



Spirit-Writing and Mediumship in the Chinese New Religious Movement Dejiao in Southeastern Asia

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Abstract. – Through the case study of the Teochew people of Northeastern Guangdong who formed the bulk of Chinese immigrants to mainland Southeast Asia between the late 19th century and the Second World War, this article deals with a widespread Chinese technic of written spirit-mediumship, called *fuji*. By taking into account the example of a New Religious Movement, named Dejiao (teaching of virtue), which appeared in the context of the Sino-Japanese war and spread to Southeast Asia afterwards, the author analyzes the ways mediums enter into communication with gods and their state of mind before and after their performance. He also singles out the sociological factors, which lead to attractive oracles and thus strengthen the faith of the believers. [*China, Chaozhou, Teochew people, mediumship*]

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According to Chinese mythology, ideographic writing was created by diviners looking for a systematic method to penetrate gods' intentions. It is said that in immemorial times they drawn up a system of signs, which, from the early beginning, was conceived as the immediate expression of reality. The idea that signs bring in themselves an incipient reality and that writing gives access to the "source" took root in the Chinese system of thought, onwards. As noted by Billeter (2001: 249), Chinese believe that: "between speech and writing, writing is always weighed up as first." He adds that "the general shape of energy tightening and undoing in

the priest or medium's body is thought to be the momentary core of universe, whose truth may only be revealed through *fu* (扶), or 'support with the hand'." Daoism made a great use of these *fu*, and today *fuji* (扶乩, spirit-writing) is believed to be the more accurate way of communication with gods in the Chinese popular religion.

Fuji as a divinatory technique, as a human experience, or as an aspect of the Chinese religious culture has already been richly documented.¹ While making reference to previous studies on the subject, I shall cast greater light in the following pages on two dimensions of Chinese spirit-writing that have been so far neglected, namely, the specific psychological and sociological aptitudes of the medium which are crucial factors for the collective assessment of his performance and career. The analysis will be based on the case study of Dejiao (德教, teaching of virtue), a China-born religious movement, which is rooted in the tradition of the "halls for good deeds" (*shantang*, 善堂). Dejiao emerged in Chaozhou (northeast of Guangdong) during the Sino-Japanese war and spread among the Chaozhou communities of Southeast Asia after the Second World War.² More recently this movement spread back to post-Maoist China (Formoso 2010).

1 See, among other works, those of de Groot (1910), Elliot (1955), Jordan (1972), Jordan and Overmyer (1986), Sutton (1989), Clart (2003).

2 The spread of Dejiao to Southeast Asia is richly documented by Tan Chee-Beng (1985) in the case of Malaysia and Singapore, and by Yoshihara (1987, 1988) concerning Thailand.

A Brief Description of *fuji*

Spirit-writing being the main religious activity of Dejiào, it is necessary to provide some preliminary information concerning its symbols, its vocabulary, and basic features. Early in the twentieth century, de Groot (1910: 1294–1300) proposed a general description of the *modus operandi* of *fuji* séances in Xiamen (Amoy), which does not present any major differences with the contemporary Dejiào spirit-writing performances.

Although *fuji* may be the commonest compound to be used, Dejiào adepts also refer to the *luan*-bird's metaphor to name spirit-writing. Depending on contexts, they thus call it *fuluan* (扶鸞, to wield the *luan*-bird) or *kailuan* (開鸞, to open the *luan*-bird). To justify such a metaphor, Malaysian followers explained to me that *luan*-bird (鸞) is the usual conveyor of the Jade Emperor and of Daoist Immortals,³ who are the main “honourable masters” to provide oracles.

As noted by Hargett (1989: 238), most Western scholars confuse *luan*-bird with phoenix (鳳, *feng*), another fabulous bird popular in Chinese mythology. Although it is undeniable that Chinese poets could prompt to pair *luan* and *feng* images in order to create otherworldly settings in verses, the symbols associated with the two animals are slightly different. According to Schafer (1963: 288), the *luan*-bird is an enriched version of the Argus pheasant and can be translated as *simurgh*, a term used in Persian legends to call a fabulous animal of comparable morphology and character. The *luan*-bird appeared in the Daoist literature as early as the first century A.D. and by that time was the favourite mount of Xi Wangmu, the Queen Mother of the West.⁴ It was also associated in poetry with the Confucian ideal of the “princely man” whose moral rectitude puts him high above the common flock (Hargett 1989: 253–255). Progressively, its role of aerial courser, soaring great distances without difficulty, was extended to the transportation of a large range of gods and Daoist Immortals travelling between earth and heaven, hence its close identification with *fuji*.

A spirit-writing performance starts with an incantation inviting the gods to “descend into the *ji*.” While two mediums silently stand by the platter before the temple's main altar, concentrating hard with heads bent and eyes closed, other male members of the congregation, gathered around, strike up the incantation. They enhance the address to the gods by burning incense and invitation messages into the altar's incense pot. Each medium holds one of the two arms of a forked branch, between 1.5 and 2 feet long and made of peach or willow wood. These two species of tree are believed to be very auspicious: both because they are symbols of immortality and fecundity, and because ghosts are known to fear them. Moreover, according to a prominent Malaysian adept of Dejiào, the willow tree's nodes are usually *bagua* shaped, thus evoking the universe's charter of the *Yijing* divination system. The same informant adds that the willow tree embodies three specific virtues: its stems hang down to the earth, thus suggesting the polite and humble attitude to adopt during rituals; its branches on the contrary point toward the sky as a mark of braveness and straightness; and its roots sink deep into the soil, as a sign of vitality.

