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Articles

The Cult of Spirit-Writing in the Qing

The Daoist Dimension

LAI CHI-TIM

Abstract¹

In Chinese religions, “spirit-writing” is an oracular technique that channels communication between the realm of deities and groups of devotees. Popular in 19th-century China, there is little evidence that it was particularly Daoist and that spirit-written scriptures contained in the Ming *Daozang* emerged directly from traditional Daoist doctrine. However, its adoption in the Qing greatly influenced the development of the religion, sparking the growth of lay practice. Beginning in the early 17th century, literati-led spirit-writing altars flourished, devoted to the immortal Lü Dongbin. Small but widespread groups centering on altars since then have represented a third facet of the religion, besides monastic and fire-dwelling Daoism. Not founded by monks or priests, these groups are lay congregations centering on spirit-writing cults to Patriarch Lü. They place strong emphasis on the personal aspect of devotion and self-cultivation through internal alchemy and other methods, commonly revealed through spirit-writing. Central to their belief structure is a shift from institutionalized to local and personal religion, opening a different path to salvation and exploring new forms of meditative processes. The compilation, production, and circulation of different editions of their texts, such as the spirit-written *Lüzü quanshu*, shows an association network devoted to lay Daoist spirit-writing cults not only in the main centers of Wuchang, Changzhou, Hangzhou, Chengdu, Beijing, Guangdong, and elsewhere.

¹ This paper is based on a research project entitled, “Virtual Museum of Guangzhou Daoist Temples (Ming Dynasty – Present).” The project was generously funded by the Research Grants Council of the University Grants Committee (Hong Kong) (ref. CUHK 447611)

In Chinese religions, "spirit-writing" (*fuluan* 扶鸞, lit. "supporting the phoenix"²), also called *fujū* 扶乩, lit. "supporting the planchette," is an oracular technique that channels communication between the realm of deities and groups of people devoted to spirit-writing cults. One or two spirit mediums, known as the "principal phoenix disciple" (*zhengluan shen* 正鸞生) or also as *jishou* 乩手, hold a writing implement, usually a Y-shaped wooden stick, believed to be directed by a deity to reveal characters in a sand tray (*shapan* 砂盤). A reader calls out the characters and a scribe transcribes the message onto paper. Usually, the séance takes place in the inner sanctuary of the shrine, an area before a central image of the deity, fenced off with a low wooden railing. A number of devotees and cult members may be present to observe the séance.



Fig. 1. A séance at a spirit-writing cult in Hong Kong.

Unlike the "martial" form of mediumship paradigmatically seen in the exorcistic or violent practices of the so-called *tāng-ki* spirit medium in

² The *luan* 鸞 is a mystical bird similar but not identical to the *feng* 鳳, which is commonly rendered in English as "phoenix."

Taiwanese and other South Asian communities, spirit-writing takes a “literary” form of mediumship and transmits divine messages to humans in written format. The literary term for spirit-writing cults is “descending brush” (*jiangbi* 降筆), meaning the revelation of divine messages through a brush on a sand-covered surface.

The Daoist Connection

There appears to be little evidence that spirit-writing was particularly the domain of the Daoist tradition. Conversely, most spirit-writing altars promoted the syncretic nature of Chinese religious beliefs and ritual practices, combining Confucian morality, Daoist concepts of immortality, and the Buddhist liturgical method for the universal deliverance of the dead. In late imperial China, spirit-writing cults were often supported by a heterogeneous local elite consisting of scholar-officials, gentry, merchants, and wealthy people.

Spirit-writing in 19th-century China was a popular religious practice shared by many new sectarian groups, such as the Xiantian dao 先天道 (Way of Anterior Heaven), Tongshan hui 同善會 (Society for Sharing Goodness), Yiguan dao 一貫道 (Way of All-pervading Unity), and others. After the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, these sectarian communities were stigmatized as “reactionary secret societies” and forced to desist from all public activities. Therefore, spirit-writing has long been abolished in mainland China. In contrast, spirit-writing altars (*jitan* 乩壇) or phoenix halls (*luantang* 鸞堂) still spread across many Chinese communities in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and North America. For instance, over five hundred phoenix halls reportedly share the popular Confucian orientation in Taiwan. In 1978, they set up an association of phoenix halls called the Republic of China Assembly of the Divine Teachings of the Confucian School (Zhonghua Mingguo Shejiao Hui 中華民國儒宗神教會) (Clart 1996, 8; 2003).

Spirit-writing was practiced in China for centuries and can be traced back to the 12th century under the Southern Song (1127-1278). An oracular technique, it was a common divination practice, in vogue among high-ranking officials and the literati as well as the common people. While spirit-writing was mostly used as an oracle to solve believers’ personal problems, it could be and was also used for writing books of revelations attributed to the deity worshiped by the cult.

