

**Mediums and the New Media:  
The Impact of Electronic Publishing on Temple and Moral Economies in  
Taiwanese Popular Religion**

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**Introduction**

Religion’s role and fate on the Internet emerged in the 1990s as a hot new topic in religious studies and has stayed with us since then, spawning for example a panel at this AAR meeting on “Surveying Our Understanding of Digital Religion” (organized by the “Religion, Media, and Culture” group). Drawing on Walter Ong’s theories of the impact of communication technologies on human consciousness and cultural innovation, in the early years expectations were high that online religion would create radically novel (and perhaps even better) ways of being religious and doing religion.<sup>1</sup> This optimism has of late been dampened. Stephen D. O’Leary, one of the field’s early “prophets,” is now taking a more guarded view, pointing out that by the mid-2000’s few religious websites had utilized the full communicative potential of the Web.<sup>2</sup> While religious groups have rushed to embrace the Web as a largely one-way platform to get their message across, they have been more reluctant to come up with

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<sup>1</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002; first published 1982); Stephen D. O’Leary, “Cyberspace as Sacred Space: Communicating Religion on Computer Networks.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64.4 (1996): 781-808; Brenda E. Brasher, *Give Me that Online Religion* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Stephen D. O’Leary, “Utopian and Dystopian Possibilities of Networked Religion in the New Millennium,” in *Religion and Cyberspace*, ed. Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), 38-49.

new interactive modes of religious communication and action. In the same conference volume as O’Leary’s piece, Lorne L. Dawson considers the limitations of online religiosity in terms of the inbuilt reflexivity of computer-mediated communication. This may work well for fringe religious forms such as techno-paganism, but seems hard to reconcile with more traditional notions of authentic religious experience.<sup>3</sup>

The present paper seeks to examine the forays into the Internet of one type of religious organization in Taiwan: spirit-writing cults, a.k.a. “phoenix halls” (*luan-tang* 鸞堂). The key activity of any phoenix hall is spirit-writing (*fuji* 扶乩, *fuluan* 扶鸞), i.e., the recording of texts authored by the cult group’s gods through the services of a human medium wielding either a pen on paper, or a wooden, Y-shaped “planchette” (*mubi* 木筆, *taobi* 桃筆) on the sand-covered surface of a tray.<sup>4</sup> Most of the texts thus produced are classified as “morality books” (*shanshu* 善書), texts admonishing people to moral reform and spiritual cultivation. Spirit-writing is not the only activity of a *luan-tang*, but is supplemented with numerous ritual and spiritual services, many of which are also performed by other groups. These include, for example, divinatory counselling (*jishi* 濟世), spiritual healing (*lingliao* 靈療), salvation of ancestors (*chaoba* 超拔), release of captive animals (*fangsheng* 放生), scripture recitation (*songjing* 誦經) etc. However, spirit-writing is the key (or perhaps, trademark) activity in that it defines the identity of a *luan-tang* vis-à-vis other religious groups that do not practise this form of mediumistic communication.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lorne L. Dawson, “The Mediation of Religious Experience in Cyberspace,” in *Religion and Cyberspace*, 15-37.

<sup>4</sup> For a general introduction to spirit-writing and spirit-writing cults, see David K. Jordan and Daniel L. Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> At the same time, it creates links of affinity with other groups that do perform spirit-writing, such as the “Way of Unity” (Yiguandao). See Clart, “The Phoenix and the Mother: The Interaction of Spirit-Writing Cults and Popular Sects in Taiwan,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 25 (1997): 1-32.