The *ji*-wielders are a pair because they express the *yin/yang* complementary during the process of spirit-writing ritual. The medium who holds one arm of the fork with his right hand but stands on the left side while facing the altar, is considered as the *yang* and “heaven's hand” (天手, *tianshou*); his fellow who holds the other arm of the fork with his left hand, and stands on the right side while facing the altar, is considered as *yin*. As de Groot (1910: 1297) pointed out, he merely behaves neutrally, abstaining from disturbing the movements of “heaven's hand.” When, after prayers and burning incense, the two “*ji* palms,” as they are commonly called, begin to shake, and the stick follows their movements by tracing characters, it means that the gods have “opened the phoenix” by coming down.

The various supports they use, as well as the ways in which their messages are written down perfectly express the lack of liturgical homogeneity within Dejiào. In some congregations, the tray where the gods' messages are delivered is a square, symbolizing earth, and which is put on the floor with the mediums sitting down to write oracles, whereas elsewhere it is a table and the *ji*-wielders remain standing. In the latter case, the table may be square, circular, or *bagua* shaped. The material used to write varies accordingly. Though in most cases characters are traced back on the sand, on incense ashes, or a combination of both; sometimes it is through a thin layer of tea or holy water poured down on the platter that the gods express oracles.

3 According to Daoist mythology, the Jade Emperor is the ruler of Heaven who governs the different realms of existence, including life on Earth and Hell. The Daoist Immortals are legendary heroes who lived during the Tang and Song dynasties and who used various methods such as alchemy, *qigong*, dietary, and meditation to reach spiritual and physical immortality.

4 Xi Wangmu is a Chinese goddess whose worship can be traced back to the 15th century B.C.E. Later on, she was incorporated into the Daoist pantheon. She is believed to dispense prosperity and longevity.

These messages, or *shiyu* (示喻, instruction of imperial edicts), are read by assistants, the *baoyu* (報喻, those reporting the instructions) who stand around the platter and transmit them in a loud voice to clerks, the *jiyu* (記喻, those who write the instructions), sitting nearby. When sand is used, an assistant is in charge of levelling it after a character has been written. The readers and scribes are educated men, who are able to transcript divine language into legible human writing. However, they sometimes misinterpret the gods' wishes. To prevent mistakes, the scribes submit at the end of each sequence their interpretative work to the gods. If the latter disagree with a word or a sentence, they express their disappointment with vigorous bangs of the tip that they knock down on the tray, and set in motion with the scrawling of the proper characters. Between two sentences there are generally short blanks in the gods' statements, marked by the divine pen standing by or tracing helical circles. The behaviour of the mediums during the séance is supposed to reflect the gods' state of mind or degree of presence. Most of the time, the stick moves fast but smoothly, under the guidance of the gods holding the right hand of the main *ji*-wielder. However, under certain circumstances the "honourable masters" possess the whole medium's body, making him enter into a trance. In that case, the gods demonstrate aggressiveness toward spectres or peculiar decisions by making the stick jump up and down, forth and back, and by hammering the tray violently. Conversely, the same acts may be the unexpected consequence of a spectre that takes possession or clings to the soul of the medium, who holds it thus causing the point to write inauspicious oracles. Sometimes, too, the main *ji*-wielder reproduces typical behaviors of the god who inhabits him. For instance, some of those who used to be possessed by Jigong, the "crazy monk" of the Song Dynasty,⁵ endorse the habits of the master by drinking heavily and speaking loudly when they deliver his poems.

These remarks lead us to the question of the identity of the gods who deliver oracles. Although their identity is systematically revealed in the case of Dejiao spirit-writing, the assertion of Tan Chee-Beng (1985: 7) that the name of the deity is men-

tioned at the end of the message must be qualified. On the contrary, in some congregations the gods start the oracle by giving their names and surnames. Usually, several "honourable masters" come down during the same séance, the average number being two or three. Statements are ordinarily written down by using Chinese script. Indeed, Chinese (either Mandarin or the Chaozhou dialect) is believed to be the only idiom to render the true commands of the gods, even if messages are sometimes expressed through English, Arabic (in Malaysia), and Thai (in Thailand).

The séances do not exclusively take place in the intimacy of devotees' houses or of congregations' temples. Sometimes, especially when "warriors' *ji*" is performed, mediums shuffle through public spaces, such as urban streets, marketplaces, graveyards, and forests to chase ghosts away. In these cases, or when the purpose is healing, the mediums may use the *ji* not to address messages or prescriptions but to expel spectres and to cure illness by applying the stick on the patient's body. They are invited to do so by written requests where devotees lay down questions and promises of sacrifice. The letters, which bear the name of the god beseeched, are burned at the altar. The pen's power can be prophylactic as well, when a brush tied to the stump of the forked branch is dipped into vermilion ink to bring happiness, luck, and positive impulse to what it strikes. Finally, the brush is also instrumental to the scrawling of good luck and protective charms on papers and pieces of clothing, either yellow or green.

What Kind of Possession Is *fu ji*?

The most comprehensive taxonomic study about possession so far published is undoubtedly "Music and Trance" by Rouget (1985). According to this author, a basic distinction should be established between "ecstasy" and "trance." Whereas the former is defined as "the action of moving through space, displacement, deviation" and involves "disturbance, agitation, wandering as applied to the mind," the latter signifies a different kind of interaction. It entails a convulsive stage and, in numerous cases, is linked to symbolic death through depersonalization, as though the visiting spirit had taken over the medium (Rouget 1985: 7). Rouget suggests that ecstasy should apply to the states of immobility, silence, hallucination, and isolation, whereas states of trance apply "solely to those that are obtained by means of noise, agitation, and in the presence of others", without hallucination (7). Concerning the latter, he makes a distinction between what he calls the con-

