A Contemporary Adaption and Transformation of Chinese Folk Religion: Revelations Brought by the *Huiling* 會靈 (Collective Trance) Movement[*]

Ting Jen-chieh[**]

Abstract

After the 1990s, in the local religious sphere in Taiwan, *Huiling*, a spirit writing movement, rose as a flourishing collective, a group that now receives widespread scholarly attention. This paper seeks to move forward from previous research and, through this example, discuss the subject of how Han Chinese folk religion faces the transformations of modernity and correspondingly adapts. *Huiling* is an image of collectively shared Han Chinese local beliefs; moreover, it is a system of religious practices, transformed in its intrinsic meaning from a symbolic system that had its origins in folk religious beliefs. This system exists simultaneously with folk religious beliefs and extends that symbolic system of Han Chinese folk religion into the contemporary world with a higher plausibility. This paper points out that, in the contrast between two forms of exposition, coherence theory and correspondence theory, Han Chinese folk religious beliefs can be regarded as a of kind disconnect from empirical evidence and possess a propositional system, intrinsically harmonious with this form of coherence theory. This system is openly facing the challenges engendered by the empirical evidence of modernity. As we observe through this example of the *Huiling*, its methods of adaptation are not those that answer to empirical evidence, but are instead a new model of transformation and

practice that results from internal alterations to enter an even more transcendent standing and progress as a declaration of truth and bodily links. In this example of the *Huiling*, this new orientation includes remolding the emergence of a new systemization of the *xiantian ling* 先天靈 (spirits of the prior heavens), *Xiantian mu* 先天母 (Mother of the Prior Heavens), *huiling* 會靈 (collective of spirits), and a fresh definition of old landscape. This new orientation of symbolic markers assists in increasing the transcendency of Han Chinese folk religion and helping belief systems adapt in the present age.

Keywords: Coherence Theory, collective trance, Chinese folk religion, private temple altar, modernity

1. Introduction

According to Giddens,[1] the process and effects of modernization can be discerned through three main elements or sets of elements: (1) separation of time and space—the condition for the articulation of social relations across wide spans of time-space, up to and including global systems; (2) a disembedding mechanism—which consists of symbolic tokens and expert systems and separates interaction for the particularities of locals; and (3) institutional reflexivity—the regulated use of knowledge about circumstances of social life as a constituent element in the institution's organization and transformation.

To Giddens, the path of modernity, to some extent, equals the process of de-territorialization, in which place and culture are differentiated from each other and a stable local personal network has been disrupted. However, modernity may create a new social system bounded and linked by new principles.[2] Giddens calls this new order one of "time-space distanciation,"[3] the conditions under which time and space are organized so as to connect presence and absence.

As for religion, Giddens has not written much about how it may adapt itself to this system of time-space distanciation. He does acknowledge that religion will never disappear and that it certainly resurfaces. However, for Giddens, with regard to modernity, religion only plays a role of counteracting and reacting. He writes:

> Not only has religion failed to disappear. We see all around us the creation of new forms of religious sensibility and spiritual endeavour. The reasons for this concern quite fundamental features of late modernity. What was due to become a social and physical universe subject to increasingly certain knowledge and control instead creates a system in which areas of relative security interlace with radical doubt and with disquieting scenarios of risk. Religion in some part generates the conviction which adherence to the tenets of modernity must necessarily suspend: in this regard it is easy to see why

---

[1] A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*, pp. 16.

[2] A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, pp. 14.

[3] A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, pp. 14.

religious fundamentalism has a special appeal. But this is not all. New forms of religion and spirituality represent in a most basic sense a return of the repressed, since they directly address issues of the moral meaning of existence which modern institutions so thoroughly tend to dissolve.[4]

Here, I acknowledge Giddens's characterization of modernity or even late modernity, yet the point I do not agree with is that Giddens assigns only a counteractive or reactive role for religion within this fabric of time-space distanciation. Rather, I would like to argue that, for religion, especially for a diffused kind of folk religion,[5] as it is a specific form integrating with and being associated with the general masses' economic production and cultural reproduction, its capacity to adapt itself to external social forces and its flexibility in absorbing other elements into the system may go beyond many scholars' expectations.

　　For example, David Jordan's ethnography of a South Taiwanese village is a pioneering study of the beliefs and practices of Chinese folk religions.[6] The work stimulated many later researchers' interest in both the structure of and the changes occurring within Chinese folk religion. Jordan, in his conclusion, suggests that Chinese folk religion can be counted as an equilibrium model but one with strong potential for adapting itself to change. He writes:

> It seems to me that this model [Chinese folk religion] is logically independent of the social practices to which it is attached and is therefore able to accommodate social change without suffering displacement…Such a system is also able to accommodate change, if slowly. We must not overlook the fact that exactly the same personnel could manipulate exactly the same supernaturals to explain exactly the same disasters with a very different set of reasons, and they could propose a different set of solutions. Decisions about ghosts as the cause of disaster, about whether the ghosts should be exorcised (formally dismissed) or accommodated (caused by ritual

---

[4]　A Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*, pp. 207.

[5]　C.K. Yang 楊慶堃, *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors*, pp. 294–340.

[6]　D.K. Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village.*

manipulations to conform to the structural norms), provide opportunity for a variety of ways of manipulating and operating the system so that it remains in concord with contemporary expectations, norms, morality, and, in general, the world as it actually is.[7]

That is to say, although Chinese folk religion plays an important social function, by producing, reinforcing, and sanctifying the patrilineal mode of social reproduction,[8] the religious system itself is relatively independent of social change, in the sense that it allows religious specialists and the community space for manipulating and adjusting.

Furthermore, according to Jordan, even though the traditional principles of social structure, such as the patrilineal and virilocal systems, may change, we may still expect Chinese folk religion to be able to sustain itself and adjust. In Jordan's own words:

> The scheme of ghostly explanations of disaster and divine correctives behaves as a good equilibrium model should in adjusting things to a tightly defined, socially sanctioned norm, and it is clearly a major force in the maintenance of descent-line and other traditional principles. But it can also easily accommodate changes in the norms (or differences in the acceptable deviation from them: another kind of norm), in response to any number of impinging social realities (including those associated with modernization). And that is the essence of a dynamic mode.[9]

In other words, it seems that because the religious system can always accommodate change in response to an evolving social reality, it can avoid being displaced.

However, Jordan predicts possible change for Chinese folk religion; he writes:

---

[7] D.K. Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*, pp. 172–173.

[8] See for example P.S. Sangren, *Chinese Sociologics: An Anthropological Account of the Role of Alienation in Social Reproduction.*

[9] D.K. Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*, pp. 175.

> Ultimately this belief system will probably be undermined. It will be undermined by essentially external forces—westernization, science, political paranoia—which maintain that there are no ghosts, that there are no gods (or that God is a Christian), and that divination is a rather perverse kind of induced autosuggestion. But it will not be undermined by its own inconsistencies or by its inability to cope with problems intrinsic of Chinese social life.[10]

I agree completely with Jordan's notion of Chinese folk religion. However, the following questions remain unclear or unanswered: 1. Chinese folk religion does indeed have a high capacity for adaptation; however, is this adaptation merely the adjustment of explanation within a given logic? Or, might the internal logic of the system also sometimes change? Furthermore, inasmuch as this "ghostly explanation of disaster"[11] still holds in the system, despite the consideration that relationships between ghosts and humans are beginning to change, can we still say that this is a system that remains unchanged?; 2. For sure, modernity, especially 'science,' may dilute the plausibility of this folk belief system, since as soon as people lose their belief in its intangible spirits, the system breaks down. Yet while still giving credit to the intangible spirits, how far can the system adapt itself to modernity? And, how will folk religion look, after being intertwined with so many components of modernity? Is it still possible that the religious system's appearance will barely change? Only circumlocution of or updating the connotations of traditional phrases would make the religion strong enough to resist social change; 3. Modernity includes many mutually related yet sometimes hierarchically associated components, such as the process of rationalization, a way of empirical-based thinking, universalistic orientation, and so on. When Chinese folk religion encounters modernity, which components of modernity will be easier for it to absorb or adapt to, and which components may cause real difficulties for the continued plausibility of Chinese folk religion?

---

[10] D.K. Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*, pp. 177.

[11] D.K. Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*, pp. 134.

Thirty years have passed since Jordan's ethnography on the structure and transformation of Chinese folk religion. The penetration of modernity into Taiwan's villages has deepened. In confronting these many and varied external forces, does the plausibility of folk religion still hold? Might the adaptiveness of this system be manifest only in its capacity to remain in equilibrium, or might it involve other dimensions?