These days, *luan-tang* come in two basic types: on the one hand, we find traditional, community-based cult groups, often affiliated with public community temples in rural areas; on the other hand, an entrepreneurial and sectarian type has come into being since the 1960s. *Luan-tang* of the latter type tend to be urban-based cult groups with a voluntary membership drawn not from the immediate neighbourhood, but from a wider area, often across the island of Taiwan. There is no sharp dividing line between the two types; texts are exchanged among them and membership sometimes overlaps (as when a member of a rural traditional *luan-tang* also attends the activities of a city-based sectarian temple). However, their modes of operation are usually quite distinct. Thus, while rural temples often have irregular séance schedules, urban temples usually hold regular activities on weekends, i.e., times that allow members to travel to the temple from their often quite distant homes. They also tend to have a much larger output of texts and a semi- to fully-professional organizational structure, with salaried staff and mediums, and usually a publishing branch for the production and distribution of their morality books. Many urban *luan-tang* since the 1960s and especially the 1970s created their reputations through the propagation of their texts in the form of fortnightly or monthly magazines and books put out by their own “magazine societies” (*zazhishe* 雜誌社). These professionally produced print products were distributed for free in temples, train stations, hospitals, and other public places across Taiwan, serving both to spread the cult group’s teachings and to attract new members. My own field research at a phoenix hall in the central Taiwanese city of Taichung in 1994 found that roughly 60% of its membership had first learned of the temple through its publications. Thus, the mass production and distribution of print products were in the past highly effective recruitment tools for urban phoenix halls. High print productivity was also

an economic necessity for these groups. Professional operations not only enable higher productivity, they also need it for continued survival. Since the publication of morality books is underwritten by donors far beyond the formal circle of cult members as a way of creating religious merit (*gongde* 功德) for themselves, a significant portion of an urban *luan-tang*'s income is generated through its publishing ventures.<sup>6</sup> The publishing of morality books thus served three basic purposes:

1. As a way of distributing content, it was the primary vehicle for the phoenix hall mission to “proclaim transformation on behalf of Heaven” (*daitian xuanhua* 代天宣化).
2. For individual sponsors, morality books were a means to create merit for religious purposes such as their own cultivation or spiritual aid to their ancestors.
3. For phoenix halls, they served as advertisements to attract new members and sponsors and to generate the main portion of their income.

I have so far largely used the past tense to indicate that the state of affairs described pertained up to the 1990s, when I did most of my field research. The situation has not changed drastically since then; the printing of morality books and journals is still a central part of both the religious mission and the business model of a sectarian *luan-tang*. What has changed drastically, however, is the overall communication culture of Taiwan, with the universal adoption of cell phones, e-mail, and the Internet since the 1990s. The present paper seeks to evaluate in what ways (if any) the rise of electronic publishing has affected urban *luan-tang*, using a selection of phoenix hall websites as its primary data.

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<sup>6</sup> For more on this aspect, see Clart, “Merit beyond Measure: Notes on the Moral (and Real) Economy of Religious Publishing in Taiwan,” in *The People and the Dao: New Studies in Chinese Religions in Honour of Daniel L. Overmyer*, ed. Philip Clart & Paul Crowe (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 2009), 127-142.

## **The Websites**

My empirical data are drawn from the websites of seven (mostly central) Taiwanese phoenix halls. All websites contain basic information about the temple in question, news about temple activities (often accompanied by photos and video clips), announcements, contact information (including by email), etc. The chart in Appendix 1 compares only those components of the sites that are of interest in the current context: the amount and format of electronic religious texts available, the site's interconnectedness (in the shape of link lists), and the site's degree of interactivity (a measurement of the degree to which the cult group is building a virtual dimension). All sites were accessed in October of 2011. I have personally visited five of the seven groups "in the real world" and thus possess ethnographic data on their offline operations (Wumiao Mingzheng Tang 武廟明正堂, Gongheng Tang 拱衡堂, Xuyuan Tang 虛原堂, Baode Dadaoyuan 寶德大道院, Quanzhen Tang 全真堂). A comparison of the sites (see Appendix 1) yields the following preliminary results:

1. Five of the seven groups make all or most of their publications available electronically, either in html or in pdf format. The remaining two provide only limited access.
2. For all of the groups, the website is a largely one-way medium of communication. Interactivity is limited to providing response forms and email links for the kinds of communication that formerly would have been (and today still also can be) accomplished by mail, fax, and phone. Where provided, blogs and bulletin boards also function largely one-way, with little input from outside the temple functionaries' circle. The virtual worship site provided by

Wumiao Mingzheng Tang is an exception to the rule and will be discussed below.