5 Jigong huofu (1130–1207) is a Buddhist monk who lived in Hangzhou during the Southern Song Dynasty. Famous for his compassionate nature, magical powers, and eccentric behavior (he lived as a beggar and used to drink alcohol), he became a folk hero and was recently popularized by TV series and movies. He is believed to be the reincarnate of the Taming Dragon Arhat, one of the eighteen legendary arhats of the Chinese Buddhist mythology. He was also incorporated into the Daoist pantheon.

scious or “reprobate” possession and the “cultivated” type of trance which is always followed by amnesia. The Dejiao *fuji* is frequently consistent with the latter type. However, – and Rouget is the first to admit that the features he describes with respect to trances are not necessarily always directly observable – it should be noted that most Dejiao séances do not involve the generation of noise, with mediums trembling, shuddering, dashing off, falling to the ground, or having convulsions. These symptoms are rather typical of *wuji* (武乩, spirit-writing of the warrior) that only a minority of Dejiao adepts practice. Under those circumstances, other, more spectacular demonstrations of spiritual possession may be displayed. These may consist of piercing one’s own flesh without bleeding, self-flagellation with hobnailed spherical sledgehammers, or “chewing” fine porcelain cups without any outward signs of pain and with the blood pouring of the medium’s mouth being put on talismans to empower them.

Concerning the “spirit-writing of the literati” (文乩, *wenji*), which is the dominant way of communication with gods, the mediums may also sometimes display obvious signs of possession, through convulsive motions, tics, noisy breathing, or fixed gazing when the god who possesses them expresses discontent or anger. Nevertheless, most of the time, the mediums give the impression that they have lost all consciousness of their surroundings, but in an unobtrusive and quiet way. Spiritual possession then becomes so internalized, as to go almost unperceived by an inexperienced spectator. The hands of the mediums holding the forked branch seem to be taken over by an unseen external force; the mediums’ eyes usually remain closed during the trance, thus showing that they have been completely taken over. The feeling of calm radiating from the mediums when doing *wenji* is enhanced by the fact that they do not shout and even speak. *Fuji* is certainly one of the few trance forms to be mainly based on writing.

In keeping with the previous features, music does not play a central role. It is limited to an invocation that the assistants of the mediums strike up in polyphony without any instrumental accompaniment. Similar to the other types of possession, this chant goes *accelerando* and *crescendo*, and its function is to trigger the possession of the mediums, or to restart the session after a break. In observance of a division of tasks between the musical assistants and the persons possessed, the latter do not take part in the incantation and reciprocally the former never enter into a state of trance (Rouget 1985: 113). In fact, the only words one can discern during the séances are those of the assistants, whose role is to interpret the ideograms that the divine pen stealth-

ily draws on the plate, and to convey in loud voices their interpretations to the gathered adherents. Dance is totally absent during the performance, and consequently the theatrical aspect of entrancements, which characterizes many other forms of possession in Asia, such as the cult of *nats* in Burma, of the *Ba-dong* in Vietnam, or of the Hokkien mediums studied by DeBernardi (2006), is of minor importance in the case of *fuji*. This theatrical aspect, however, can be observed when a medium impersonates a specific deity whose habits and mannerisms he reproduces.

Even when the mediums do not overtly impersonate the gods’ temperaments, the idea prevails among the adepts that the subject of the possession is pervaded by deities, and as such may switch from one personality to another. The relationship between divinity and medium is never seen as an encounter which could be experienced as a communion, a revelation, or an illumination. It is instead perceived as the visit of one or more deities who then invest the *ji*-wielder and use him as a tool to convey their power and knowledge. Thus, followers have no problem accepting those *ji*-wielders who present themselves as illiterate or having a low level of Chinese education, but who can easily draw ideograms and sentences of a high level of erudition while in trance. It appears, however, that most of them have a good knowledge of the Chinese classics when questioned. Furthermore, in Thailand where education in Chinese language was severely restricted for decades, there are very few mediums able to impersonate the gods.

How to Become a Medium?

In a recent article, Clart (2003) qualifies the model of the Chinese medium as a passive and reluctant mouthpiece of the gods. For their part, the accounts of de Groot (1910: 1270), Elliott (1955: 47), and Jordan (1972: 73, 84–86) convey the idea that prospective mediums usually suffer seizures or ailments. According to Clart, even if latent mediums resist the eventuality of becoming a conduit of the gods’ messages and initially repudiate the idea of lending their bodies to the practice of divination, the “anointed ones” “ultimately succumb and restructure their lives to accommodate the possession experiences” (2003: 153). Although oral accounts confirm that the career of certain Dejiao *ji*-wielders can be explained with reference to this pattern, they are, however, of relatively little significance compared to other constructs which make the mediums’ calling the result of a more balanced relationship between gods and men.

These processes correspond more or less to an alternative model that Clart (2003: 156) calls “moral-cultivational mediumship,” which he considers to be of particular relevance concerning *wenji*. In this particular case, possession is seen as a form of partnership between a deity and a human being of great moral purity, which the former initially appointed as a messenger because of his ability to achieve such a moral state. The involuntary and sometimes violent character of mediumship is then replaced by a voluntary and cultivational effort on the part of the candidates. The way Dejiao appeared as a religious movement in 1939 perfectly illustrates this men-to-gods interaction, since the channel of communication that the founders of the movement succeeded in establishing at the time with Liu Chunfang and Yang Junsong, two Daoist masters of the Tang Dynasty (618–907), was the result of an initiative from “men of good morals,” whose aim was to cultivate and spread virtue. In fact, most of the Dejiao *ji*-wielders I met claimed to have been selected by the gods among applicants who longed to perform the function. In some respect, their selection had something to do with the mandarin examinations for entry into the imperial bureaucracy.