Maintaining Jordan's theoretical concern, this study explores the issues around the patterns of structure and change in Chinese folk religion, especially within the contexts of the contemporary global and modern world arenas. The so-called situation of de-territorialization (to be described later)[12] will be delineated as the backdrop of the current study. I will use the case of *Hui lingshan* 會靈山 (Converging with the Spirit Mountain) [hereafter *Huiling*], currently a thriving collective trance movement in Taiwan, to help us shed light on the relevant issues.

The rationale for this study is that, through examining the most recent developments of folk religion within the locally embedded Chinese religious tradition, we may get a glimpse of the trajectories of Chinese folk religion in this global and modern milieu. Of course, the phenomenon under consideration may not be the only possibly trajectory of Chinese folk religion, yet as a bottom-up collective religious movement, it can teach us some heuristic lessons on the issues concerned.

In the subsequent sections, I will give an account of this collective trance movement, delineating its trajectory under the Chinese folk religious tradition and Taiwanese historical context and explaining how and why *Huiling* can help Chinese folk religion in its endeavor to fit itself successfully into a de-territorialized social climate. The empirical and theoretical implications of this phenomenon will be discussed thereafter.

2. Description of the Collective Trance Movement

A. Definition and Manifestations

For the convenience of later discussion, I would first like to offer a temporary, descriptive definition of *Huiling*. The group is a collective trance movement that

---

[12] See N. Garcia Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity.*

started in Taiwan around the late 1980s. The constituency of the movement mainly comes from the followers of *shen tan* 神壇 ('private temples'; to be discussed below). Underlying this movement, there is a loose yet reticulated network of religious practices. This network is beyond any specific religious organizations and sectarian groups.

The purpose of collective trance, according to the majority of practitioners, is to discover one's original purified soul and to meet the so-called *Xiantian mu* 先天母 (Mother of the Prior Heavens) in order to receive personal or familial benefits and attain ultimate personal salvation. In practice, participants in this movement organize themselves into small groups of usually between five and forty people, who visit specific temples around Taiwan, in particular the so-called Mother Goddess Temple (*Muniang miao* 母娘廟). Participants conduct a pilgrimage–like religious activity, although the activity is not referred to as pilgrimage. Once participants arrive at the specific religious site, they engage in collective trance and special performance inside or outside that temple. Around the temple, people then cry, scream, dance, laugh, and write and speak in a supposed celestial language. This activity is based upon a cosmic theory about the distinction between *xiantian* 先天 (Prior Heavens) and *houtian* 後天 (Posterior Heavens), which will be discussed below. The various deities belong to the former, and it is assumed that they are crucial for humans to enhance our spirituality and gain our ultimate salvation.

The definition above is general; the actual manifestations of *Huiling* in different assemblies diverge in the following dimensions: (1) degree of mobility: whether followers engage in frequent visits to those presumed sacred sites or remain limited to a specific site. Sometimes followers choose to be inside only one specific private temple to engage in this activity, rather than to visit many other sites; (2) fanaticism of the performance: the extent to which participants dramatize their appearance; (3) scale: followers associate with one another to engage in this activity. The number of assembly members could fall anywhere in the range of two to one hundred people.

B. Doctrines, Cosmology, Soteriology, and Practices: The Connotation and Implication of the Phrase *Huiling*

Huiling is a vibrant and multifarious movement, yet it is not amorphous. For a better understanding of *Huiling*, here I try to codify and delineate the basic doctrines, cosmology, and soteriology based upon both written and oral sources, as well as

observations of actual practice.

First, *hui lingshan* 會靈山 literally means 'converging with the Spirit Mountain.' It is hard to trace the beginning of the use of this label to designate the movement. However, we do know that the words *lingshan* 靈山 (Spirit Mountain) are the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit term '*Gradrakuta*' (vulture peak, *Gradra* meaning 'vulture,' and *kuta* meaning 'peak'). As the phrase was translated into Chinese, the adjective *ling* 靈 (spirit or efficacious) was added. The phrase '*Gradrakuta*' was therefore interpreted in a more mysterious sense as *Lingjiu shan* 靈鷲山 (Spirit Vulture Mountain or Efficacious Vulture Mountain).

The phrase '*Gradrakuta*' appears in many Buddhist sutras. For example, in the *Lotus Sutra*, Gradrakuta Mountain is the place where Buddha gives the teachings to his audiences. Since Gradrakuta Mountain is the name of a place associated with Buddha's enlightening lessons, 'departing for *Gradrakuta*' (靈鷲山 *lingjiu shan*) may thus refer to a process similar to the 'pilgrim's progress' of John Bunyan's book title (The Pilgrim's Progress）. Indeed, the term 'Spirit Mountain' did become popular in the Chinese cultural context, with the connotation described above, and in this interpretation, anyone who seriously engages in any kind of religious self-cultivation will be doing what is called *xiuling shan* 修靈山 (cultivating the Spirit Mountain). Here, 'Spirit Mountain' can refer either to a physical sacred religious landmarks or to one's true inner self, in need of cultivation and exploration.

The famous popular saying below illustrates these connotations very clearly:

> The Buddha is on the Spirit Mountain, so don't seek afar;
> The Spirit Mountain is right within your heart.
> Everyone possesses a pagoda on his Spirit Mountain;
> So cultivate at the base of the pagoda of your Spirit Mountain.

> 佛在靈山莫遠求；靈山就在汝心頭。
> 人人有個靈山塔；只向靈山塔下修。

For members of the collective trance movement, one more meaning has been added to the above connotations of *lingshan*: one meets the important deities associated with the inner self, and then cultivates oneself thoroughly in order to attain salvation.

C. Cosmology and Schema of Salvation

With regard to doctrines and cosmology, I will emphasize several main themes underlying *Huiling*, all of which are interrelated and reinforce one another. Moreover, almost all of them already exist elsewhere, in Buddhism, Daoism, other Chinese sectarian groups, or other folk religious beliefs. Today, *Huiling* bundles and syncretizes different materials and forms them into a brand-new system of religious practices. Concepts within this cosmology and schema of salvation include the following: 1. concept of spiritual transmigration and ways to restore our spiritual purities: it is presumed that the human being is situated in a ceaseless process of transmigration. In this process, our souls have been degraded and polluted. After these transmigrations, that is, pollutions, humans are too contaminated to be liberated in the short term. However, there is one alternative way for us to exempt ourselves from this long passage of self-contamination, and fortunately, this short-cut alternative is a holistic treatment and at the same time the most efficient route for self-redemption. The essence of this method is to access and associate with our cosmic nature through specific paths of the Prior Heavens that are mediated by *Xiantian mu*. These specific paths were previously unavailable in this world, but now they have been transmitted to our human realm; 2. concept of the *xiantian ling* 先天靈 (spirit/soul of Prior Heavens) and the *houtian ling* 後天靈 (spirit/soul of Posterior Heavens): it is assumed that humans have at least two souls. One soul comes from the Prior Heavens and is sited deep within us. The *ling* here refers to one's spirit or soul, and this spirit/soul of Prior Heavens is the one that has never been polluted, having existed before the beginning of written human history. The other soul, called the spirit/soul of Posterior Heavens, has been polluted during the process of transmigration. Now is the time for us to liberate ourselves from the cycle of rebirth, and the most direct and fastest path is through merging our spirit/soul of Prior Heavens with *Xiantian mu*; 3. concept of *Xiantian mu*: before the start of human history, all souls resided in heaven and were begot from the Prior Heavens. Later, *Xiantian mu* was differentiated into at least five cosmic mothers (*wumu* 五母). In the present age, the mothers descend to this world to save their beloved children; 4. concept of the *sanqi mojie* 三期末劫 (Three Periods of the Final Kalpa): according to the theory, the third period, the *Baiyang qi* 白陽期 (White Sun Period) is presumed to be coming. This idea of the periods of the final kalpa, of course, already enjoyed a long tradition in various Chinese sectarian movements. It

originates in the Buddhist concept of *jie* 劫 (kalpa) and later was appropriated by the *Bailian jiao* 白蓮教 (White Lotus Society) during the Song dynasty (960-1279). The White Lotus Society postulated that, to save humanity, the great goddess sent Buddha down to earth to teach a salvific morality to her wayward children. Human beings, however, being steeped in wickedness, required repeated efforts for their salvation. The great goddess sent down, in succession, the *Randengfo* 燃燈佛 (Lamp-Lighting Buddha) and *Shijiamonifo* 釋迦牟尼佛 (Sakyamuni Buddha). Yet, each could save only some of her children, leaving most of humanity still benighted. The salvation of the remainder would be undertaken by a third and final god Milefo 彌勒佛 (Maitreya Buddha).[13] *Huiling* has inherited these popular ideas, but has given the last savior different names—*Xiantian mu* in her five differentiated forms. Eschatological ideas are now represented in *Huiling* as follows: in the last period, people's souls are polluted, and human beings find it hard to achieve salvation by themselves. As such, the cosmic mothers are quite anxious about humanity, so they descend to this world to help human beings along the path to salvation during this last eschatological period. Then, according to *Huiling*, by the grace of the cosmic mothers, or say, converging with the spirits of the cosmic mothers, followers can enhance their spirituality and hope to attain the ultimate salvation.

