is also cause for caution: should one be so careless as to sponsor the printing of a heretical book, one will have

²² Some Buddhists show similar zeal and imagination in the propagation of their own religious literature. There are Buddhist printing and publishing centres, such as the “Lotus Society” (*Lianshe*) in Taichung, that concentrate on the printing and distribution of sponsored religious literature. I once happened to ride in a taxi steered by a very enthusiastic young driver who had transformed his car into a missionary centre on wheels, complete with taped sūtra-recitations, Buddhist images on the dashboard, and a pouch with Buddhist devotional literature, published by the Lotus Society, hanging from the back of the driver’s seat.

²³ *Wenheng Shengdi gongguolü*, vol. 1, 32.

²⁴ *Wenheng Shengdi gongguolü*, vol. 1, 32.

²⁵ One such case is described in *Luanyou* 552 (1993): 26-27.

to share in the demerits occasioned when the book in question leads people astray. The *Wenheng Shengdi gongguoliu* contains no clear regulation to that effect, but on one occasion the question came up and was dealt with in the following way:

Wang Xianlong asked: "From a nearby temple I have brought back some old morality books which are in rather a disorderly state. What should I best do with them?"

The Benevolent Teacher replied: "The main thing is to clean them, and then to re-circulate them. However, although this is a meritorious act, you must decide upon it only after looking at the books' contents. If they are not true morality books that give expression to the gods' ideas, you will incur the transgression [or "demerit"] of abetting errors."²⁶

Because of this danger of inadvertently spreading heresy, in a report about an exemplary *shanshu* sponsor in northern Taiwan, it is pointed out that he first checks the correctness of a book's contents before sponsoring it.²⁷

4. The Economic Functions of Morality Book Publishing at the Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy

Most of the Taiwanese phoenix halls founded before the 1960s were located in rural areas or small towns. Gary Seaman has provided us with a study of one such typical cult group in his 1978 book, *Temple Organization in a Chinese Village*. By contrast, the Mingzheng Tang is representative of a new type of urban-based phoenix hall that began to appear from the 1960s onwards. These have been called "new-style phoenix halls" (*xinshi luantang*), and one aspect that is new about them is their much larger output of morality literature when compared to that of traditional halls.

Although religious fervour for proclaiming transformation on behalf of Heaven and the desire to create merit for oneself are important factors in the Mingzheng Tang's flourishing publishing concern, they do not account for the size of this concern when one compares it with the relatively small output of traditional rural phoenix halls. Surely religious motivation and interest in cultivation are roughly constant among phoenix disciples in traditional halls and "new-style" ones such as the Mingzheng Tang. There must therefore be an additional factor to explain the difference in productivity of the two types of phoenix halls.

²⁶ *Shiyi chandao lu*, vol. 8 (Taichung: Luanyou zazhishe, 1993), 5.

²⁷ Chunlian 春蓮, "Zhuyin shanshu de fubao" 助印善書的福報 [The rewards of sponsoring morality books], *Luanyou* 362 (1984): 27.

This factor is to be found in the institutional structure of the Mingzheng Tang and the composition of its membership. While most traditional phoenix halls (such as Seaman's Pearl Mountain Village cult) are rural and community-based, drawing their membership and resources from the local community, new-style urban phoenix halls are characterized by the geographical dispersion of their membership. A traditional phoenix hall only has to serve its local community to maintain itself, and the majority of its activities are geared towards this community. This is one of the main reasons for the preponderance of personal consultation and healing sessions over book-writing séances in rural phoenix halls. The former are the primary services rendered by the hall to the community; book publications, though considered meritorious and prestigious, are not the cult's primary objective. A new-style phoenix hall such as the Mingzheng Tang, by contrast, has no local community to serve, but exists solely by and for its mission of "proclaiming transformation on behalf of Heaven." It is a specialized religious organization, separated organizationally from the surrounding local community, which serves a clientele of believers all over Taiwan with its print products and ritual services. Its professional organization with full-time, paid staff makes possible a degree of productivity that is beyond the capacity of a community-based rural phoenix hall, even if the latter wanted to achieve such a level of output. This productivity, however, is not only possible for the Mingzheng Tang, it is also necessary for its continued survival. In many respects, a body like the Mingzheng Tang with the Phoenix Friend Magazine Society is a religious business, and like any business it has to create revenue. It has to keep supplying the religious market with a diversified range of ritual services and products in order to maintain or increase its market share. There is a trend in the Mingzheng Tang's development towards an ever greater diversification of its activities beyond the book-writing séances proper. New rituals, spiritual healing services, building-projects, the holding of *dharma* and life-releasing assemblies (*fahui*, *fangshenghui*), the periodic introduction of a new deity with the attendant need for new god images and ritual texts—all of these are, in addition to and beyond their religious meanings, attempts to keep the present clientele investing its money and allegiance in the Mingzheng Tang, and, if possible, to attract new groups of believers. However, among the broad range of "merit products" sold by the Mingzheng Tang, the publishing of spirit-written morality books has remained fundamental. While most of the other services are offered by a variety of temples and religious specialists, it is the production and distribution of spirit-written books that differentiates a phoenix hall from its competitors; these works are its "trademark product." The donations of printing-sponsors have always been and still are the Hall's main source of income. At the same time it is the Mingzheng Tang's *shanshu* that

create and support the Hall's reputation of being especially close to and favoured by the celestial authorities; this reputation and prestige, in turn, give credibility and value to all of the other services offered by the Hall. Economic necessity and religious enthusiasm thus go hand in hand in generating the great activism and productivity of new-style phoenix halls.