Overseas, wherein those who have the cultural background and the requisite motivation are few, the process by which gods are believed to make a choice within a group of prospective mediums is evidently of particular importance in strengthening the vocations, and somewhat counterbalances the shortage of callings. Because this process is based on the idea of a “fate affinity,” it institutes in the medium’s perspective a “life pact” with the “honourable master.” Personally, I have never heard among the Dejiao worshippers the folk theory that de Groot reports about involuntary possession in Xiamen. According to this theory, the mediumship vocation should be due to defects in the practitioner’s “eight characters” (八字, *bazi*), thus predestining such an individual to a short lifespan (1910: 1269). However, informants were keen to interpret the mediums’ careers with reference to the principle of *yuanfen* (緣份, fate affinity). This special affinity with gods and the pact it underlies are reinforced by the idea that the “honourable masters” take an active part in the training of the people they choose as mediums, and that it would be a dreadful betrayal not to honor this divine involvement. Outside of mainland China, training as a prerequisite to efficient communication with gods is overemphasized. Such training has two dimensions: one coming allegedly from the gods, and the other from a “human teacher” (人師, *renshi*), usually an older medium from the same congregation or from an affiliated one. In the former

case, the instructor is called either *xianshi* (仙師, Immortal teacher) or “honourable master” (師尊, *shizun*). More than 80% of the Dejiao *ji*-wielders I interviewed during my investigations were either under training or had completed such a regimen after months and frequently years of learning. Interestingly, the students of *fujī*, whatever their age, are called “children of the *ji*” (乩童, *jítong*), thus underlining the intellectual virginity and flexibility, two properties associated with childhood, that such students should embody.

The “divine” and human dimensions of training are inextricably linked in and by practice, since the students are from the beginning invited to hold the stylus under the supervision of experienced mediums. This is done during special sessions and, if a student has sufficiently advanced in the course of his training, during ordinary séances. In the last instance, *jítong* sometimes operate as pairs of beginners, but frequently an inexperienced medium serves as “left hand,” to an experienced one. When they do not operate directly as *ji*-wielders, the students assume the various functions of an assistant. For instance, when sand is used on the tray, they may be in charge of levelling it after a divine sentence has been written. Otherwise they act as oral interpreter or as clerk by writing the messages on a register. They thus carry out the various functions of spirit-writing and, therefore, incorporate the techniques.

Informants identified five aspects to the training of a medium, which can in no way be considered as successive steps, since they are usually taught concurrently. The first aspect consists in learning how to chant properly the prayer of invocation. The exact phrase used to express the appropriateness of the performance is “correct and sincere.” The idea that underlies such formula is that, while chanting, the medium must be motivated by a great purity of feeling and intention. He or she must have exclusively in mind the sincere, eager wish to invite the masters to uplift morality on earth. The second aspect consists in the production of protective and healing written charms on various materials, such as rice paper, pieces of cloth, or wood. Because the training on this subject is mainly based on observation of the way more experienced mediums act, it is closely related to the third aspect, that is, the study of famous *fujī* texts of the past. Apprentices spend many hours and days in deciphering and translating into intelligible and literary forms the elliptic moral poems delivered by the “honourable masters.” The tens of morality books (善書, *shanshu*) published by the Dejiao congregations offer a rich corpus of oracles to these exercises. Moreover, most books or

magazines propose one or several exegesis of the main *jiwen*, thus giving the students the opportunity to compare their own interpretations with those of more experienced mediums. Although the stated goal of these exercises is to make understand the “profound reason” of spirit-writing, their implicit function is to familiarize the apprentices with the moral patterns, key concepts, and the typical expressive style of *fujī*. In other words, the ultimate aim is to standardize the writings of the new cohort of mediums in accordance with the tenets of a preexisting spirit-writing tradition. A well-known Dejiao medium from Malaysia, and at the time president, clearly expresses this goal when he says that:

Undoubtedly, the “palm of the *ji*” who does not know enough characters will be unable to render faithfully the marvellous nature of the divine messages. He will fail to express the true meaning of the “imperial sayings” (*shengyu*), and many secrets will remain in the hands of the honourable masters (Chen Wen-Bo 2001: 82 f.).

The interpretation of *fujī* texts remains a part of the careers of the Dejiao mediums well after their period of training, and it is actually one of their favourite occupations. They not only form the main readership of the Dejiao divine messages printed in books and magazines; they also get to interact with their colleagues during regular séances or special events. Such interaction then becomes an opportunity to comment on the performances of the various *ji*-wielders and to compare translations of divine edicts. In this respect, the opening ceremonies and anniversaries of congregations, or other significant celebrations involving several teams of mediums, are high points in the ongoing exchange of views and knowledge, contributing in large part to a relative homogenization of spirit-writing within this religious movement. Such circumstances are also of crucial importance in drawing common criteria of evaluation used to assess whether the *fujī* performance is coming from a “human” or a “divine” planchette.

The fourth aspect of the mediums’ training is to make the new recruits rely entirely and faithfully on the gods. This part of the training agenda then consists of inculcating in the students a steadfast trust in divine instructions. Doubt, fear, and other ambiguous states of mind must disappear in favor of the unfailing conviction that the gods are omnipotent, omniscient, and basically benevolent, as long as one respects their edicts. Among these instructions are the taboos and prescriptions that the mediums should observe before or after the possession. They are enunciated as the training séances go by, and vary in detail from one medium to an-

other, thus contributing to the reinforcement of the pact between the divine enactors and the practitioner. It is believed that these rules vary according to the the “eight characters of birth,” which define the basic astrological identity of the medium. The aim of such a set of dispositions is to get rid of the obstacles, linked to specific signs of destiny, which could prevent the medium from becoming a genuine channel of communication. In addition to the observance of certain personal directives (such as a permanent prohibition to eat certain kinds of meat, vegetables, and fruits), most Dejiao *ji*-wielders share a common set of transitory prescriptions, adherence to which is expected to facilitate the attainment of spiritual purity before possession. They thus restrict their diet to vegetarian fare and refrain from sexual intercourse during the days preceding the séance. The strict observance of the rules enacted by the masters is, among other prescriptions, a mark of respect and obedience. More generally, the *ji*-wielders are taught not to discuss or even to think about the messages and orders they convey during their trance. This is one of the reasons why obtaining the mediums’ opinions and attitudes about their practices is often a problematic undertaking. Too great an understanding by the practitioner of the processes at work during performances is believed to be a major obstacle to the attainment of the “truth” and “profound reason” of the *ji*. The following account that a prominent member of a Dejiao congregation of Hong Kong related to me is all the more indicative of such kinds of obstacles.