D. A Glimpse of the Practices

Using practitioners' accounts and written representations in the relevant *shanshu* 善書 (morality books; to be discussed later), we can easily identify *Huiling*'s pilgrimage sites. Some morality books document over two hundred pilgrimage sites across Taiwan for *Huiling* groups. However, a core listing does appear in repeated form across different sources. Among the core sites, five temples associated with the differentiated forms of the cosmic mothers are the most important.

Originally, these five temples were not interlinked, either geographically or ritually. But since the emergence of *Huiling*, these five temples have gradually become integrated into an imaginary cosmic spiritual network. Therefore, in *Huiling*'s current cosmic framework, among these five mother temples, each embodies a primary abode of a specific form of *Xiantian mu*. In Taiwan, the five

---

[13]   Maria Hsia Chang, *Falun Gong: The End of Days*, pp. 52.

cosmic mothers and their corresponding temples are located at the following sites:

1. *Wangmu* 王母 (Queen Mother) resides in the *Sheng'an gong* 勝安宮 (Palace of Supreme Peace) in Hualian County 花蓮縣 on the east coast of Taiwan.
2. *Jinmu* 金母 (Golden Mother) resides in *Cihui tang* 慈惠堂 (Temple of the Compassion Society) in Hualian County.
3. *Jiutian xuannü* 九天玄女 (Mysterious Woman of the Nine Heavens) resides in the *Jiutian xuannü gong* 九天玄女宮 (Palace of the Mysterious Woman of the Nine Heavens) in Miaoli County 苗栗縣 on the central west coast of Taiwan.
4. *Dimu* 地母 (Earth Mother) resides in the *Dimu miao* 地母廟 (Earth Mother Temple) in Nantou County 南投縣, which is located in the central Taiwan.
5. *Guanyin* 觀音, known as the Goddess of Mercy in English, resides in the *Guanyin miao* 觀音廟 (Guanyin Temple) on the southwest coast of Taiwan.

Cosmologically, it is believed that these five mothers embody the *sancai* 三才 (three powers or three elements) —heaven, earth, and humanity—that constitute the cosmos. Originally, this idea of the three elements appeared in the *Yijing* 易經 (*Book of Changes*). Heaven is embodied by both the *Wangmu* and *Jinmu*; earth is embodied by *Dimu*; and humanity is embodied by *Jiutian xuannü*.

It is believed that the path of *Huiling*, by its very nature, is a path of repentance and submission, and through such acts, one can converge with the holy spirits and then attain further spiritual enhancement and even finally, ultimate salvation. *Guanyin*, although she embodies none of the three elements, has the capability of conferring forgiveness and compassion, thereby giving her an intrinsic role in this schema of salvation. Geographically, these five temples are evenly distributed across Taiwan Island. Serious practitioners of *Huiling* are urged to visit all five temples at least once each year.

E. Books

The *Huiling* movement has been popular since the early 1990s. However, its morality books have only been published extensively since the early 2000s. They have titles such as the *Manual of Ling Practice* (*Huiling shou ce* 會靈手冊), *Discussing the Truth on the Spirit Mountain* (*Lingshan Lundao Shu* 靈山論道書), *Outlines for Huiling* (*Huiling gaiyao* 會靈概要), and so on. The contents of the

books or booklets usually include explanations of why one should choose the *Huiling* path, the specific procedures that should be followed for this religious practice, where to meet the *Xiantian mu*, and the like.

I have collected more than 20 different morality books that are circulated within *Huiling* groups. Contents usually include definitions of and instructions for the presumed standardized procedures. Each book emphasizes slightly different dimensions, such as repentance, redemption, thaumaturgy, tour guiding, and so on. As *Huiling* is a vibrant, ongoing movement, these newly published books give instructions and directions on how and where to converge and conduct the collective trance meetings. Therefore, the publishing of these books not only performs the religious function of reinforcing sectarian legitimacy and contributing to donors' merit accumulation, but also molds knowledge and practices of the movement. Later, we will return to the morality books to see what functions they have played within the movement.

F. New Temples

Corresponding to the popularity of *Huiling*, new temples have been constructed. Some temples claim to serve the Prior Heavens, as they focus on deities and spirit of the Prior Heavens. These new temples attract followers from all directions. The temples vary in scale, and we may classify them into the following three categories:

1. Newly established large temples that claim to embody the new mandate of heaven. A most renowned temple is called *Wuji tianyuan gong* 無極天元宮 (Temple of the Boundless Celestial Primordial). This temple was established in 1971 by a group of low-rank civil service workers, who chose a remote area in north Taiwan to proclaim the new mandate of heaven coming from the Prior Heavens. Once established, this temple soon became a famous temple associated with Prior Heavens theology.

2. Private temples that have transformed themselves to adapt to the new salvation schema. Many of these, although begun as suppliers of healing services, greatly welcomed the *Huiling* salvation schema. This may be due to this schema's advantage in promoting the legitimacy and religious resonance of private temples without lessening any sense of autonomy. Often, those private temple already having a title encompassing the Chinese characters *wuji* 無極 (Infinite;

Boundless), a common phrase in Daoist philosophy, have a higher tendency to adapt themselves into the new schema since the phrase *wuji* has been deliberately taken to represent the Prior Heavens by the relevant morality book writers or *Huiling*'s 'theologians.' Retrospectively, after *Huiling* became popular, many private temples already having *wuji* in their title began to differentiate themselves from other temples, in the sense that they received the mandate of heaven directly from the Prior Heavens.

3. Small temples, bearing the name of the five main mother temples, that arose after *Huiling* became popular. Since island-wide pilgrimage to the five different mother temples is costly and toilsome, religious entrepreneurs built new smaller temples, putting statues of the five mother deities together in one location. Followers can thus easily access the five differentiated forms of *Xiantian mu* at the same time.

3. A Comparison between Traditional Pilgrimage and *Huiling*

The activities of *Huiling* could be categorized as one type of pilgrimage. However, a juxtaposition of *Huiling* and alternative pilgrimages seen in traditional Chinese folk religion or territorial cults reveals differences between the two. In general, the process of de-territorialization, as seen for example in the gathering together of the five mother deities, already disrupts the plausibility of the village-based or group-based activities; under this influence, pilgrimage involving the intercommunication between territorially defined cults may either experience a kind of transformation in meaning or gradually lose its original participants. Nevertheless, we may also assume that the process of de-territorialization can release a new possibility for people to cluster and worship deities. Here, I want to emphasize that the differences between tradition folk beliefs and *Huilin*g exist in at least three crucial dimensions: 1. the underlying nature of the deities: *huiling* differentiates deities into two categories of the Posterior and Prior Heavens. The former category includes deities descending from true or fictive historical figures; the latter encompasses the deities who presumably already existed before humanity came into existence. Deities of the Prior Heavens include *Dimu*, *Jinmu*, the *Sanqing*

daozu 三清道祖 (The Venerable Ancestors of the Three Purities), and others; the deities of the Posterior Heavens include *Guan Gong* 關公 (Duke Guan); *Xuantian shangdi* 玄天上帝 (Upper Thearch of the Mysterious Heavens), and others. However, some historical figure deities could be counted as either type, depending on an informant's point of view; Mazu 媽祖 is an example. When Mazu is classified in *Huiling* as a deity of the Prior Heavens, it implies that she existed before human history. Thus, during her lifetime, Mazu descended from the Prior Heavens with the purpose of saving people. So here the historical figure Mazu is only one incarnation of the eternal *Xiantian mu* spirit; 2. the organizational base: in the *Huiling* movement, participants organize themselves into small groups rather than as a village. Therefore, the patron god associated with the participants does not embody the whole village. During the religious practice of *Huiling shan*, participants gather into small groups associated with specific teachers or a private temple, and each participant can affiliate with one or several deities of the Prior Heavens; 3. the geographical space or the extended network: traditional folk beliefs mainly encompass the nested hierarchy of territory within the same marketing network; however, for *Huiling*, territory is not bounded by the nested hierarchy of a regional system. The sphere of activities may include and extend to any geographical space corresponding to an imagined yet culturally defined space, such as the boundary within the five directions.