5. Summary and Conclusion

The spirit-writing of morality books is the central ritual activity of the Mingzheng Tang; it is what defines it as a phoenix hall. These books fulfil external and internal functions. Externally they are directed towards society, preaching the need for moral reform in order to cure the ills of the present age, believed to be in a process of moral decay, caused by the social and cultural effects of modernization. Internally, they figure prominently in the cultivational practices revolving around the concept of "merit," a key term in the Mingzheng Tang's model of cultivation. Merit and demerit are quantifiable results of moral and immoral actions, speech, and thoughts; their balance is carried as karma from one existence to the next. As teachers, the Mingzheng Tang's gods do not merely guide and instruct their disciples in their moral cultivation, but also assess their relative accomplishment in this endeavour, assigning merits and demerits for a student's every success and failure. Merit, however, is not just a kind of passive reward granted by the teacher for the student's moral success, but as karma it is an active force in itself counteracting the effects of demerits. Moral action creates merit, and merit in turn clears away the "karmic obstructions" (*yezhang*) clouding one's numinous nature, thus facilitating further moral action. Here the writing and dissemination of morality books represent opportunities for merit creation. As we have seen, morality books are the most highly valued means of accumulating merit because of their assumed broad impact all across society and the incalculable amount of "consecutive merit" they produce by their transformative effectiveness. Beyond providing disciples with the direct moral instruction and guidance of the gods, the Mingzheng Tang's morality books thus also act as virtually inexhaustible sources of merit, which can be tapped by attending the book-writing séances and sponsoring the printing of the texts. While the Mingzheng Tang offers a number of other merit creating opportunities (such as the sponsoring of "bushels," building-projects, new god images, life releasing and *dharma* assemblies), morality books are without doubt its principal line of "merit products." For their production and marketing the Hall maintains in the form of the Phoenix Friend Magazine Association a specialized apparatus staffed with professional, full-time personnel. The existence of this institution makes possible a publishing programme that far exceeds the capacity of traditional-style, village-based phoenix halls. How-

ever, not only does it enable, it also necessitates a high level of productivity. With no local community to support it, the Mingzheng Tang depends entirely on donations given to it by its members and outside believers; a large part of this income comes from the money given for the printing of morality books and the *Phoenix Friend* magazine. Without the continuous production of new *shanshu* to attract merit money, the Magazine Society could not generate enough income to cover the considerable costs incurred by its publishing concern and by the activities of the Mingzheng Tang. Thus the high morality book output of new-style phoenix halls such as the Mingzheng Tang is conditioned as much by economic as by religious factors.

To the Western observer, accustomed to thinking in antagonistic terms about “God” and “Mammon,” this close intertwining of religious and economic concerns may appear problematic at first sight. However, viewed from a religious economy perspective such as that developed by Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, every religion’s primary function is “to create, maintain, and exchange supernaturally based general compensators,” a compensator (such as a belief) being a substitute for something not attainable in this life (such as immortality).²⁸ This describes very well what the Hall of Enlightened Orthodoxy is engaged in. The “compensator” it sells is merit, created through activities such as morality book printing, releasing living beings, charitable giving maintained through a belief system that correlates merit with supernatural rewards, and which it exchanges for money and good deeds. The merit sold by the Mingzheng Tang also possesses a quality that allows us to refine Stark and Bainbridge’s model. The latter posits the existence of two different kinds of compensators: general, truly religious, compensators which can be redeemed only in the afterlife, and specific, magical compensators, that bring benefits in this life. While Stark and Bainbridge’s model interprets religious exchange as a limited transaction where you can buy either one or the other of these two different products, the Mingzheng Tang has progressed into an “open economy:” merit is basically a compensatorial currency which can be put to use for both “general” and “specific” purposes, that is, for salvation in the afterlife and worldly blessings in this life. Phoenix disciples fully committed to their cult’s teachings will usually attend its ritual activities on a regular basis as part of a religious regimen that they expect will lead them to posthumous salvation. These core adherents invest their time and money in the creation of merit for both “general” and “specific” purposes. By contrast, individuals from the outer circles of the Mingzheng Tang’s adherents are less committed to the Hall’s

²⁸ Rodney Stark – William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 172.