In the early 1990s, his congregation had trained a young couple of mediums. The man, who acted as “celestial hand,” was a student in philosophy at the University of Hong Kong. He was well-versed in Daoist teachings but was ill-tempered. As for his girlfriend and assistant, she received a good Confucian education and had a good background in classic Chinese literature, a quality that was not readily apparent however. After six months of training, their *fujī* was lively, accurate, and smart. The man eventually became a petty official in the New Territory’s administration system. But to improve his family’s income, he started to work as a taxi driver by night. During one stormy evening, he was wielding the willow tree when suddenly the storm outside intensified and the divine pen stopped. After a long while without any motion, the *ji*-stick suddenly stood up and struck the main medium’s head. He then rushed to the altar, while his assistant let go of the willow stick, screaming in apparent fright. It became clear that he was actually delivering, at the top of his voice, a gods’ message in a language that nobody could understand. The audience was panic-

stricken. Then, the president of the congregation, after recovering from the surprise dealt by the unprecedented performance, knelt down before the altar and implored the “honourable masters” to put things in order. He then threw water from the altar’s flowerpots at the face of the medium, who subsequently fainted. An older, more experienced medium then took the willow stick, and through him the Daoist Immortal Lü Dongbin⁶ allegedly blamed the young man for having perfected his intelligence to the detriment of the control of the “diabolical fire of the heart.” The *jiwen* concluded by ordering him to go home and copy *fujī* poems in order to calm and train his mind.

This anecdote leads us logically to the fifth and perhaps main principle which is inculcated in the minds of *ji*-wielders, that is self-forgetting. It is only by training himself to attain a level of concentration that adepts call alternately *rudīng* (入定, calm), *kongxu* (空虛, empty void), or *jiran* (寂然, silence) that a medium can reach the extinguishment of desires (慾念, *yunian*), thus allowing the gods’ spirit (神靈, *shenling*) to become manifest. The spontaneous account that one of the earliest Dejiao adepts and mediums of Hong Kong, Lü Yi-Tan, published in 1998 is a good “emic” depiction of this state of nonbeing as well as of the difficulties in reaching it. He writes:

When I started to do *fujī* the first time, my heart was beating hard and my stylus remained motionless for a long while. Suddenly, the willow stick moved very fast and began drawing circles in the air. Though I was at the time very calm (*rudīng*), the divine pen was too fast and at the beginning I was unable to write any characters. My arm had gone completely numb. Then, I thought that such a block was the consequence of my inability to make my heart sincere, and that I was swamped by my subconscious. It was better to calm down and to try to make my mind go blank. Then a message came to me: *If the heart is sincere, the mind will be right*. It was followed by another one that I wrote without restraint and that the “honourable master” Bai Yun was sending to me. Its content was: *to be doubtful of the miracles makes the communication mistaken. Only the appeased heart can receive the spirit of the “honourable masters”*. Liu Chunfang and Yang Junsong came down too. Finally, they were followed by Lü Dongbin who wrote that: *when the mind is magnificent and solemn the willow stick cannot stop anymore*. This message was actually delivering the profound truth of *fujī*. After fifty minutes of spirit-writing, I felt that my head was becoming heavy and my feet very light. The upper part of my body suddenly toppled on the left side of the planchette. In my heart of hearts, I was willing to

ask the *shizun* to stop. The wish was almost immediately fulfilled. Other worshippers came to hold me up, and to make me sit down. They poured perfumed water on my whole body. However, I still felt sleepy for a long time. My fingers that held the stick were frothing; their skin was burnt out ... (Lü Yi-Tan 2001: 65).

Despite the pain and difficulties he experienced, Lü Yi-Tan was lucky enough to enter into communication with gods at his first attempt. Such ease in taking up the mantle of mediumship appears to be quite uncommon. In most cases, the willow stick can remain motionless for hours, and even when it begins moving it is usually unable to deliver coherent messages over a period covering several sessions. However, to “fine-tune” (微調, *weítiao*) the medium’s mind so as to produce clear transmissions is not an easy undertaking. Lü Yi-Tan admits (1998: 66) that

Up to now, I am unable to deepen the philosophy of the *Dao*. I am not tenacious enough to uplift my mind! I finally think that the “honourable masters” are content with using my weak abilities to bring to the surface small drops of information. I should confess that after several months of practice, I became aware that I was not calmed down sufficiently. It is why it is difficult for me to hold the willow stick, and the transmission is interrupted from time to time. It is like an old radio not tuned properly: sometimes the reception is clear, sometimes it is jammed. In that case, if I have to complete a sentence, I must do it by myself. It is why the messages I transmit become *yiji* (the *ji* of the [human] mind), and I consequently asked the “honourable masters” not to hold the willow stick anymore. The first condition to do *fu ji* is to be calm (*jiran*) and to switch oneself off. Otherwise one cannot host the heaven’s spirits and our consciousness can even prove to be harmful.