According to Kristofer Schipper and Terry Kleeman, one of the earliest surviving scriptures contained in the Ming *Daozang* 道藏 (Daoist Canon), the *Wenchang dadong xianjing* 文昌大洞仙經 (Great Cavern Scripture According to Wenchang, DZ 5), is explicitly recognized to have been composed by spirit-writing or "descending the brush onto the phoenix terrace" (*jiangbi yu luntai* 降筆於鸞臺) ((Schipper 1994, 12-13; Schipper and Verellen 2004, 1204-05). It was revealed near Chengdu, Sichuan in 1168 by the Divine Lord of Zitong 梓潼帝君, a popular deity in northern Sichuan, to the medium Liu Ansheng 劉安勝, referred to as the Attendant Transcendent of the Phoenix Ministry (*luanfu shixian* 鸞府侍仙) (Kleeman 1993, 46; 1994, 16-19).

Liu's spirit-writing shrine was called the Altar of the Mysterious Union in Jade Vacuity (Xuanhui yuxu tan 玄會玉虛壇), established in the Pavilion of Central Harmony and Sincere Response (Zhonghe chengying lou 中和誠應樓) on the otherwise unknown Baoping shan 寶屏山 near Chengdu (*Gaoshang dadong Wenchang silu ziyang baolu* 大洞文昌司祿紫陽寶籙 1.3a; Kleeman 1994, 18). We have very little information about the medium or his spirit-writing group. Although some scholars regard his group as one of the earliest Daoist shrines (*daotan* 道壇) practicing spirit-writing, it is not clear whether Liu was a Daoist priest with patrons who formed an organized Daoist group centered on religious spirit-writing (Xie 2013, 125-26; Clart 1996, 13).

Unlike the traditional view that the rise of the spirit-writing cult had a close affinity with Daoism (see Xu 1999; Kleeman 1993, 60), my hypothesis is that it cannot be taken for granted that this example of Liu Ansheng's spirit-written scriptures emerged directly from the "internal structure of traditional Daoist doctrine" (Xu 1999, 9). Indeed, the 43rd Heavenly Master of Longhu shan in Jiangxi, Zhang Yuchu 張宇初 (1361-1410), in his *Daomen shigui* 道門十規 (Ten Rules for Daoist Followers) condemned the use of spirit-writing as unfit for orthodox Daoists (Schipper and Verellen 2004, 33, 35). In traditional Daoism, divinities were little more than the hypostasis of cosmic forces, invoked only through elaborate rituals performed by properly ordained priests. In contrast, as Kleeman rightly points out, the religiosity of the spirit-writing cult represents the Song religious revolution, through which cult members had direct communication with the Divine Lord of Zitong (1994, 13; 1993, 63). In sum, it may not be justifiable to argue that, be-

cause they were transmitted in the *Daozang*, these spirit-written scriptures in honor of Zitong and revealed to Liu Ansheng should be viewed as created and developed as part of Daoism.³

Indeed, in his study of the Ming *Daozang*, Schipper delineates a new feature of Daoist theological evolution, namely the increasing influence of popular cults of local saints in lay society after the Southern Song. No longer defining itself against the cults of popular deities, as common in medieval times, Daoism during the Song came under the ever-increasing influence of the worship of popular saints associated with local temples and lay associations (*shehui* 社會). Some local saints such as Wenchang, Mazu 媽祖, Wenqiong 溫瓊, and Guangong 關公 became accepted in Daoism to a certain extent (Schipper 1994, 1-23). Schipper estimates that sixty of the 1420 texts in the Ming Canon relate to the popular worship of local deities. He explains that this adoption of popular cults brought about a certain theological shift in Daoism from the medieval concept of divinity as the hypostasis of cosmic *qi* to the “ephemerist theories which see gods as the transcendent spirits of erstwhile human beings” (Schipper 1994, 20).

Appreciating the adoption of cults of local deities into the Daoist pantheon is useful to the present inquiry concerning the relationship between spirit-writing cults and Daoism. Local literati practiced spirit-writing at home, in temples, and in special shrines founded in every prefecture and county capital under the Song, Yuan, and Ming. It is thus not surprising that it influenced the development of Daoism, and that the *Daozang* contains elements related to it. It has, moreover, also exerted significant influence on lay Daoist literati-congregations in modern China (see Shiga 2013).

First Daoist Cults

Besides the *Wenchang dadong xianjing*, the *Daozang* also contains a collection of writings from a temple cult devoted to two local saints in central Fujian that flourished from the Northern Song until the late Ming. It

³ Philip Clart presents a different view, arguing that “although our data on these Daoist spirit-writing cults are still fragmentary, they are sufficient to indicate the existence of a long and widespread pre-nineteenth century tradition of congregational groups dedicated to such deities as Wenchang, Chen Tuan, and Zhang Sanfeng” (1996, 15).

devoted itself to popular gods named the True Lords of Vast Mercy and Marvelous Succor (Honggen lingji zhenjun 洪恩靈濟真君), a divine title given to the euhemerized figures of the two Xu brothers. Among the many books reproduced by their cult and included in the *Daozang*, the earliest is the *Xuxian hanzao* 徐仙翰藻 (Literary Writings of the Immortal Xu Brothers), dated to the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368). Identifying it as a spirit-written scripture, Schipper says, "All the pieces contained in this collection [*Xuxian hanzao*] were written by the immortal Xu brothers themselves through spirit-writing (*luanji* 鸞箕 or *jibi* 箕筆)" (Schipper and Verellen 2004, 1211).