4. Some Historical Antecedents of *Huiling*

Due to the limitations of my current information, that is, without accumulated longitudinal data, it is hard for me to clarify the historical progression of *Huiling*. Nevertheless, based upon some primary observations of the configurations of various religious movements and organizations in modern Taiwan, I can discern that at least three earlier religious developments in Taiwan may have contributed much to *Huiling*'s formation. It is therefore worthwhile to consider a brief overview of these earlier historical antecedents. Our discussion starts with the broader historical background, then moves to a rather narrow yet influential sectarian movement. However, the three developments we will discuss, in fact, became compelling in Taiwanese society almost at the same time.

A. Private Temples

First, we should put *Huiling* in the context of a broader social development: the emergence of *shentan* 神壇, a kind of private temple that serves as the main carrier of Chinese folk religion. This new development reorients folk religion from communal, village-based public ritual activities to personal healing services in clinic-like semiprivate settings.

Due to de-territoritalization, that is, "the loss of the natural relation of culture to geographical and social territories",[14] territorially defined cults may gradually have lost their general plausibility. Specifically, the force of modernization may have disrupted the locally everlasting and recurrent social relations and time-space experience; thus, even though the customary territorial cults endure, the scope and degree of the plausibility behind these territorial cults has been reduced. Another possible development is that, if the plausibility of the territorial cults has been reduced, other forms of non-territorially defined religious practices may evolve or emerge due to folk religion's tenacity for sustaining the religious needs of the general population. Here, the so-called private temple is one of these alternatives.

Specifically, since the 1960s during the process of urbanization, villagers immigrated to the newly developed urban areas, yet in these new circumstances, surrounding neighborhoods were rarely interconnected. New forms of religious practice arose. Still residing in their previous living 'habitus,' which in a way corresponded to fragmentary urban settings, many new immigrants engraved josses resembling and deriving from (through the process of *fen xiang* 分香 [dividing incense] or *fen ling* 分靈 [reproducing the joss image]) their hometown's patron deities.[15]

At the outset, these newly established josses may only have been worshipped in the new immigrants' personal houses. This form of religious setting suits the urban milieu perfectly, in the sense that people's interactions become more fluid and segmented, and connections become weaker. Thus, a small-scale client-oriented

---

[14]　N. Garcia Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, pp. 229.

[15]　See Hsun Chang 張珣, "'Dividing Incense' and Pilgrimage: Mazu and Social Integration," 分香與進香──媽祖信仰與人群整合 pp. 83–105. Also see Xing-zhi Chen 陳杏枝, "The Private Temple in Taipei Ka-làh," 台北市加蚋地區的宮廟神壇 pp. 93–152.

institution would much better serve people's immediate physical and spiritual needs. Soon, however, religious entrepreneurs became involved. With the dual purposes of occupying a new market niche and enhancing a specific religious path, these semi-specialists would begin to open commercialized private temples. These temples now are private, as they are located in people's own houses; but they are also public, as they are open to outside clients and enshrine deities with some clear public orientation. To sum up, these private temples have the following characteristics: 1. the temples house public-oriented deities residing in semiprivate settings; 2. curators of the private temples are usually non-ordained self-cultivated religious specialists; and 3. private temples offer various services to clients, loosely defined as forms of commercial transaction.

Generally, the main institutional form of Chinese folk religion has now gradually transformed from a territorially defined, public-oriented, and communal/closed system[16] to a public-oriented yet small-group and clinic-like religious fabric. However, here the discussion focuses on the analytic framework rather than people in real action. In real daily life, the practices of traditional folk religion and *Huiling* overlap more than expected. Current scholarly discussion has not offered any real cases, yet the conceptual explanation is still based on an ethnographic grounds. I have elsewhere documented a private temple's real practices of *Huiling*.[17]

B. *Cihui tang* 慈惠堂 (Compassion Society)

It has been reported elsewhere[18] that the modern belief complex related to the *Muniang* 母娘 (Venerable Mother) started in east-central Taiwan in the early 1950s. A young man was possessed by the deity *Muniang,* and her revelations through this young man signified the beginning of the faith. Since this point, the contemporary manifestation of *Xiwang mu* 西王母 (Queen Mother of the West), represented in form and name by *Muniang*, has had a great impact on the doctrines and practices of

---

[16] Allen Chun, "The Changing Times of a Village Temple Alliance System in the Northern New Territories of Hong Kong: An Analysis of a Tianhou Cult," p. 66.

[17] Jen-chieh Ting 丁仁傑, *Popular Religion for Contemporary Han Chinese: Discourse, Identity, and Social Reproduction*, 當代漢人民眾宗教研究：論述、認同與社會再生產 pp. 409–420.

[18] D.K. Jordan and D.L. Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan,* pp. 129–140.

folk religion in Taiwan.

A split among adherents in the formative period has caused the first group dedicated to *Muniang* to be divided into two organizations, the *Sheng'an gong* 勝安宮 (Palace of Sacred Peace) and the *Cihui tang* . Each of these organizations uses a specific name to refer to its own mother deity: the former labels the deity *Wangmu niangniang* 王母娘娘 (Mother Queen), and the latter *Jinmu* 金母 (Golden Mother). Most adherents believe that these two names may simply represent different radiant forms of the same deity, although some consider the two mother deities to be sisters.

A private temple can voluntarily affiliate with the *Cihui tang*, thereby becoming a branch of the principle organization. One benefit of joining this temple network is that a private temple can be immediately recognized and accepted by the public. In addition, the interconnection with the *Cihui tang's* broad network makes external resources more accessible.

In time, the *Cihui tang* system (with its headquarters in Hualian County and at least one thousand branches nationwide) or say, the modern complex of *Wangmu niang* beliefs, developed into the most prosperous religious practice in Taiwan.[19] This may have been partly due to the *Cihui tang's* strategy for extension through the purposeful creation of alliances with many private temples, and partly due to the *Wangmu niang's* presumed transcendent position within the hierarchical pantheon corresponding with the urban middle class's' new psychological needs and imagination. But here is not the place to review the historical trajectory and overall religious practices of the *Cihui tang*. However, one thing we need to keep in mind is that the group's religious practices do stimulate and impact *Huiling*'s later development.

One example of this is that the *Cihui tang* enhances and legitimizes trance as an accepted form of spiritual practice, not only for shamans, but for all followers as well. This reorientation of shamanism has had a great impact on commoners' religious practices. Jordan and Overmyer give the following vivid description of trance activities in the *Cihui tang*:

> Some Compassion Society rituals are described in more detail below. They

---

[19]　See Zong-xian Lai 賴宗賢, *The Origin and Development of Taoism in Taiwan*, 台灣道教源流 p. 50.

include congregational chanting of scriptures, spirit-writing séances, processions in honor of the goddess, and, most distinctively, individual "dancing" while under the influence of a deity, more politely known as "training" (*xun*). Training, here, is a state of ecstatic excitement usually associated with makeshift shadow-boxing or with slapping one's body in a pattern of quick, repetitive motions with the flat of each hand alternately. It is thought especially to promote health and healing. The fact that all can become possessed and "dance" while in a state of trance is seen by Compassion Society leaders to be one of the most important distinguishing characteristics of their religion, particularly in contrast with the Palace of Sacred Peace, in which only the *tank-ki* dance. From this perspective the sect appears as a popularization of spirit mediumship, making available to all the certainty of individual election hitherto limited to folk elite in Taiwan and southeast coastal China. For the Compassion Society the only difference between a member in a state of trance and a *tank-ki* is that the *tank-ki* speaks words of a deity or spirit. Thus it is not supporting that for them such articulate possession expresses temporary heightening of awareness rather than a long-term vocation.[20]

To make the foregoing *tank-ki's* kind of practice plausible and legitimate within the Chinese folk religious context for not only specialists but also for commoners, there needs to be some dramatic transformation and reorientation of the religion in doctrine, the position of deities within the pantheon, and the schema for salvation. And it is exactly here in the *Cihui tang* that the barrier for direct mediation has been released and a more democratic form of spiritual mediation has emerged, even though it may have been an unintended result. Soon, the *Cihui tang's* new type of spiritual practice—a democratic form of possession—was appropriated by many private temples and small religious groups.