programme of moral cultivation and use the merit-making opportunities offered by it principally for “specific” purposes that may include helping them pass examinations, heal diseases, correct an inauspicious turn of destiny, or to free ancestors from purgatory. To them, the Mingzheng Tang is one provider of ritual services among many in the Taiwanese religious marketplace. It differentiates itself from its competitors by its particular method of solving its clients’ problems, namely, letting them create merit for themselves through the sponsoring of the cult’s books. Of course, the Mingzheng Tang also offers other problem-solving methods, such as the use of the planchette as an oracle for practical purposes (*jishi*), for numinous healing (*lingliao*), or for the writing of charms. These, however, are not unique to the Mingzheng Tang; similar services are offered by fortune-tellers, Daoist practitioners, and *tang-ki* (speaking mediums). These services are clearly of secondary importance to the Mingzheng Tang as ultimately they draw their legitimacy from the Hall’s reputation for being closely connected with the celestial authorities and therefore being able and authorized to mediate between it and the human petitioner. This reputation, in turn, is based on its ability to write and disseminate *shanshu*, each of which has to be specifically mandated by Heaven as proof of the continued high esteem in which Heaven holds the Hall. In sum, the Hall’s morality books are central to its self-definition as a phoenix hall, to its reputation as a mediator of numinous power, to its divinely guided and supervised programme of moral cultivation, and to its economic viability as a voluntary religious association lacking the support of a territorially based community.

The example of the Mingzheng Tang thus reveals a whole complex of religious functions tied to the morality book publishing industry of Taiwan, a complex not immediately apparent from the dusty little booklets at the neighbourhood temple or the bus station. The production of these booklets is closely connected with their sponsors’ desire to accumulate merit as part of a path of personal cultivation and with their publishers’ institutional structure that requires a constant output of such texts.

Concerning the question of the overall social impact of morality books this means: If these are the key factors behind the voluminous morality literature of modern Taiwan, we should be cautious about deducing from its ubiquity alone that it has a significant impact on Taiwanese society. The large numbers of *shanshu* circulating in Taiwanese communities are first and foremost an indication of the high vitality of a particular sector of the Taiwanese religious economy, but not per se evidence of a widespread influence of this literature on moral values and religious beliefs in Taiwanese society at large.

Postscript

After presenting a version of this paper to two different audiences in Taiwan in late 2006,²⁹ the comments I received caused me to realize that the application of Stark and Bainbridge's rational choice model of religious behaviour constitutes the beginning rather than the conclusion of an analysis of the exchange mechanisms described in this paper. The kind of economic exchange model I employed here has its persuasive qualities and fits in well with other authors' observations concerning the commodification of morality in Chinese societies.³⁰ At the same time, however, the conversion of cultivation and money into merit also possesses features that are not easily explained in terms of commodity exchanges. Tsinghua professor James Wilkerson pointed out that the notion of consecutive merit, for example, implies that we are dealing with more than a simple exchange of goods or conversion of currencies. When I describe consecutive merit as an interest-bearing merit investment, it clearly differs in kind from a straightforward exchange of goods, and may perhaps more profitably be conceptualized as a gift that establishes some kind of relationship which enables the return flow of merit as a return gift. And indeed, looked at in this way, we could say that the meritorious action (sponsoring of a morality book) creates an object (the book) that is then given as a gift. Although the donor is anonymous and does not create a personal relationship with the recipient (the reader of the book), just as in more typical gift economies the latter is obligated to return the gift in some way, which happens here in the form of the accruing consecutive merit that the recipient transfers unwittingly to the donor. There is a certain resemblance here to the Maori notion of the gift (*taonga*) that carries with it a spirit (*hau*) which will ultimately effect a backflow of return gifts even through a chain of several givers/recipients. As Marcel Mauss put it in his classic essay on the Gift,

[the *hau*] pursues not only the first recipient of it [= the *taonga*], but every individual to whom the *taonga* is transmitted. The *hau* wants to return to its place of birth, to its sanctuary of forest and clan and to its owner. The *taonga* and its *hau*—itself a kind of individual—constrains a series of users to return some kind of *taonga* of their own, some property

²⁹ Lectures given at the respective Departments of Anthropology of Tsinghua University (Hsinchu, Taiwan) on 29 November 2006, and of National Taiwan University on 1 December 2006. I would like to thank Prof. Ku Kun-hui of Tsinghua and Prof. Lin Wei-ping of National Taiwan University for inviting me to give these lectures.

³⁰ See for example Marc L. Moskowitz, *The Haunting Fetus: Abortion, Sexuality, and the Spirit World in Taiwan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 69, 168-169.

or merchandise or labour, by means of feasts, entertainments or gifts of equivalent or superior value.³¹

Thus, at least in some dimensions merit may well function more in terms of gift than commodity exchanges. However, the example of consecutive merit also shows differences from classical gift exchanges in that there is no personal contiguity among the members of the donor-recipient-donor chain and thus no operative social relationship is established. This anonymity of the exchange is confirmed by the unconscious, hidden nature of the return flow of merit: the recipient reciprocates the gift without knowing it and is therefore not an actor in any kind of personal relationship. This separation of the exchange from face-to-face social intercourse implies that at the very least classical gift theory would need to be significantly adapted to help account for the “merit complex” of modern Chinese popular religion. That, however, cannot be attempted in a postscript to a largely empirically focused research paper like the present one. It is a task that I hope to tackle in the future within a more general study of the merit concept in Chinese culture.

³¹ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, translated by Ian Cunnison (London: Cohen & West Ltd., 1969), 9-10.