3. The temples do not create linked networks, but with a couple of fairly limited exceptions maintain isolated websites.

As for many other religious organizations, the Internet for these groups appears to be an extension of previous, largely one-way media use to (1) spread their message, and (2) attract new members and donations. This impression is strengthened by the fact that no temple has set up online payment mechanisms; all donations need to be made by conventional wire transfers into the temples' bank accounts. Furthermore, the phoenix hall business model of providing merit in exchange for sponsorship of morality book printing has not yet been adapted to the internet environment: quantified merit amounts are still attached to the numbers of sponsored printed books, scriptures, and magazine issues. No procedure for assigning quantified merit to the online publishing of *shanshu* has so far been developed.<sup>7</sup> Thus, electronic *shanshu* can fulfil only two of the three basic functions of their print counterparts; the one function not yet available is that of directly generating quantifiable amounts of merit. Therefore, intangible yet quantifiable merit remains for the time being tied to tangible (and equally quantifiable) offline merit products.

Since printed morality texts remain the main source of income for phoenix halls, the latter need a business strategy on how to manage their product portfolio.

The seven websites reveal two basic strategies:

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<sup>7</sup> Such mechanisms are not impossible to imagine. For example, one might conceive of assigning merit amounts to each download of a sponsored e-book. This would help quantify a hitherto unquantifiable category, that of “consecutive merit” (*houxu zhi gong* 後續之功), i.e., the merit produced by the specific salutary effects effected by *shanshu* that found their way into the hands of receptive readers. See Clart, “Merit beyond Measure.” However, an interview with the chairman and the principal medium of the Baode Dadaoyuan in March 2011 did not elicit any evidence that phoenix hall leaders are expending much thought on this question.

1. Full electronic content access as a way to attract business to the “brick-and-mortar” temple and its print merit products (Gongheng Tang, Xianyi Tang, Baode Dadaoyuan, Quanzhen Tang, Chongxin Tang).
2. Full listings of print products and provision of “teaser” material (such as brief excerpts, pictures of book covers etc.), but only limited electronic access so that interested readers are directed to the print products controlled by the temple (Wumiao Mingzheng Tang, Xuyuan Tang).

Neither of the two strategies amounts to a substantive shift in the mode of operation of the phoenix halls examined here. To reiterate: The websites enhance offline ways of communicating content and attracting the faithful and their donations, but they do not create radically new ways of religious action and participation. This conservative use of web technology is also visible in the limited interconnectedness and interactivity of the sites examined here. The low degree of interlinkage among these sites (and with other sites) needs to be seen in the context of competitiveness among phoenix halls, which collectively are suppliers of merit products for a limited clientele. While phoenix halls may have overlapping membership and maintain amicable (though distant) relations with other groups, they almost never advertise the morality literature of other temples in their print products. This attitude apparently does not change on the Internet—another sign that the new communication medium is seen primarily as an enhancement of the old.

The same conservatism applies to the interactive potentials of the Web. As long as the phoenix hall business model cannot be transferred into cyberspace, these cult groups are not likely to move much of their ritual activity online.<sup>8</sup> The one

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<sup>8</sup> To my knowledge, no phoenix hall has ever considered the possibility of conducting online *fuluan* séances. In fact, *fuluan* as a form of writing should be quite at home in the scriptocentric Internet environment. This could be achieved by either having the medium type into a computer instead of writing on paper or sand or by replacing the sand tray with touch-sensitive screen.

exception to this picture of almost non-existent interactivity is the Wumiao Mingzheng Tang's virtual offering ritual, which fits in with that cult group's openness to technological innovation. For example, the temple has added a computerized display to its ancestral offerings space on the second floor to allow worshippers to display their deified ancestors' titles in the altar space (see photographs in appendix 3); it also supplements the traditional pen-on-paper recording of the god's messages during a séance with an additional record typed into a laptop computer (located just outside the inner sanctum). The online worship site seems to go a step further by offering free rituals away from the brick-and-mortar temple, but it is in my view intended as an attention-getter rather than a genuine alternative in virtual space. After all, the same temple carefully limits the extent to which its texts are available in cyberspace, thus firmly protecting its offline operations.<sup>9</sup>