This new form of unmediated salvation between deities and followers could be represented by different organizational forms. However, *Huiling*'s diffused and loosely integrated spiritual network has made the best use of this. The result is that

---

[20] D.K. Jordan and D.L. Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan*, p. 139.

after *Huiling* practitioners reassembled elements of contemporary popular religious practices and ideas, a plausible, efficacy-oriented, self-contained belief system, minimally restricted in regards to membership and spiritual mediation, arose and began to gain popularity.

C. *Yiguan dao* 一貫道 (Way of Penetrating Unity)

It is well known that in China, diffused religion has relied upon institutional religion for the development of mythical or theological concepts.[21] In this context, a prosperous sectarian movement in modern Taiwan, Yiguan dao 一貫道 (Way of Penetrating Unity), offers *Huiling* ready-made mythical and theological concepts. *Yiguan dao* is currently the largest sectarian group in Taiwan. An underestimated official figure shows that in 1995, *Yiguan dao* in Taiwan had approximately 942,000 members.[22] *Yiguan dao* adherents believe in a God beyond all other gods, called *Mingming shangdi* 明明上帝 (Most Bright Emperor) or *Wusheng laomu* 無生老母 (Eternal Primordial Mother). It is a syncretic faith that draws upon Confucian, Buddhist, Daoist, and folk religious terminology. According to *Yiguan dao* adherents, this religion attempts to identify common principles underlying Daoism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism. The *Yiguan dao* faithful believe that by uncovering a single set of universal truths, the 'increasing chaos' of modern times can be defeated and the world's people can live peacefully in harmony.[23] The movment was once prohibited but now demonstrates widespread influence on popular religions in Taiwan. Although it is hard to trace the appropriation of *Yiguan dao's* ideas by other religious groups, we can indeed see that *Yiguan dao's* cosmology and schema of salvation, in one way or another, constitute the core of *Huiling's* teachings. Moreover, *Huiling's* exaltation of *Xiantian mu* can easily be recognized as a parallel or derivative development of *Yiguan dao's* exaltation of *Wusheng laomu* as the target of worship.

Many ideas in *huiling*, such as the Prior Heavens, *Xiantian mu*, the coming

---

[21]　C.K. Yang 楊慶堃, *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors*, p. 295.

[22]　Ministry of the Interior, Republic of China, *Statistical Abstract of the Interior of the Republic of China*, p. 117.

[23]　Yi-jia Tsai 蔡怡佳, *The Reformative Visions of Mediumship in Contemporary Taiwan*, p. 34.

third eschatological period, and so on, apparently originate from *Yiguan dao*. The popularity of these ideas in Taiwan was originally due to *Yiguan dao's* re-affirmation and propagation. Certainly, under the diffused form of spiritual practice, *Huiling* itself has not directly invented but has only borrowed elements from *Yiguan dao's* cosmological blueprint and salvation schema to constitute its own coherent theological premises. Furthermore, even though those ideas in *Yiguan dao* are not novel, in Taiwan it was only due to the adherents of *Yiguan dao* that these ideas were popularized among a much broader social circle.

The differences between *Yiguan dao* and *Huiling* are not in their general cosmological blueprint and salvation schema, but in the more specific and technical dimensions of how to acquire salvation. *Yiguan dao* followers gain salvation through the esoteric rite of conversion, as well as through their continuing endeavors in moral self-cultivation and proselytization. In *Huiling*, salvation is gained through a process of self-cultivation defined by spirit possession and spiritual enhancement.

To sum up, we can say that *huiling* is a collective creation. Whether intended or unintended, *Huiling* has developed into a loosely spiritual, networked, collective trance movement. However, even with the new label of *Huiling shan*, *Huiling* has not yet differentiated itself from folk religion, since the deities of the Prior and Posterior Heavens can coexist within the traditional polytheist pantheon. *Huiling* is neither a sectarian group nor a territorially defined ritual practice, yet it does have many small group leaders among this diffused spiritual network. Historically, three earlier religious developments in Taiwan—that is, the proliferation of private temples in urban settings, the fast growth of the *Cihui tang* and the related *Muniang* belief complex, as well as the sectarian movement *Yiguan dao* and its theology's popularity—already contained enough symbolic and organizational resources to be integrated into a new faith system. As soon as these religious ferments became prevalent, *Huiling* then wove them together to form a new base for religious development. Shortly thereafter, *Huiling* began to mushroom all over Taiwan from the late 1990s.

5. A Sociological Commentary on the *Huiling* movement in Taiwan

We have explored the influence of modernity on the territorialized type of folk religion through Giddens' framework. We have also mentioned Jordan's ideas that we may take folk religion in Taiwan as an equilibrium model with the potential of adapting itself to external dynamic change, but we should explore them more carefully. According to Jordan, in this model, elements of the system are well integrated and thus can always be self-correcting; [24] yet, at the same time the system can also easily accommodate changes in norms and can transform itself in response to any number of impinging social realities. Paralleling these arguments, a recent book by Wei-Ping Lin has shown how rural migrant workers cope with challenges in urban environments by creating branches of village deities in the city, establishing urban shrines, and selecting a new spirit medium.[25] These practices show how the traditional village is being reconfigured in cities today.

How flexible or durable can this Chinese folk religious system be? To what extent can we say that after adjusting itself to social change, it remains the same system? Beyond this model of Chinese folk religion, described by others as an 'equilibrium' and 'dynamic' system, can we further define and describe this system? All these issues need elaboration, which will be achieved through an analysis of the case of *Huiling*.

According to Giddens, in order to maintain the time-space distanciation of modern society, there are two other types of disembedding mechanisms intrinsically involved in the development of modern social intuitions: symbolic tokens and expert systems.[26] By symbolic tokens, Giddens means the media for interchange that can be passed around without regard to the specific characteristics of individuals or groups that handle them at any particular juncture. Various kinds of symbolic tokens can be distinguished, such as media of political legitimacy or financial capital in the

---

[24] D.K. Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*, p. 175.

[25] Wei-Ping Lin 林瑋嬪, *Materializing Magic Power: Chinese Popular Religion in Villages and Cities*.

[26] A Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, p. 22.

economic sphere.[27] With regard to expert systems, Giddens refers to the systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organize large areas of material and social environments.[28] By providing "guarantees" of expectations across "distantiated time-space," this "stretching" of the social system is achieved via the impersonal nature of tests applied to evaluate technical knowledge and by public critique.[29]

For Giddens, religion is something to be dissolved by modernity; however, in the following analysis I would like to employ Giddens's framework as a reference point to analyze the dynamics of *Huiling*. Though perhaps contradictory to his line of thinking, that is borrowing Giddens's insights into how modernity works within its time-space distanciation system to examine a religious movement, our analysis allows us to see parallels between Giddens's depictions of a modern system and *Huiling*'s actual manifestations. I argue that even if we define *Huiling* as an exercise that counteracts the move toward modernity, in the *Huiling* system we still find functional equivalents to the symbolic tokens and expert systems suggested by Giddens. In *Huiling*, it is the concept of the *Xiantian ling* 先天靈 (*Ling* of the Prior Heavens) that is equivalent to a symbolic token, while both the private temple and morality books function as expert systems within the expanding system of folk religious practices. Indeed, Giddens postulates that during de-territorialization, religion is being disrupted and compelled to counteract social change. So how is it that the two mechanisms of modernity such as symbolic tokens and expert systems can be reproduced in some semblance within the folk religious system?

Suppose we characterize *Huiling* as a previously territorially defined folk religion, which after the process of de-territorialization, begins to re-link and re-embed itself in a different space primarily through its disruption of both particularized social interaction and homogenous local experience and the transformation of traditional symbols and mechanisms. We may see that the internal mechanisms of *Huiling* look much like Giddens's characterization of a modern social system. Reality is in fact very much the opposite, in the sense that this newly 'distanciated system' is not a modern society. Rather, it is the religious system or

---

[27]   A Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, p. 22.

[28]   A Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, pp. 27–28.