The analogy of radio transmission to which Lü Yi-Tan refers is frequently used among *ji*-wielders. Clart (2003: 167) quotes for instance a worshipper of the Taiwanese Mingzheng Tang Phoenix hall who believed that “a good medium is a person whose mind can work on the same frequency as that of the communicating deity; he is like a radio set whose transmissions become clearer the more finely it is able to tune in to the signal-emitting station.” Another medium among my Dejiao informants compared the “palm of the *ji*” (*jishou*, a metaphor for the medium) to a dish aerial receiving Hertzian waves from the *dede she* acting as a moral broadcasting centre. Clart (2003: 167) is certainly right to suggest that such analogies are not drawn arbitrarily, that they are “grounded in a worldview that does not recognize a discontinuity between the natural universe and the moral cosmos”.

⁶ Lü Dongbin is the group leader of the Eight Immortals of the Daoist mythology.

To come back to Lü Yi-Tan, his account shows that he remained partly conscious during his first trance, not only because he was feeling the physical effects of possession, but also because he was able to link the meaning of messages he was writing with changes in his level of receptiveness to the divine inflows. Although interesting, this account is nonetheless unrepresentative, and it is perhaps why Lü Yi-Tan admits that he is not sufficiently blessed with the requisite level of abilities to practice *fuji*. In most cases, the mediums claim to be able to switch themselves off completely at the time of possession. Absolute self-obliviousness, including insensitivity to pain, is the state of mind being put forward. The most extreme example of this utter self-forgetting state is the main *ji*-wielder of Zi Zhenge, the flagship Dejiao congregation of Thailand. This young man (he was in his late thirties in 2003) is known to be a favorite “stylus” of Jigong. He radically changes behavior during possession. While in the normal course of life he is rather shy, gentle, and abstemious, when in a trance he belches and generally exhibits rough manners, ingesting bottles of cognac or other strong brandy without restraint. After hours of being in a trance and heavy drinking, he never displays any manifest signs of exhaustion, and even declares afterwards that he feels alleviated, although physically drained. These aspects of his mediumship contribute to the popular perception that he is a pure channel of transmission.

Finally, the emphasis that folk theory places on self-obliviousness during possession raises the question of the locus of the mediating function. Is the stylus moved directly by the gods or is it moved by the medium as an agent of the god? According to Clart (2003: 164 f.), the mediating function is clearly located in the human medium, despite the believers’ theorizing which localizes it simultaneously in the latter and in the forked branch. The main argument he puts forward to support his thesis is the great concern for the medium’s purity of mind. The training of the *ji*-wielders within Dejiao also insists on this purity, which is in no way limited to the mind. It equally applies to the physical as well as spiritual aspects of the person, hence the dietary and sexual restraints imposed before the séances. The Mingzheng Tang worshippers and their Dejiao counterparts also are of one mind with regard to the mediating function, which they believe to be assumed both by the divine pen and the *ji*-wielders. It is precisely on this second point that my interpretation diverges from that of Clart. From the very moment we take into account both folk representations and practices, there is no reason to give precedence to the human agent in the chain of causation. On the

contrary, the worshippers make the efficacy of material, human, and divine mediums (the *luan*-bird as gods’ mount) depend on the same steps. Thus, while the accomplished medium need to make his mind go blank and his body pure so as not to interfere with the inflow of divine thoughts and matter-energy (*qi*), the *luan*-bird is believed to be *sui generis* a paragon of virtue. Furthermore, the willow or peach tree from which divine pens are taken is usually chosen, following divine instructions, in a “clean” natural area, and should have neither knots nor malformations. I also mentioned in a previous section that the willow tree’s central node was believed to be *bagua* shaped, thus acting as an efficient symbol of the cosmos and of the positive combination of its basic components. Finally, the divine pens are kept in a sacred place, usually a corner of the central altar of the congregation’s prayer hall, near the divine icons. Stored that way, they are protected from the influence of malevolent spirits and of profanes’ stain (usually their handling is restricted to the mediums). They are also kept in closer contact with gods and are, therefore, in an ideal place to absorb their radiating magical power.

That the efficiency of the human medium, of the divine pen, and of the *luan*-bird be considered closely interdependent and of equal importance is suggested by the equivalence and interchangeability of the terms applied to them. The emphasis is sometimes placed on the *ji*, the divine pen, through compounds such as *fuji* (to support the *ji* with hand), *jishou* (hand of the *ji*), or *jitong* (children of the *ji*) to designate the planchette divination and the mediums engaged in such divination. In other illocutionary contexts, the emphasis is placed on the *luan*-bird through compounds such as *luanbi* (鸞筆, *luan*-bird’s pen), *luanyu* (鸞諭, *luan*-bird’s command), and *luanwen* (鸞文, *luan*-bird’s writing) to identify the divine pen and the messages it draws. In yet other contexts, compounds refer directly to the human medium. The main term is “deity and human become one” that the Mingzheng Tang worshippers and their Dejiao counterparts use to express the interaction between mediums and deities during trances. Let us note, however, that the references to the human mediums in the terminology are few in comparison with the mentions of the planchette or of the fabulous bird. We can conjecture that the long training process and harsh discipline involved in establishing mediumship makes *a priori* the *ji*-wielders less reliable and less easily identifiable to the gods than the two other mediums. The fact that the Dejiao comments about *fuji* focus on *ji*-wielders and their experiences is essentially symptomatic of the problems they raise.