The worship of the popular deities of Zitong and the immortal Xu Brothers most likely is not typical of the widespread Daoist congregational groups devoted to revealing Daoist divinities by means of spiritwriting from the Southern Song to the mid-Ming. Indeed, the cults represent only some of the instances recorded in the *Daozang*. Nor do we have much evidence to conclude that there was a widespread organization of Daoist altars for spirit-writing before the late 16th century.

In contrast, it is beyond doubt that spirit-writing enjoyed considerable popularity among scholar-officials and literati in late imperial China. They often used it to ask about the outcome of examinations and what official posts they were to attain. For example, the literati-medium Jin Shentan 金聖嘆 (1608-1661), an eminent literary critic, was well-known for using his private spirit-writing practice to resolve the personal problems of many local literati in the Wu region (modern Suzhou, Jiangsu). Jin acquired his divine messages through planchette revelations received from a Buddhist saint by the name of Lean dashi 泐庵大師, who had reincarnated many times since his death in the Chen dynasty (late 6th c.). In view of the popularity of spirit-writing among the late Ming literati in Suzhou, Lu Lin 陸林 notes that "during the reign of Emperor Zhenzong (1628-1644), there was a flourishing of planchette altars set up at home by many literati scholars in the Wu 吳 region" (2006, 158).

Beginning in the early 17th century, literati-led spirit-writing cults flourished devoted to the worship of the Daoist immortal Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓. Also known as Patriarch Lü 呂祖 (Lüzū), he was officially canonized as Fuyou dijun 孚祐帝君 (Imperial Lord, Savior of the Needy) during the Yuan. The school of Complete Perfection (Quanzhen 全真) honored him as their third major patriarch, closely linked to their founder

Wang Zhe 王喆, aka Chongyang 重陽 (1113-1170) and his seven direct disciples. In the late 16th century, he began to communicate via planchette with many devotees of spirit-writing altars established in the Jiangsu and Jiangxi regions. The preface of the *Bapin xinjin* 八品仙經 (Immortal Scripture in Eight Chapters), written in 1589 by Li Yingyang 李應陽 and contained in the *Lüzu quanshu* 呂祖全書 (Complete Books of Patriarch Lü), specifies the details.

The *Bapin xinjin* descended from Patriarch Lü via spirit-writing. The first and second chapters were received in Guangling 廣陵 [Yangzhou 揚州]; the third and fourth chapters in Jinling 金陵 [Nanjing 南京]; the fifth scripture in Piling 毘陵 [Changzhou 常州]; the sixth and seventh chapters in Xinzhou 信州 [Shangrao 上饒]; and the eighth chapters in Linjiang 臨江 [Zhangshu 樟樹].

Patriarch Lü transmitted these chapters to all his believers for wider circulation. The Imperial Lord requested his disciple Qixuanzi 啟玄子 from Guangling to gather and publish the eight chapters. The disciple Li [Yingyang] wrote the preface to this compilation of Patriarch Lü's scripture. After Qixuanzi had finished collecting and editing the eight chapters, he pledged to the female immortal Ho [Xiangu] 何仙姑 and the immortal Zhang Ziyang 張紫陽 to conduct a proofreading by planchette. The final *Bapin xinjin* was printed at [Qixuan zi's] altar called the Pavilion of Gathering Immortals 集仙樓 located in Wandian 萬店 [of Guangling]. (9.Pref 5b)

Spirit-writing cults by private individuals composing scriptures like this, centered on revelations by Lü Dongbin, in the late Ming clustered mainly in the lower Yangzi region, from Jiangxi to Jiangsu. In contrast, Daoist spirit-writing during the Kangxi reign (1662-1722) spread throughout the empire. Four spirit-writing altars in particular distinguished themselves within the cult to Patriarch Lü by their explicit association with traditional lineages of Daoism and the worship of Daoist deities. They included the Gu hongmei ge 古紅梅閣 (Old Red Plum Hall) in Pi-ling, the Hansang gong 涵三宮 (Palace Encompassing the Three [Teachings]) in Wuchang 武昌 (Hubei), the Yutan 玉壇 (Jade Altar) west of Tianxin Bridge 天心橋 in Sucheng 蘇城 (Suzhou), and the Jueyuan tan 覺源壇 (Altar of the Source of Awakening) in Beijing.



Fig. 2. Daoist spirit-writing activity devoted to Patriarch Lü.

The first three were all founded under Kangxi, while the last was famous for being directed by Jiang Yupu 蔣予蒲 (1756-1819), an elite-official at the Qing court under Qianlong (1736-1795). They represented a new type of lay Daoist movement that shared a belief in Patriarch Lü combined with spirit-writing, independence from monastic institutions, and the engagement of lay communities in the cult within certain congregational contexts in association with traditional lineages.