[29]   A Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, p. 28.

local experience that we previously believed would be disrupted by modernity. To see these issues more clearly, I turn to an examination of *Huiling* components that help to sustain folk religion in an extended social and spiritual network: the concept of the *Xiantian ling*, private temples, and morality books. For the *Huiling* movement, these elements play an equivalent role to the symbolic tokens and expert systems of a capitalist system.

A. *Xiantian ling* 先天靈 (*Ling* of the Prior Heavens): The Symbolic Token in *Huiling*

Sangren argues that the "notions of supernatural power (*ling*) attributed to gods" can be best understood as "at once manifestations of a cultural logic of symbolic relations and as a material logic of social relations."[30] Though I accept *ling* as the key notion underscoring both Chinese symbolic reasoning and social relations, I would characterize it from a rather different perspective. I would like to argue that *ling*, which according to Sangren, functions as a mediator of the spiritual and social, may easily become a means to justify established power structures. Therefore, those who have social power accordingly may be considered to have some internal '*ling* power.' In short, under this logic, spiritual and social dimensions are mutually reinforced and justified. Therefore, *ling* is a concept that carries hierarchical implications and can be readily taken for conservative use (the conservative maintenance/preservation of power structures).

In contrast, the concept of the *Xiantian ling*, although a derivative phrase of *ling*, connotes quite different ideas. *Xiantian ling* refers to the soul that one received before one's historical transmigration. Passing through history, this soul constitutes our innermost self and has not been contaminated by the process of transmigration. Because this soul stems from the Prior Heavens, it is distanced from the historical conditions of social hierarchies and unequal resource distribution. Yet, this notion is neither abstract nor deviates from tradition and history, since the soul is referred to as an individualized entity with qualities associated with the pre-existing symbol *ling* (spirit, power). Without regard to one's occupation, social status, gender, or ethnicity, one develops a unique personal attachment and identity through

---

[30] P.S. Sangren, *Chinese Sociologics: An Anthropological Account of the Role of Alienation in Social Reproduction*, p. 4.

identifying one's eternal *Xiantian ling* and merging it with *Xiantian mu*.

Huiling doctrine on the *Xiantian ling* draws on pre-existing symbolic associations of the term *ling*. Thus, the *huiling* concept shares conventional ideas of the term, such as connotations of spiritual power, efficacy, responsiveness, and so on. Though *Huiling* teachings admit the functional connotations of *ling*, they place the conception of *Xiantian ling* in an imperative and prior position compared to the traditional connotations of *ling*. Only through returning to one's true inner self, rather than relying on external manifestations of power or efficacy, can one transcend to a level of non-contamination and eternality. Through this idea of *Xiantian ling*, *Huiling*'s conceptions of the Prior Heavens and traditional Chinese folk religious ideas of *ling*'s mediating function can coexist or even mutually translate in the same symbolic and ritual sphere.

Ling (spiritual power) manifests itself in communal and personal history; thus, it is associated with actual power structures and social arrangements. However, in postulating the existence of the *Xiantian ling* (a utopian definition for a presumed eternal and pure form of people's inner spirits), *Huiling* establishes a transcendent domain that goes beyond any specific historical incidents, territorial boundedness, and social hierarchies. Therefore, *Huiling* also creates a new base for people to interact and make equal connections.

We recall that, by symbolic tokens, Giddens means a media for interchange that can be passed around without regard to the specific characteristics of individuals or groups that handle them at any particular juncture. In the case of *Huiling*, although the concept of the *Xiantian ling* is not a 'thing' to be used as a medium of exchange, its capacity and function are similar to Giddens's description of a symbolic token. With an understanding of this idea of *Xiantian ling,* people associate with others more easily, and this association can also be extended, in the sense that our mutual interaction lodges on a transcendental yet equal ground.

To sum up, under the impact of external forces of de-territorialization, Chinese folk religion entails a dynamic process of self-transformation. This self-transformation creates and is epitomized by a symbolic token equivalent—the *Xiantian ling*. Nonetheless, with regard to internal dynamics, we can also see developments that parallel those of territorialization, de-territorialization, and re-embedding. These include moving from a communal/closed consensus to a lack of consensus to the idea of the *Xiantian ling* that links people together. And, the genesis and the

popularity of the concept of the *Xiantian ling* in Chinese folk religion demonstrates the ability of the Chinese folk religious system to be re-embedded into the current global world without much difficulty.

B. The Private Temple: One of the 'Expert Systems'

Chinese folk religion has always incorporated 'expert systems,' such as Daoist priests and other religious professionals, but the current form has changed. As we discussed above, one change in folk religion in contemporary Taiwan is that the private temple has gradually become the main carrier of Chinese folk religion in urban settings. Many people, especially urbanites, now attend services more often in private temples than in territorially based community temples.

A private temple may occupy only a fraction of urban space, though will often not be integrated with surrounding neighborhoods; nevertheless, the intimacy of interaction within the temple can often foster clients' sense of belonging. Although the urban lifestyle might distance city residents from traditional religion, urbanites' participation in private temples reestablishes links to the folk religious system. In the beginning, this re-linkage arises through the pursuit of pragmatic ends, such as asking for blessings, healing, exorcism, and the like. Yet later, the cosmological and salvational dimensions of the religious system provide greater appeal for followers and their daily life practices.

After all, though mainstream culture has become more secularized, people still turn to religion in their daily lives. If people have chances to connect to specific spiritual networks, they may reconnect with the spiritual worldview. In the case of *Huiling*, we see that through a dispersed yet dense spiritual network reticulated by private temples, individuals are still integrated into the folk religious system. Private temples are gradually becoming the new reservoir and inheritor of folk religion, both ritually and cosmologically. Folk religion is no longer a communal/closed system; rather, its format becomes the voluntary assembly of a small group or loosely extended network. Among these voluntary assemblies, many possibilities arise; *Huiling* is one of these possibilities, and it may also be the most geographically extensive.

As private temples are the basic institutional nodes of this *Huiling* system, each private temple continually engages in the circulation and re-interpretation of folk religion. As mentioned earlier, in terms of 'expert systems,' Giddens refers to the

systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organize large areas of material and social environments.[31] Here, although folk religion is not strictly technical and impersonal, the private temple does play the role of 'expert system' within this newly distanciated folk religious system. Through private temples, commoners' everyday lives are merged with a religious system that derives from and transforms folk tradition. Through these private temples, despite the potential for deception or fraud, followers of *Huiling* still receive guarantees of expectations (of being healed and saved) within a distanciated time-space sphere. By providing guarantees of expectations across distanciated time-space, *Huiling* extends its social system even further.

C. Morality Books: Another 'Expert System'

In addition to private temples, morality books also play the functional equivalent of an expert system within the movement. Indeed, morality books, together with the so-called *Luantang* 鸞堂 (Phoenix Halls), spirit-writing temples that boomed in Taiwan around the 1920s,[32] have become important sources for the propagation of the moral teachings of folk Confucianism, folk Buddhism, and folk religion. Nevertheless, with regard to folk religion in the traditional community, oral communication has remained a dominant form of transmission. In a traditional setting, the publishing of morality books played a greater role in establishing a publisher's, in this case a Phoenix Hall's, spiritual authority and accumulating sponsors' merit; systematically spreading the teachings was less important. Often influential and classical texts, such as the *Liaofan sixun* 了凡四訓 (*Four Lessons by Liaofan*), the *Taishang ganying pian* 太上感應篇 (*Book of Rewards and Punishments*), and *Yinzhi wen* 陰騭文 (*Tract on Hidden Judgement*),[33] had already seen widespread

---

[31] A Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, pp. 27–28.

[32] See G. Seaman, *Temple Organization in a Chinese Village*, pp. 20–29. Also see Zhi-yu, Wang 王志宇, *The 'Benevolent Lords' Worshipping in Taiwan* 台灣的恩主公信仰.

[33] See C.J. Brokaw, *"*Yuan Huang (1533-1606) and the Ledgers of Merit and Demerit*,"* pp. 137–195; and his *Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China*. Also see Ruey-ling, Chu 朱瑞玲, "The Psychological Implication of Taiwanese Morality Books: From Traditional to Modern;" 臺灣民間善書的心理意涵：從傳統到現代的轉折 and his "Charity and Altruistic Behavior in Chinese Society," 中國人的慈善觀念 pp. 105–132.

publishing. Thus, even as the teachings were being spread, this usually only represented a revitalization and redistribution of old teachings rather than a dissemination of new teachings.