Although the degree of reliability of a medium may not be fully ascertained, he nonetheless can receive “divine recognition” when, in due course, the gods confer on him a “heavenly degree” (天文憑, *tian wenping*). This “degree,” which takes the form of *fuji* poetic allegories conveying the idea of completion, is delivered at the occasion of a *fuji* séance during which the medium thus singled out is excluded. Because it is considered similar to an imperial diploma, opening the way to an official appointment, it is another piece of evidence that gods and devotees are thought to operate along the lines of a “heavenly bureaucracy.” Significantly, the *ji*-wielder, upon receipt of such a level of recognition, may use the “seals of authority” (印把子, *yin bazi*) of his congregation. Such an appointment does not suggest, however, that the human medium takes over the mediating process. According to folk theory, he remains a “driving belt” in the process of communication. Moreover, the “heavenly degree” can hardly be considered as the final stage of an initiating process. *Ji*-wielders without divine accreditation can also be efficient “receivers” and be renowned for their capabilities, whereas the recognition conferred by the gods may be invalidated in the event of infringement of taboos. Although some mediums report that the gods had put to the test, through dream-like visions, their resoluteness and other virtues before the awarding of accreditation, these experiences, which are strictly personal, seem to be reproduced all along the medium’s career. Accordingly, they do not correspond to levels of training, and the medium’s divine appointment is not acknowledged through a *rite de passage*. In contrast with the custom of the Taiwanese organization studied by Clart (2003: 168), attainment of the above-described status is not marked by the granting of a “pen name” or other signs of public recognition.

Status and Power for the *ji*-Wielders

That some mediums are officially appointed by the gods raises the question of their status within the religious community they belong to. In the view of Clart (2003: 170), a medium is not a particularly gifted individual, and “spirit-mediumship is the practical application of ability attainable by anyone at a fairly high level of cultivation”; this remark perfectly applies to Dejiao. On the other hand, the observation of de Groot that the *tong ji* (童乩, *tang ki*) of Xiamen belong to the lower social stratum does not apply to Dejiao mediums, since the people who take up the function come from every stratum in the social scale. There is a small number of business ty-

coons who hold the forked branch, but members of the middle and working classes are equally represented: truck or taxi drivers mix with shopkeepers, school teachers, students, engineers, accountants, and salesmen. In Malaysia, where there is a plethora of *ji*-wielders, women are admitted in mediums’ circles, which are largely dominated by men. They either form two-female teams or male-female pairs. In the latter case, the usual combination is a man in the position of heaven’s hand with his wife or girlfriend assisting him. A brief survey I conducted in 2003 among fifty Dejiao mediums revealed that their average age was over 57 and that nearly 85% of them had received formal education in Chinese schools. As for the remaining 15%, most of them were residing in Thailand, and, because of severe restrictions imposed for decades on Chinese schools in this country, they were usually self-taught in written Chinese.

Only a minority of mediums are members of the directorial board of their congregation, and very few are those who act both as leader and “celestial hand.” Usually, they work unobtrusively in the shadow of wealthy and influential businessmen who represent the political and financial “task force” of the cult community. This does not mean, however, that the mediums do not involve themselves in the community’s current affairs. On the contrary, whereas most directors, who are usually deeply involved in the management of their own businesses and are also active in the board of several philanthropic organizations, have little time to spare for the administration of each of them, the mediums are often very active in the daily affairs of their respective pavilions. This is particularly true when they are past middle age and have retired from their professions. Otherwise, young, devoted mediums are frequently recruited by directorial boards as permanent staff.

Indeed, the more the mediums involve themselves in the activities of their congregation, the more they develop their knowledge of its members, of their aspirations and concerns. Even if it is well-nigh impossible to establish a causal connection between such knowledge and the alleged accuracy of oracles, we can, however, surmise that they somehow correlate. Here we touch on the main point. How large is the extent of personal manipulation on the mediums’ performance? And what is the effect of this possible bias on their fame? Evidently, the vast majority of Dejiao worshippers would deny the possibility that those they consider to be true “heavenly hands” may introduce human opinion and expectation in their *fuji*, even with regard to meeting the general goals of the organization or to offering people some degree of relief. We have seen previ-

ously that the main criterion they use to decide of the reliability of the oracle is precisely the ability of the medium to create an intellectual void within himself. However, indisputable signs lack to identifying whether the practitioner has reached this state of mind. Consequently, the difference between *renji* (human planchette) and *shenji* (divine planchette) is primarily a matter of personal assessment.

The more or less good reputation of the mediums apart, the “human” or “divine” character of the oracle is usually assessed with reference to its possible effect on the movement’s unity, and to its effectiveness in the treatment of individual problems. Whereas the divine origin of spirit-writings whose contents fit the general purposes of the movement is rarely discussed, those which intend to restrict the *fujii* activity or favor certain associations at the expense of others inevitably raise misgivings.

With respect to the achievements of the mediums in replying to individual requests, it unambiguously appears that the more their oracles and healing prescriptions prove to be effective, the more their performances will be regarded as divine planchette and the greater their fame will be. Within Dejiao, like in other religious contexts, people who are not convinced of the outcome of an oracle often visit another spirit medium to check the validity of the diagnosis (DeBernardi 2006: 105). Moreover, the collective memory is prompt to forget or downplay failures and to conversely retain and magnify miracles or noteworthy events, especially those which reinforce the *raison d’être* of the devotees’ faith. In the case of Dejiao this trend is reinforced by two sociological phenomena. First, the fame of the medium as a true “heaven’s hand” tends to be function of his degree of involvement in the life of the congregation. This may be partly due to the better accuracy of his predictions, linked to his familiarity with devotees, but it may also be attributable to the influence and power he has accumulated as an active member of the association’s staff. It is indeed more difficult to question the authenticity of the oracles delivered by a core member of the organization than by a near-outsider. When such a challenge occurs, it inevitably leads to a clash and to the departure of one of the conflicting factions. As for the second phenomenon, it is correlated to the number of mediums operating concurrently in a given national context. The fewer the *ji*-wielders, the more the devotees depend on them, and the fewer are those who dare to challenge their oracles. Thus, whereas the human/divine planchette controversy has always been a crucial element of the Dejiao history in Malaysia and Singapore where *ji*-wielders are numerous, it is of little significance in

Thailand, Hong Kong, and the PRC, where, for various reasons, they are fewer in number. As a consequence, the status of the mediums in the latter set of countries is often considered to be higher compared to that of their Malaysian and Singaporean colleagues.