The *Jinhua zongzhi*

Monica Esposito and Mori Yuria recently studied the *Jinhua zongzhi* 金華宗旨 (Tenets of the Golden Flower), an alchemical text attributed to Patriarch Lü that centers on the contemplative practice of the golden elixir (*jindan* 金丹) and in the West is known as *The Secret of the Golden Flower* (Wilhelm 1962; Cleary 1992). They show conclusively that it stems from a spirit-writing community named the Bailong jingshe 白龍精舍 (Pure Assembly of the White Dragon), and in the late 17th century was received by a branch of the Gu hongmei ge in Piling (Esposito 1998; 2013; Mori 2002). Members of both spirit-writing altars claimed to belong to the school of Pure Brightness (Jingming dao 淨明道), associated with the immortal Xu Xun 許遜, originally of the Jin dynasty (265-420).

In Song times (1112), Xu Xun was canonized by Emperor Huizong as the True Lord of Divine Merit and Marvelous Succor (Shengong miaoji chenjun 神功妙濟真君). His worship subsequently developed into a full-fledged Daoist school (Schipper and Verellen 2004, 1115). In the early Qing, its followers received texts on contemplative alchemical practices through spirit-writing. As Shao Zhilin 邵志琳 (1748-1810) notes in his preface to the *Jinhua zongzi*, around 1688 a group of at least seven people belonging to Pure Brightness came together at the Bailong jinshe altar in Piling. There they received the *Jinhua zongzi* from Xu Xun through intermediaries: the immortal Lü Dongbin joined by the well-known Complete Perfection masters Qiu Chuji 邱處機 and Tan Chuduan 譚處端.⁴

The text was first revealed as a dialogue between Patriarch Lü and the spirit-writing disciples. As a recipient named Pan Yi'an 彭伊安 describes it,

As I remember, it was in the *wushen* year [1668] that our holy patriarch Chunyang [i.e., Lü] began to transmit the 'Instructions.' The seven people who made a commitment to him bowed deeply and obtained [his teachings]. None but these seven received this transmission. The most profound teaching was [expressed in] no more than one or two words. It could not be put into words and letters. Afterwards, the seven questioned the Patriarch in detail. As our holy patriarch spared no mercy in giving clarifications, [his teachings were] compiled for days and months. Eventually they composed a volume. (*Lüzu quanshu* 49, Pref. 9a; Mori 2002, 167)

However, the volume lingered unfinished after the seven original recipients passed away. Only a second revelation to seven other members of the school in 1692 made its completion possible. In its first part, entitled *Kaizong chanjiao* 開宗闡教 (Clear Teachings on the Foundation of our Tradition), Tan Chuduan reveals that, since the transmission of Xu Xun's teachings had disappeared for generations, this text had come to revive them. However, it required the beginning of a new Daoist sect by the name of Ritual Lineage of Great Oneness (*Taiyi fapai* 太乙法派) to be

⁴ Shao Zhilin, in his version of the *Jinhua zongzi* collected in the 64-juan *Lüzu quanshu*, criticizes this school: "Complete Perfection could flourish in its ultimate boom. It had a prosperous time among its followers but declined in the mind-transmission until it reached extreme disorder and confusion, reaching the replacement and decline seen at present" (49.1ab; Mori 2002, 170-71).

linked with Pure Brightness, since its genealogy "does not reside in the southern and northern traditions [of Daoism]" (Esposito 2013, 278). Founded as a new Daoist sect, it also honored Patriarch Lü as the "great Daoist founding master of the first generation." In its wake, its disciples received religious names taken from the post-creation (*houtian* 後天) sequence of the eight trigrams (*Lüzu quanshu* 49.26b).

Like most private spirit-writing altars in the early Qing, Bailong jingshe and Gu hongmei ge in Piling were presumably located in private homes. In contrast, the spirit-writing community of Hansang gong, in the northeast of Wuchang city, in the late 17th century distinguished itself by establishing an independent sanctuary (*gong* 宮) to receive Patriarch Lü's teachings. He began to deliver planchette revelations from heaven to a group of twenty elite scholars at this altar in 1702 (13, Lü Pref. 3a). This altar, too, was originally privately located, in the homes of Li Wushu 李務恕, Song Ticheng 宋體誠, and Qiao Yishu 喬以恕 (13, Huang Chengshu Pref. 3ab). Since their homes did not have enough space and might contaminate the holiness of the descending phoenix, they relocated their spirit-writing activity to a newly-built, independent sanctuary—the Hansang gong on Mount Chongfu 崇府山, northeast of the city.

Its congregation created an organization with its own altar rules, liturgical patterns, and séance officers; members came to fulfill specialized functions (3b-4a). The community further undertook the compilation of a first anthology attributed to Patriarch Lü, the *Lüzu quanshu* in 32 scrolls (see Lai 2013), published in 1744. It served as a model for other Daoist spirit-writing altars who soon came to publish their own editions of histransmissions.