However, in the case of *huiling*, morality books began to play a more substantial role in guiding and uniting religious practices. Recently, the contents of morality books have become more relevant to contemporary issues, oriented towards providing pragmatic advice. These published materials of course include books, but now encompass flyers, audio and video tapes, DVDs, and websites. These formats have already rendered morality books more accessible and applicable. people's daily lives. The change and transformation of morality books in modern Chinese society is itself a large issue in need of further exploration, but will not be addressed here. Suffice to say that, even through a brief survey of morality books within *Huiling*, we discover many new emergent patterns.

In content and style, these recently published morality books are idiosyncratic. Even though their lessons are similar to those of the traditional morality books, the moral teachings show greater concern for enhancing one's personal spirituality in a secularized, chaotic world. A cosmological picture with a specific teleological direction are elaborated, and the association of the publisher's organization and the right path documented in the morality books are emphasized. The books are often published in a series, sometimes more than ten books, rather than in a sole volume. Overall, these morality books are highly sophisticated and elaborate. They give specific instructions on how to engage in an effective path of spiritual enhancement. The texts are presented in systematic discourse and discussion rather than conventional parable or stories about moral retribution.

Huiling has also established a new pattern of circulation and distribution for morality books. Initially, distribution looks followed a traditional approach, that is, piling books up in public spaces such as temples, parks, and stations, for free circulation. However, now books are not only for open dissemination but also for advocating a new spiritual path and maintaining a loosely spiritual network, as the books often clearly list the publisher and other religious organizations as accessible resources for further help. Based on my field observation, these morality books are most often distributed to both dispersed individuals and many spiritual circles both within and outside the private temple. If we look at distribution from the demand side, we find that those who request the books are now individuals mediated through

various voluntary assemblies rather than singular individuals. For each voluntary assembly or spiritual circle—usually of about five to one hundred people, circumscribed by the size of the specific private temple—the leader collects many morality books from different sources, then often sorts out the most relevant for followers to discuss and read. At other times, the leader syncretizes and updates them with study notes or even a published book for further circulation within or outside of the private temple. Morality books now contribute to the production of religious practice guidelines and the development of a coherent and systematic appearance within such diffused religious practices.

In summary, in the *Huiling* movement, morality books now play an indispensable role in guiding, uniting, and vitalizing participants' religious practices. Morality books, together with private temples, now constitute a functional equivalent to the expert system. These two mechanisms provide guarantees and support for participants in this new faith system. Even in circumstances where participants do not have clear and sufficient knowledge to engage in the relevant practices, active counseling and a family-like network of private temples, provide a trustworthy and promising face for 'stretching' the religious system. The ongoing publishing of new morality books, which manifest the newly revealed mandate of heaven, update traditional religion into a currently relevant form, demonstrate a penetrable existence to enhance the movement's legitimacy, and offer a more systematic presence that can guide and unify participants, and still accomplish similar ends.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

As I have argued, by studying recent folk religious developments within the locally embedded Chinese religious traditions, we glimpse the trajectories of Chinese folk religion in this global and modern milieu. Through this study, we can also explore the sophisticated dynamics and essential characteristics of Chinese folk religion. The process of modernization produces a standardized time-space experience for people and disrupts the social activities and relations particularized to territorial contexts. As a result, de-territorialization may occur, and the plausibility of traditional Chinese territorial folk religion may be weakened. Nevertheless, as

religious practices of local communities face the challenges presented by de-territorialization, traditional folk religion can be transformed into a format that adapts more readily to modern situations. In the present paper, the case of *Huiling,* a collective trance movement popular in Taiwan since the mid-1980s, has helped us to shed light on these issues.

The case of *Huiling* affords us many clues for rethinking the essential characteristics and dynamics of Chinese folk religion. Here, I focus on issues related to the equilibrium model. [34] For heuristic purposes, I want to rephrase the 'equilibrium model of Chinese religion' in philosophical and epistemological terms. Without delving into too much detail, here it is sufficient to point out that the equilibrium model of Chinese religion may be counted as one reflection of the 'coherence theory of truth,' which states that the truth of any (true) proposition consists of its coherence with some specified set of propositions. [35] The theory differs from its principal competitor, the 'correspondence theory of truth' in that the two theories give conflicting accounts of the relation between propositions and their truth conditions. [36] According to the former, the relation is coherence; according to the latter, it is correspondence. The two theories also give conflicting accounts of truth conditions. According to the coherence theory, the truth conditions of a proposition are to be found in other propositions. The correspondence theory, in contrast, states that the truth conditions of propositions are not propositions, but rather objective features of the world. [37] As a criticism of different versions of the coherence theory of truth, the correspondence theory of truth was developed and advocated by Russell and Moore in the early twentieth century. [38] These labels could be applied more broadly to refer to whether the truth is based upon internal coherence or its relation to external reality. Chinese folk religion can be

---

[34] D.K. Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*, pp. 172–177.

[35] H.H. Joachim, *The Nature of Truth*.

[36] B. Russell, "On the Nature of Truth," pp. 28–49.

[37] See 'The Coherence Theory of Truth,' in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy at http://plato.standord.edu/entries/truth-coherence/.

[38] B. Russell, "On the Nature of Truth," pp. 28–49; G.E. Moore, *Some Main Problems of Philosophy.*

characterized as one kind of coherence theory. For example, even though phrased in different terms, Jordan's idea of the equilibrium model roughly corresponds to, or at least is commensurate with, the coherence theory. Jordan writes that Chinese folk religion "is logically independent of the social practices to which it is attached and is therefore able to accommodate social change without suffering displacement."[39] This clearly demonstrates the case of a typical coherence theory model.

Nevertheless, this coherence theory of Chinese folk religion still must face the challenge of plausibility or say, the 'correspondence of empirical facts.' Again, according to Jordan's speculation: "Ultimately this belief system [Chinese folk religion] will probably be undermined. It will be undermined by essentially external forces—westernization, science, political paranoia—which maintain that there are no ghosts, that there are no gods……But it will not be undermined by its own inconsistencies."[40] Therefore, for our particular purpose, we may say that, in its epistemological base, Chinese folk religion is a type of coherence theory. Bearing this in mind, how might the Chinese folk religious system adapt itself to social change, especially when its plausibility is under the pressure of external forces?

It is interesting to note that, in meeting external challenges of empirical accountability and plausibility, mainly from the sources of modernity, adaptations of Chinese folk religion in the case of *Huiling* do not occur to enhance its empirical accountability; rather, such adaptations aspire to 'authenticity' through offering more transcendental and immanent concepts—more transcendental in the sense that the crucial new idea, the *Xiantian ling*, moves far beyond any historical specifications, and more imminent, in the sense that now everyone shares the same quality of transcendence on a more immediate level. Besides, the representation of authenticity is not made more authentic by adding new information, but only through enhancing a previously rather implicit systematic discourse of religious teachings into an explicitly more systematic form of representation; that is, by following the criteria of authenticity within the coherence theory of truth and even sticking to these criteria more intensively.

The above thesis needs further elaboration, yet here it is sufficient to say that the Chinese folk religious system, by its very nature (with the quality of coherence

---

[39]   D.K. Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*, p. 172.

[40]   D.K. Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*, p. 177.

of truth), when it faces the challenge of 'empirical correspondence,' within its 'coherence framework,' does not adjust itself so as to derive more empirical facts and prove its accountability. Rather, it adjusts by rebuilding or transforming its authenticity into a more transcendental, more internally penetrating, and more equally distributed base. Of course, these adjustments may not assure this religious system's empirical correspondence; on the contrary, such changes may distance it further from empirical reality. However, in regard to the system's internal logic and theoretical coherence, the authenticity of the truth would not deteriorate in the slightest.

For certain, inconsistency between the religious system and external reality may lessen the system's plausibility, yet that does not necessarily entail the weakening of followers' faith in the system; in fact, in most cases, belief is strengthened. Once one has a deep conviction in a current belief, though the belief system may be challenged by facts that disconfirm central tenets, strong group support and enthusiastic proselytization can strengthen and rationalize one's belief system.[41]

Nevertheless, given drastic inconsistencies, followers of a system do not remain quiet and peaceful within the system. In terms of "tribulations of the self," Giddens shows us that in steering between the conflicting claims of rival types of abstract system, the self may face at least four kinds of dilemma or tension presented by modern social circumstances: unification versus fragmentation; powerlessness versus appropriation; authority versus uncertainty; and personalized versus commodified experience.[42] In other words, within the current world arena, no matter the religion, inconsistencies between a religious worldview and empirical explanations of the world have intensified. Nevertheless, such inconsistencies rarely diminish people's faith in the religious system, but instead prompt transformations in religiosity—the nature, contents, and practices of a tradition. In *Huiling*, we thus see a possible transformation of Chinese folk religion to an almost entirely distanciated form. Through this case study, we can also learn about the essential characteristics, dynamics, and patterns of change of Chinese folk religion.