Even among the mediums who are unanimously considered to be pure channels of communication with gods, the pending question remains whether their power and prestige is related to their state of possession or to their ability to be possessed. In other words, and to reconsider an issue addressed by Jordan (1972: 73, 84), Sutton (1989: 113), Clart (2003: 155), and others, do the worshippers respect the possessing deity or the possessed individual? When we take into account the point of view and attitudes of the Dejiao devotees, such lines of inquiry appear to be meaningless, since the adherents do not separate the status of the medium *in* and *by* practice, during the trance and after. According to them, the man who proved in the past to have an outstanding propensity for receiving high-tune transmissions from the gods should logically maintain or reinforce such power, except if he infringes the taboos associated with the function. This is the reason why renowned mediums who leave their congregation after a clash usually bring with them a large number of followers. In certain instances, these powerful *ji*-wielders may even become the objects of a cult founded after their demise. It should be noted, however, that these mediums are not worshipped as deified humans, but as privileged tools of communication with gods, whose capacity remains intact after death. In other words, they are not considered as subject but as object of the miraculous powers radiating from heaven.

I have so far focused the analysis on the *ji*-wielders. However, the role that their assistants play in the production of oracles should not be neglected. Whereas the mediums are supposed to be in a state of self-obliviousness during the trance, the *baoyu* who report the oracles in a loud voice, and the *jiyu* who write them, ought to be particularly clear-sighted. This faculty is all the more needed for the *baoyu* who should quickly decipher series of cabalistic ideograms scrawled on the tray and must render them into legible human writing. Although usually ignored by the literature, these assistants play a key role in shaping the divine instructions and in presenting believers’ requests to the gods, either individually or collectively. With regard to the latter aspect, the assistants usually “adjust” the content of the divine reply to reflect the nature of the request, and are expected to do so by those who are anxiously looking for a personalized answer. Such bespoke

interpretation is validated by its collective character (several *baoyu* working together), and also by the fact that it is read to the *ji*-wielders and thus submitted to divine checking at the end of each sequence of the ongoing session. Freer and more controversial are the exegeses provided after the séance by the mediums or other literati who attend it as observers. They assume an important function by providing the devotees with a digest of the heavenly instructions. Finally, the interpretative process relies on several agents, organized in concentric circles around the divine pen: from the mediums in charge to the *baoyu*, and from them to the literati who are well-versed in divine poetry. Although ethnographers commonly follow the devotees by focusing their attention on the *ji*-wielders, who assume paradoxically the main responsibility of “good” or “wrong” oracles in the native view, the issue of the interpretative process ultimately proves to be in the hands of individuals who are not only in a state of perfect consciousness but are also located at the outpost of human expectations.

Finally, the Dejiao materials partly confirm the statement by Clart (2003: 174f.) pertaining to a bipolar hierarchy between *jishi* (濟世, to be of help) and *zhu shu* (著書, to compile scholarly works); in other words, between *wu* and *wen*, “warrior” and “literati.” If, according to the author, the first pole, characterized by violent behavior and bloody sacrifice (including self-mortification) is at the bottom, the second, characterized by refined conduct and vegetarianism, is at the top. Clart adds that “this bipolar hierarchy is not limited to the group-specific value system of phoenix halls, but resonates with basic categories of Chinese culture concerning purity and impurity, the civil and the martial” (2003: 175). Although the Dejiao practitioners stand out from the mediums studied by Elliott (1955) or Clart by considering *wen* and *wuji* as two aspects of the same practice, they, however, establish a clear distinction between those well-versed in *wenji*, who practice *wuji* exceptionally, and others who emphasize relief of the needy as a supreme goal (the *jishi* aspect).

Conclusion

In the case of Dejiao, mediums are logically central to construct utterances adapted to the requirements of projective identity. Analysis of the present article shed light on their power in this domain, whose extent varies in accordance with their renown. This power mainly lies in what I call a “basic structuring antinomy.” On the one hand, the mediums’ ef-

iciency and fame rest on their ability to display a deep state of self-obliviousness at the time of possession, and, henceforth, to temporarily suspend interpersonal inferences. But on the other hand, their accuracy and power correlate directly with their involvement in the daily life of the congregation they belong to, and implicitly with their responsiveness to the expectations of their “brothers in virtue.” In other words, their real hold rests on this fictional disconnection, which is more or less consciously cultivated by them and other followers, between the “divine devolvement” characterizing *fujī* and their otherwise “mundane involvement.” In any event, it is by stealthily making use of information derived from social, political, and religious contexts that they can sometimes meet the expectations of their coreligionists, in the guise of divine intervention.

To be effective, such manipulations need to be assumed collectively. Against the common focus of ethnographical accounts on the medium’s function, a more comprehensive analysis, proposed in this article, reveals that gods’ utterances are construed through the cooperation and tacit complicity of several agents organized in concentric circles around the divine pen. Significantly, legible oracles result from an interpretative process which is entirely in the hand of individuals, either oral interpreters or literati, who are not only in a state of perfect consciousness but are also expected to adjust divine utterances to human requests and expectations. A close examination of the criteria and mechanisms leading to the public acknowledgement of divine prophecy confirm fulfilment of individual or collective goals as an important requirement. We thus observed that the oracles unambiguously interpreted as divine planchettes were those, which echoed the moral and unitarian objectives pursued by a majority of adepts. Sociological factors are also to be taken into account; the human versus divine planchette’s controversy being a central issue in Malaysia, whereas it is of little significance in the other countries where mediums are in need. Finally, divine oracles prove to act in close reflection of human abilities, goals, and expectations.

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