Another spirit-writing altar linked with Patriarch Lü is the Jueyuan tan in Beijing during the Qinlong era (see Mori 2001). Its central figure was Jiang Yupu, also known as Huijue 惠覺. In 1781, he obtained the advanced official degree (*jìnshì* 進士) and entered government service, reaching a position in the Ministry of Revenue (*hubu shilang* 戶部侍郎) in 1808 (Esposito 2013, 205). Although the exact origin of the Jueyuan tan is unknown, an immortal named Enwu 恩悟 reports according to the *Lüzu quanshu zhengzong* 呂祖全書正宗 (Complete Works of the Orthodox Lineage),

In the winter of the *wuwu* 戊午 year [1798], the altar was [re]opened to receive the divine order. The True Lord of Proclaiming the Teaching

[Hongjiao zhenjun 宏教真君, i.e., Liu Shouyan 柳守元, the legendary disciple and assistant of Patriarch Lü] was the resident deity, transmitting divine teachings received from the Imperial Master [Lü]. (ch. 1, Pref. 35a)

Following Patriarch Lü's transmission of alchemical teachings, Jueyuan tan members aspired to create a new orthodox Daoist line, called Celestial Immortal Lineage (Tianxian pai 天仙派) (Esposito 2013, 211). Unlike the Ritual Lineage of Great Oneness affiliated with Pure Brightness, it had no connection to this school nor did it use trigrams to designate its followers, applying instead a new twenty-character lineage poem (*paishi* 派詩):

Tranquilly without any being, 寂然無一物
Marvelously unified with the former heaven, 妙合於先天
Original Yang returns to its original position, 元陽復本位
In solitude you pace the Jade Capital as an immortal. 獨步玉京仙
(Esposito 2013, 285)

However, like other Daoist spirit-writing altars, they were keen to publish spirit-written scriptures attributed to Patriarch Lü. For instance, in his postscript to the new edition of the alchemical scripture *Jindan xinfa* 金丹心法 (Mental Methods of the Golden Elixir), Jiang Yupu claims: On the 18th day of the 6th month in the second year of Jiaqing [1797], I met Chizhen zi 持真子 in Jinan 濟南 and had a first glimpse of the book *Jindan xinfa*. I was struck with wonder, saying, 'Marvelous! This is [the manifestation of] the Dao.'

Spirit-writing altars like the Jueyuan tan played a major role in the later development of the Daoist tradition. As Monica Esposito notes, "This new lineage—created at the Jueyuan tan with its beliefs, aspirations, rules, and commitments—became the driving force in the compilation of a new standardized Daoist Canon [i.e., the *Daozang jiyao* 道藏輯要, the Essence of the Daoist Canon], whose revelation lay in the magical hands of the founding patriarch Lü Dongbin" (2013, 211).

The *Lüzü quanshu*

Members of major Daoist spirit-writing altars all had an explicit lineage consciousness that placed religious beliefs and practices in the Daoist

tradition. This clearly differentiated them from other spirit-writing shrines that incorporated certain self-appellations of the Confucian school (*rumen* 儒門) or popular sects. The latter tended to embed their syncretistic teachings within a popular ritual framework, linked to the worship of popular gods, such as the Venerable Mother of the Limitless of Yiguan dao. In addition, Daoist altars were religious sites independent of the monastic circles of the Complete Perfection school. Rather, they featured a congregational character, receiving Lü Dongbin's teachings via spirit-writing. In the early Qing, moreover, they produced a group of new revelatory Daoist texts, central to the later compilation of various anthologies of Patriarch Lü's writings.

In 1744, the Hansang gong community published the first *Lüzu quanshu* in 32 scrolls, followed by various editions with different numbers of scrolls, compiled at other spirit-writing altars. Between 1803 and 1805, Jueyuan tan disciples compiled a new anthology in 16 scrolls, entitled the *Lüzu quanshu zhengzong*. Another version, the *Lüzu quanshu zongzheng* 呂祖全書宗正 in 18 scrolls, was stored at the spirit-writing altar in the Suzhou area home of Pang Dingqiu 彭定求 (1645-1719), a Daoist devotee and eminent scholar of the Neo-Confucian teachings of Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1528) (Lai 2013, 202). The *Lüzu quanshu zong-zheng* was re-published in 1852 by Chen Mouzi 陳謀子 after he restored its original woodblocks.

Central to Chinese religious life in Ming and Qing society was the harmonious integration of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, acclaimed by all religious schools, sects, and lay associations. Daoist spirit-writing communities, too, adopted this pattern of thought into their religious system, enhanced with the belief that the immortal Lü Dongbin was the "Patriarch of all Three Teachings" (Sanjiao zongshi 三教宗師).