### **Conclusions and Questions for Further Research**

In the following, I will list some very preliminary conclusions:

1. Electronic publishing fits in quite smoothly with a phoenix hall's mission to "proclaim moral reform on behalf of Heaven (*daitian xuanhua*). As a new format of one-way communication, electronic publishing has not required any theological adaptations.
2. Phoenix halls have therefore largely adopted electronic publishing as an enhancement of their previous communication strategies. By offering electronic versions of their magazines and morality books, temples reach a wider readership and can thus attract additional members to their offline cult groups and merit investors to their print publishing ventures. The focus remains on the offline community; there is

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<sup>9</sup> I will try to verify this hypothesis during my next visit to the temple in 2012.

little attempt to build true online communities. The technological potential is there to move some rituals into the virtual sphere, but so far this is not happening.

3. Thus, phoenix halls have not yet significantly utilized the interconnective and interactive aspects of the Internet.

3a. The only interactive element of most sites is a comment form that can be used to send electronic messages to the temple and to submit questions for the “divinatory counselling” séances. Established interactive formats such as chat rooms and blogs, utilized by other religious groups, are for the most part absent.

3b. Interconnectivity varies greatly with some groups maintaining lists of links to other religious and charitable organizations, while others are barely interconnecting at all. Low interconnectivity is related to the competitive nature of *luan-tang*, which vie for a limited pool of adherents and merit investors. Just as company websites typically do not interlink with the web presences of competitors, *luan-tang* rarely point to the portals of other *luan-tang*.

4. Reasons for the limited use of the Internet by *luan-tang*:

4a. Simple technological inertia—a factor certainly not to be underestimated, but it also needs to be pointed out that for all their value conservatism, phoenix hall members are not typically technophobes. Questionnaire research has shown positive attitudes toward technological innovation among *luan-tang* members.<sup>10</sup> My own research has also emphasized the highly flexible nature

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<sup>10</sup> Zhang Jialin 張家麟, “Dangdai Taiwan fuluan yishi bianqian 當代臺灣扶鸞儀式變遷,” in *Dangdai Taiwan zongjiao fazhan 當代臺灣宗教發展* (Taipei: Wenjing, 2005), 277-288.

of phoenix hall conservatism.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, I would not accord significant explanatory value to technological inertia, ineptitude, or disinterest.

4b. The core experience in *luan-tang* is the encounter with the gods in the spirit-writing séance. Here we come up against the question as to how the sacred is or can be experienced in the virtual sphere. This relates to the broader concerns of Lorne L. Dawson mentioned in this introduction to this paper. A shift of phoenix hall ritual practice into cyberspace has not yet happened in any substantial way. Whether it could or will happen, depends both on the larger question of the viability of online religious experience, and on the creation of a viable online business model by and for phoenix halls.

Which brings us to the last point:

4c. So far, in both its religious and economic dimensions, the Taiwanese merit economy remains based on a print culture; a comparable model is not yet available for online publishing.<sup>12</sup> As long as *luan-tang* have no way of maintaining themselves through online activities, they are not likely to move much of their “business” into cyberspace.

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<sup>11</sup> Clart, “Chinese Tradition and Taiwanese Modernity: Morality Books as Social Commentary and Critique,” in *Religion in Modern Taiwan: Tradition and Innovation in a Changing Society*, ed. Philip Clart and Charles B. Jones (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2003), 84-97.

<sup>12</sup> Much to the chagrin of many local temples that find their shelves overflowing with morality books and do not know how to deal with all this unwanted religious literature. See a recent newspaper report on the situation in Pingdong county. Li Lifa 李立法, “Yin shanshu, mei ren kan, miaoyu shoudao toutong 印善書，沒人看，廟宇收到頭痛,” *Ziyou shibao* 自由時報, 5 May 2010 (accessed online on 22 October 2011, <http://www.libertytimes.com.tw/2010/new/may/5/today-life12.htm>).