Certainly, the discussion here on the coherence theory of truth is based upon

---

41　See the case in L. Festinger, H.W. Riechen, and S. Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails*.

42　A Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*, p. 201.

epistemological considerations, which differ from the sociological explanation offered by Giddens. The former corresponds to the issue of internal plausibility, while the latter corresponds to the issue of external plausibility. With regard to internal plausibility, if a symbolic system is coherent enough to resist falsifications, we may say it has high level of plausibility; yet, if another symbolic system, even with strong internal coherence, still cannot match external empirical evidences, we may say it has the characteristics of a lack of external plausibility. Therefore, even though Chinese folk religion is seemingly coherent and possesses high internal plausibility, when facing rapid social change, it will still face the problem of a lack of external plausibility, such as cannot survive in a situation of time-space distanciation.

Nevertheless, while acknowledging these issues, I still want to emphasize that Chinese folk religion, when facing matters of modernity, never remains completely passive though its external plausibility may have been weakened. In response to situational change, it develops new orientations to enhance its adaptability for the new world arena. In the case of *Huiling*, these new orientations include the concepts of *Xiantian ling*, *Xiantian mu*, and *Heling shan*. Also, new locations and institutions, such as new pilgrimage sites, many private altars, and some new integrated associations, continue to emerge. All these serve to enhance folk religion's capacity to adapt to the modern world.

Some may argue that *Huiling* is already a new system, rather than a traditional folk religious system. However, even if it puts forth a new system of practices, that system relies on the same set of traditional symbols as existing Chinese folk religion; *Huiling* has not created new symbols. *Huiling* is a bottom up invention that has given traditional folk symbols new meanings, or perhaps double meanings, which allow the group to adapt itself in the new settings of time-space distanciation, without any deterioration in the plausibility of territorial-based folk beliefs. As *Huiling* extends the plausibility of the symbols of folk religion, we should view it as one point on a wide spectrum of Chinese folk religion. In the long run, *Huiling* will not be able to enhance the external plausibility of Chinese folk religion. Yet, by offering new practices and concepts, *Huiling* has heightened the internal plausibility of a wider Chinese folk religion. This current case study thus sheds light on the dynamics of Chinese folk religion in the modern day.

（本文於 2017 年 1 月 18 日收稿，3 月 30 日通過刊登）

Bibliography

Brokaw, C.J. "Yuan Huang (1533-1606) and the Ledgers of Merit and Demerit." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies,* 47: 1, 1987, pp. 137–195.

Brokaw, C.J. *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Chang, Hsun 張珣. "'Dividing Incense' and Pilgrimage: Mazu and Social Integration." 分香與進香—媽祖信仰與人群整合 *Thought and Words* 思與言, 33: 4, 1996, pp. 83-105.

Chang, Maria Hsia. *Falun Gong: The End of Days*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004.

Chen, Xing-zhi 陳杏枝. "The Private Temple in Taipei Ka-làh." 台北市加蚋地區的宮廟神壇 *Taiwanese Sociology* 臺灣社會學刊, 31, 2003, pp.93-152.

Chu, Ruey-ling 朱瑞玲. "The Psychological Implication of Taiwanese morality books: From Traditional to Modern." 臺灣民間善書的心理意涵：從傳統到現代的轉折 Paper presented at the Conference of Indigenous Psychological Studies at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica 中研院民族所本土歷史心理學專題研討會論文集, Taipei, 1992.

Chu, Ruey-ling 朱瑞玲. "Charity and Altruistic Behavior in Chinese Society." 中國人的慈善觀念 *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology Academic Sinica* 中央研究院民族學研究所集刊, 75 ,1993, pp. 105-132.

Chun, Allen. "The Changing Times of a Village Temple Alliance System in the Northern New Territories of Hong Kong: An Analysis of a Tianhou Cult." In *Development and Change in Mazu Cult Worship* 媽祖信仰的發展與變遷, edited by Lin Mei-rong et al. 林美容等, pp. 57-78. Taipei: Taiwan Association for Religious Studies 臺灣宗教學會, 2003.

Festinger, L., Riechen, H.W. and Schachter, S. *When Prophecy Fails*. New York: Harper & Row, 1956.

Garcia Canclini, N. *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

Giddens, A. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity, 1990.

Giddens, A. *Modernity and Self-identity*. Cambridge: Polity, 1991.

Huiling gaiyao 會靈概要 (Outlines for Huiling).

Huiling shou ce 會靈手冊 (Manual of Ling Practice).

Joachim, H.H. *The Nature of Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906.

Jordan, D.K. *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972.

Jordan, D.K., and Overmyer, D.L. *The Flying Phoenix: Aspects of Chinese Sectarianism in Taiwan*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986.

Lai, Zong-xian 賴宗賢. *Taiwan daojiao yuanliu* 台灣道教源流. Taipei: Zhonghua Daotong Press 中華道統出版社, 1999.

Lingshan Lundao Shu 靈山論道書 (Discussing the Truth on the Spirit Mountain).

Lin, Wei-ping 林瑋嬪. *Materializing Magic Power: Chinese Popular Religion in Villages and Cities*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015.

Ministry of the Interior, Republic of China 中華民國內政部. Statistical Abstract of the Interior of the Republic of China 中華民國內政部統計摘要. Taipei: Department of Statistics, Ministry of the Interior 中華民國內政部統計處, 1996.

Moore, G.E. *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1910-11.

Russell, B. "On the Nature of Truth." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 7, 1906, pp. 28-49.

Sangren, P.S. *Chinese Sociologics: An Anthropological Account of the Role of Alienation in Social Reproduction*. New Brunswick, NJ: The Athlone Press, 2000.

Seaman, G. *Temple Organization in a Chinese Village*. Taipei: The Chinese Association for Folklore, 1987.

Snow, D.A. & Machalek, R. "On the Presumed Fragility of Unconventional Beliefs." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 21: 1, 1982, pp. 15-26.

Ting, Jen-chieh 丁仁傑. *Popular Religion for Contemporary Han Chinese:*

Discourse, Identity, and Social Reproduction 當代漢人民眾宗教研究：論述、認同與社會再生產. Taipei: Linking Publishing 聯經出版社, 2009.

Tsai, Yi-jia 蔡怡佳. *The Reformative Visions of Mediumship in Contemporary Taiwan*. Ph.D. dissertation, Rice University, 2003.

Wang, Zhi-yu 王志宇. *The 'Benevolent Lords' Worshipping in Taiwan* 台灣的恩主公信仰. Taipei: Wenjin 文津, 1997.

Yang, C.K. 楊慶堃. *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961.

漢人民間信仰的當代適應與轉化：
會靈運動所帶來的啟示

丁仁傑*

摘要

1990 年代以後在台灣地方宗教場域裡蓬勃發展的集體性起乩運動會靈，目前已廣爲學界所注意，本文進一步想由這個例子，來討論漢人民間信仰面對現代性的轉化與適應議題。會靈是與既有漢人地方信仰共用相同的地景，而且是在民間信仰原有象徵系統上進行內在意義轉化的一套宗教實踐系統，這套系統在與民間信仰並存的同時，也擴大了漢人民間信仰象徵系統在當代世界裡的「可信性」的基礎。本文指出，在「融貫理論」與「符合理論」兩種論述型態的對比下，漢人民間信仰可以被視爲一種與經驗事實脫鉤，而具有一套高內在協調性的「融貫理論式」的命題系統。當這套系統面臨現代性所產生的經驗證據的挑戰時，我們觀察到，以會靈運動爲例，其適應方式不是以經驗事實來做回應，而是透過內在性的論述轉化與新的實踐模式，而進入了一個更爲超越性的層次來進行眞理宣稱和身體連結。在會靈的例子裡，這些新的取向包括了：先天靈、先天母、會靈、地景的重塑與新修行制度的浮現等等，這些象徵符號的新取向，有助於提高漢人民間信仰象徵系統的超越性，並且也有助於漢人民間信仰適應於當代世界。

關鍵字：融貫理論、會靈、漢人民間信仰、私人宮壇、現代性

---

* 中央研究院民族學研究所研究員。