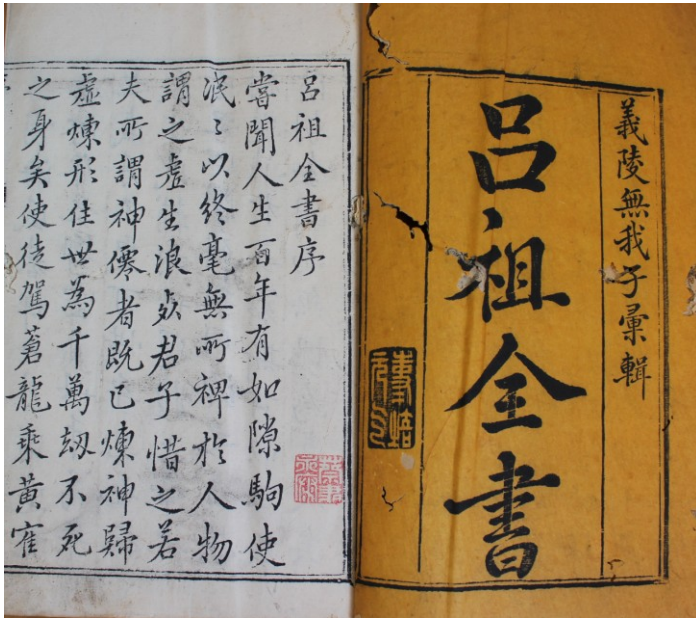


Fig. 3. The *Lüzu quanshu* of 1744

The *Qingwei sanpingjing* 清微三品經 (Immortal Scripture in Three Chapters of the Heaven of Pure Tenuity) states: “We know that the Dao of Confucianism is the same and interconnected with Daoism and Buddhism. Dao has no different intent, and both the schools of Confucianism and Buddhism ultimately derive from it” (*Lüzu quanshu* 14.6a).

The compilation Patriarch Lü’s teachings, furthermore, inspired the completion of the *Daozang jiyao* 道藏輯要 (Essence of Daoist Canon) by the members of the Jueyuan tan, the most important Daoist anthology after the Ming Canon, completed in 1445. Unlike their predecessor, Qing rulers did not undertake a major compilation of this kind, since they tended to repress rather than support Daoism. “The repressive measures instigated by the Manchu rulers and continued by their successors were so effective that in the 1920s only two or three copies of the Ming canon remained extant” (Schipper in Schipper and Verellen 2004, 39-40).

Today, the situation has changed. The canon has survived, and is now available in a variety of typeset and electronic editions, its 1500 texts essential for the modern study of the religion. Begun in 1406 by Zhang Yuchu, it contains about 700 works from earlier canons, to which “the

Ming editors added almost 800 new [Ming] books" (Schipper 1994,, 5). Published in 1445, it offers no materials on late Ming and Qing Daoism and contains few if any spirit-written materials.

The *Lüzu quanshu*, thus, serves as a major supplement to the canon. Even its first version, in 32 scrolls, contains a number of important texts:

Wupin xianjing 五品仙經 (Immortal Scriptures in Five Chapters)

Sanpin xianjing 三品仙經 (Immortal Scriptures in Three Chapters)

Cantong jing 參同經 (Scripture on the Equality of the Three)

Shende jing 聖德經 (Scriptures on the Virtues of the Saints)

Hanzan zayong 涵三雜詠 (Assorted Chants from the Palace Encompassing the Three)

Hanzan yulu 涵三語錄 (Recorded Sayings from the Palace Encompassing the Three)

These works consist mainly of esoteric alchemical teachings, moral injunctions, formal doctrines, treatises on the harmony of the three teachings—all allegedly transmitted by Patriarch Lü through spirit-writing, especially at the altar of the Hansan gong (see Esposito in Pregadio 2008, 726-28; Lai 2013). The *Lüzu quanshu* is thus not only an indispensable source for the study of Qing Daoist altars, but also the foundation and culmination of lay Daoist devotional practice, which largely displaced traditional methods dominantly tied to esoteric rituals performed by ordained priests. The *Lüzu quanshu* and *Daozang jiyao*, thus, provide canonical confirmation that these altars distinguished themselves as part of the Daoist tradition. Not only are their lineages affiliated with Daoist schools, but their compilation and publication of Patriarch Lü's transmissions represents their conscious effort to contribute to the completion of a new Daoist canon, supplementing and amending the omissions in that of the Ming.

In 1742, Liu Tishu 劉體恕, the main editor of the *Lüzu quanshu* in 32 two scrolls, and Huang Chengshu 黃誠恕, the spirit-writing medium of the Hansan gong, decided to gather all spirit-writing scriptures received from Patriarch Lü. When they published his "Complete Writings" in 1744, Huang praised the publication as a work constituting a great collection at the core of the Daoist canon and they announced that this anthology of revelations constituted the essence of the Daoist canon (*Lüzu quanshu* 14.6a, 18.32a).

Between 1803 and 1805, Patriarch Lü ordered the Jueyuan tan in Beijing to publish a new anthology entitled the *Lüzu quanshu zhengzong* in 16 scrolls, including various newly revealed scriptures. As a literati group of lay Daoist reformers, the altar members further followed an idealistic vision of Daoism, stressing the “method of the Golden Elixir” as the *non plus ultra* of orthodox teaching. Next, Patriarch Lü asked them to compile and publish a new standardized canon. They called it *Daozang jiyao* and claimed it was “to collect the quintessence of the entire canon and amend the omissions of the earlier version.” In other words, both texts were the result of altar members’ aspirations toward a reformed Daoism, of their longing to promote and spread the esoteric teachings of the Golden Elixir as received from Patriarch Lü writing. Authorizing this new vision of reformation, he announced before Lord Lao and the all the gods that this standardized canon should collect all texts to “synthesize the true transmission of the alchemical path and to gather together the essence of all scriptures” (Esposito 2013, 212).

Modern Daoism

During the Qing, Daoism was in decline or repression, since the Manchu rulers venerated Tibetan Buddhism and adopted a fundamentalist form of Confucianism, using it both for imperially endorsed rituals and as the basis of the examination system. At this time, “Daoism was not prominent in society and suffered from the generally low status of the clergy. . . . This low status deterred many intellectuals from taking the vow, depriving institutional religion of a supply of educated leadership” (Esposito 2000, 624).

The Qianlong census of all clerics in 1736-1739 shows just how much the Qing state repressed fire-dwelling Daoists (*huoju daoshi* 火居道士) of the Orthodox Unity (Zhengyi 正一) or Celestial Master (Tianshi 天師) school. The only Daoists to be issued a full Ordination Certificate (*dudie* 道牒) were monks of Complete Perfection, who had left the householder’s life (*chujia* 出家) and resided celibately in monasteries. Married Daoist masters living at home received a subordinate variant of the certificate called a Ministry License (*buzhao* 部照) from the Board of Rites (Goossaert 2000).

In addition, the government reduced the official status of the hereditary Celestial Masters based on Mount Longhu 龍虎山. In contrast to the high court status his predecessors enjoyed under the Ming, the 56th Celestial Master Zhang Yulong 張遇隆 (?-1766) would no longer receive an audience at the palace after 1740. He was also demoted from third to fifth in rank at court and forbidden to request titles. By reducing the Celestial Master's formal title and privileges, the Qing state undermined his nominal powers in managing the Daoist religion, especially in the Jiangnan region (Goossaert 2004a, 125; Schipper and Verellen 2004, 39). The influence of the Celestial Masters continued to decline until, in the Daoguang period (1821-1850), the formal title Perfected of Orthodox Unity (Zhengyi sijiao zhenren 正一嗣教真人) disappeared altogether and the relationship between the court and the lineage came to an end (Esposito 2000, 627).

The Qing state officially only recognized the clergy of Complete Perfection, preferring them because they lived in monasteries and followed an ascetic and well-regulated life, conforming to government ideas of rule and control. This was significantly different from the Ming, when many monastic establishments disappeared and ordained clerics only survived by being absorbed into Orthodox Unity or popular temples (Goossaert 2000b, 702). In the early Qing, Complete Perfection experienced a revival, carried mainly by the seventh Dragongate (Longmen 龍門) patriarch, Wang Changyue 王常月 (?-1680), the abbot of the Baiyun guan 白雲觀 (White Cloud Abbey) in Beijing after 1656. He renewed the lineage was renewed and established the Baiyun guan as a major training center for all monks in preparation of formal ordination (*chuanjie* 傳戒) according to the *Longmen lüzong* 龍門律宗 (Dragongate Vinaya) tradition (Esposito 2013, 91-92; Esposito 2014, 12-13). Approved by the Qing state, Dragongate became the favored Daoist order and, within a few decades, claimed an exclusive monopoly on Daoist ordination. Over the next centuries, ordained clerics gained control of most Daoist monasteries in the country. The Qianlong census by "cautious extrapolation suggests a total of around 20,000 Quanzhen clerics for the whole of mid-eighteenth century China" (Goossaert 2004b, 717). The area of dominance of the Complete Perfection clergy and their residential temples may well have extended into northeastern China, including areas such as Hebei, Shandong, and Liaoning (2004b, 718, 736-38).

The various measures of the Qing state, its demotion of married Daoists and Celestial Masters and enhancement of the monopoly of Complete Perfection in due course became a characteristic facet of Daoism in modern China, where political changes further disrupted the connections of Daoist masters with local temples, community life, and ritual services (see Lai 2012). On the other hand, neither had a great impact on local spirit-writing altars featuring groups of Daoist laypeople devoted to worshipping Patriarch Lü. Disassociating themselves from Orthodox Unity with its grand, classical liturgy (*keyi* 科儀), lay communities distanced themselves from the complexity and adulteration of the institutionalized performance of purgations (*zhai* 齋) and cosmic renewals (*jiao* 醮). This is clearly reflected in their choice of texts. “The new [Daoist] canon made the clear choice of leaving them [ritual texts and manuals of exorcism] out to focus on the quintessence of Daoist teaching [for the attainment of true immortality]” (Esposito 2007, 108).

At the same time, they inherited the practice of internal alchemy, the main meditative practice of Complete Perfection and the ultimate means for the attainment of immortality. However, their form of self-cultivation was different and they did not rely on clerics for instruction, and only later did ordained Daoists expand their practice into the laity. For example, in 1787-1792, the renowned Min Yide 閔一得 (1748/58-1836), eleventh Dragongate patriarch on Mount Jin’gai 金蓋山 (near Huzhou 湖州), founded a local group of lay disciples of Complete Perfection, called Lineage of Skillful Means (Fangbian pai 方便派), at a Daoist temple known as (Gu)meihuaguan (古)梅花觀 (Old Plum Blossom Abbey). This, however, has less to do with their desire to enhance lay practice than with the spread of spirit-writing cults dedicated to Patriarch Lü coming to influence the ordained tradition (Goossaert 2011). To borrow Mori Yuria’s words, “the new Dragongate lineage on Mount Jin’gai seems to have gained a guarantee of legitimacy from the spirit-writing of Patriarch Lü” (2002, 179).

In fact, Daoism did not become popularized or gradually lose its unique religious identity when it assimilated the popular cult of spirit-writing. Rather, spirit-writing, especially dedicated to the worship of Patriarch Lü, created a reformation, a new dimension of Daoism, as evident in the compilations of the different editions of the *Lüzu quanshu* and the new *Daozang jiyao*. It means an emancipation of traditional Daoism

into lay associations longing for Patriarch Lü's divine guidance and inspiration. Beyond the reach of the institutional arms of Orthodox Unity masters or Complete Perfection monks, lay devotees of spirit-writing altars directly honored Patriarch Lü as Master of Initiation (*dushi* 度師) or so Immortal Master (*xianshi* 仙師). Like Protestant movements in the West, they claimed to have direct communication with their lord, the Savior of the Needy. They placed strong emphasis on the personal aspect of their devotional practice by means of self-cultivation through internal alchemy and other methods, revealed via spirit-writing. Central to their belief structure was its shift from institutionalized to local and personal religion, opening a different path to transcendence or salvation and exploring new forms of alchemical and meditative processes.

The religious function of spirit-writing cults in effecting "improved access to the sacred realm" (Kleeman 1993, 63) is not merely the spread of lay Daoist altars centered on spirit-writing. As Philip Clart points out in his study of phoenix halls in Taiwan since 1853, their widespread development furnishes an illuminating example of the appropriation of spirit-writing cults into the popular Confucian tradition for the purpose of inventing a new Taiwanese religious tradition, comprising a syncretism of Daoist and Buddhist elements (Clart 1996). In a very similar manner, the spiritual function of spirit-writing cults also sparked the growth of lay Daoism throughout the Qing period. However, the compilation, production, and circulation of different editions of their texts, such as the spirit-written *Lüzü quanshu*, shows an association network devoted to lay Daoist spirit-writing cults not only in the main centers of Wuchang, Changzhou, Hangzhou, Chengdu, and Beijing but also in other parts of the country, notably Guangdong.

The earliest Daoist spirit-writing altar in Guangdong is the Yunqun xianguan 雲泉仙館 (Immortal Academy of Cloudy Springs), established in 1858 on Mount Xiqiao 西樵山 in Nanhai 南海. In 1965 and 1979, after they reestablished the Academy in Hong Kong in 1949, its followers published a 20th-century edition of the *Lüzü quanshu* in 33 scrolls, including also the Southern Song alchemical text *Lingbao bifa* 靈寶畢法 (Complete Methods of the Numinous Treasure) (Lai 2013, 184n4). Outside the monastic and formal ordination system, the Yunqun xianguan goes back to a group of local literati with a focus on spirit-writing and self-cultivation. Members received formal admission by accepting a Daoist name chosen

through spirit-writing. “There was no monastic system. The members did not wear their hair in Daoist fashion or dress in Daoist robes” (Shiga 2002, 199). Although the Academy had no formal ordination system, its lay believers received the status of Daoist (*daoshi* 道士), conferred by Patriarch Lü. As its spirit-written *Shanyu renting lu* 善與人同錄 (Record of Being Good to the Human Community) says,

The ancestral master [Lü] gave an oracle to all disciples, asking them a question: Why are all those who cultivate Dao called *daoshi*? [Patriarch Lü explains,] *Daoshi* refers to a state in which the literati [*shi* 士] are connected to Dao. This category of literati linked to Dao is parallel to other classes, such as literati skilled in literature [*wenshi* 文士] and scholars with degrees [*xueshi* 學士]. (1.7)

To distinguish a *daoshi*'s learning from other modes, the text further prescribes that “Daoist masters must widely practice goodness with merit-making and at the same time follow the path of cultivation and refinement.”

Conclusion

Small but widespread spirit-writing altars, including the Gu hongmei ge in Piling, the Hansanggong in Wuchang, the Jueyuan tan in Beijing, and the Yunqun xianguan in Nankai, represent a third facet of Daoism since the Qing dynasty. Not founded by monastic leaders or other clerical Daoists, they are lay congregations centering on spirit-writing cults honoring Patriarch Lü. Their devotees were elite scholars, some even official *jinshi* graduates who occupied high official rank. From the 17th to the mid-18th centuries, the number of small spirit-writing groups continued to grow. They actively received revelations on alchemical self-cultivation from Patriarch Lü and spread books with Daoist content along with the three teachings. The compilation and spread of the writings of Patriarch Lü, therefore, reflects an idealistic vision of Daoism that arose and spread among literati and spirit-writing circles interested in self-cultivation who were caught up in moralistic and eschatological sentiments of sanctity and salvation.

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