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Son of Man or Son of God? The Spirit Medium in Chinese Popular Religion*

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Daoist priests, masters of rites and spirit mediums are important religious practitioners in Chinese popular religion. The positions of Daoist priests and masters of rites are usually hereditary, passing from father to son. This tradition is particularly strong among Daoist priests. Scholars of Daoism write:

Daoist scriptures and practices are highly secretive and will only be passed on to lineage members or official disciples.¹

Daoism is passed on primarily from fathers to sons, and secondarily from masters to disciples.²

Therefore, the primary concerns of Daoist scholars include genealogy and the master-disciple relationship,³ the geographical location of Daoist altars,⁴

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1 Huang Ding 丁煌: „Tainan shiye daoshi Chen and Zeng liangjia chutan: Yiqi jiashi, chuanyan ji wenwu yisan wei zhuti luelun“ 台南世業道士陳、曾二家初探: 以其家世、傳衍及文物亦散為主題略論, pp.284, in: Department of History, National Cheng Kung University 成大歷史, and the Daoism Society of the R.O.C in Tainan, Province of Taiwan 中華民國道教教會台灣省台南市支會 eds.: *Daojiaoxue tansuo* 道教學探索, Tainan City, 1988.

2 Feng-Mao Lee 李豐楙: „Zhongbu shanxian daoshi hangyequan: Chen and Li liangge daotan de hezuo yu chuancheng“ 中部山線道士行業圈: 陳、李兩個道壇的合作與傳承, pp.159-203, in: Zhi-Ming Zheng 鄭志明 ed.: *Daojiao wenhua jinghua* 道教文化精華. Dalin, Chiayi, 2000: 172.

3 Huang Ding, *ibid.* John Lagerwey 勞格文, translated by Li-Ling Xu 許麗玲: „Taiwan beibu zhengyipai daoshi puxi“ 臺灣北部正一派道士譜系, pp.31-47. In: *Minsu qiyi*

and the varying ethnic interactions of priests with the local society in different places.⁵

By contrast, the position of spirit medium is seldom hereditary. This article examines spirit mediums in terms of their recruitment system which contrasts strongly with that of Daoist priests.⁶ I ask: Why are spirit mediums

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- 民俗曲藝 103, 1996a. John Lagerwey 勞格文, translated by Li-Ling Xu 許麗玲: „Taiwan beibu zhengyipai daoshi puxi (Xupian)“ 臺灣北部正一派道士譜系(續篇), pp.83-98. In: *Minsu quyi* 民俗曲藝 114, 1996b. Tsung-Hui Xie 謝聰輝: „Daren gong Weng jia zupu yu daotan yuanliu kaoshu“ 大人宮翁家族譜與道壇源流考述, pp.205-58. In: *Taiwan shi yanjiu* 台灣史研究 16/2, 2009.
- 4 Feng-Mao Lee, *ibid.*, and Feng-Mao Lee 李豐楙: „Zhidu yu kuosan: Zhanhou Taiwan huoju dao jiao de liangge zongjiao mianxiang: Yi Taiwan zhongbu de daotan daoshi weilì“ 制度與擴散: 戰後臺灣火居道教的兩個宗教面向: 以臺灣中部的道壇道士為例, pp.109-44. In: *Taiwan zongjiao yanjiu* 台灣宗教研究 2/1, 2002.
- 5 Feng-Mao Lee 李豐楙: „Taiwan zhongbu ‘Kezishi’ yu kejia yimin shehui: Yige zongjiao and minsushi de kaocha“ 台灣中部“客仔師”與客家移民社會: 一個宗教、民俗史的考察, pp.121-57, in: Guang-Yu Song 宋光宇 ed.: *Taiwan jingyan (II)* 台灣經驗 (II). Taipei, 1994.
- 6 Studies of spirit medium are wide-ranging. Besides general introductions (Fang-Yuan Dong 董芳苑: *Tongji zhuotou zhi yanjiu* 童乩桌頭之研究. Tainan, 1977. Fang-Yuan Dong 董芳苑: „Taiwan minjian de shenwu: Tongji yu fashi“ 台灣民間的神巫: 童乩與法師, pp.246-66, in: *Taiwan minjian zongjiao xinyang* 台灣民間宗教信仰. Taipei, 1984; You-Xing Huang 黃有興: „Daoshi, fashi, and jitong“ 道士, 法師, 乩童, pp. 80-122, in: *Penghu minjian xinyang* 澎湖民間信仰. Taipei, 1998) and reviews (Fu-Shih Lin 林富士: „Jitong yanjiu de lishi huigu“ 乩童研究的歷史回顧, pp.40-60, in: *Xiao lishi: Lishi de bianchui* 小歷史: 歷史的邊陲. Taipei, 2000[1993]), the majority of studies on spirit mediums thus explore the psychiatric characteristics of spirit mediums (Rong-Guang Wen 文榮光 et al.: „Linghun fushen xianxiang: Taiwan bentu de yali yinying xingwei“ 靈魂附身現象: 台灣本土的壓力因應行為, pp.1-31. In: *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan minzuxue yanjiusuo jikan* 中央研究院民族學研究所集刊 73, 1992), their treatment of disease, and the psychological needs that they fulfill (Xun Chang 張珣: *Jibing yu wenhua* 疾病與文化. Taipei, 1994[1981]; Arthur Kleinman: *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture : An Exploration of the Borderland between Anthropology, Medicine, and Psychiatry*. Berkeley 1980; Yi-Yuan Li 李亦園: „Shizhen shijia hua tongji“ 是真是假話童乩, pp.101-15, in: *Xinyang yu wenhua* 信仰與文化. Taipei, 1978[1977]; Fu-Shih Lin 林富士: „Yizhe huo bingren: Tongji zai Taiwan shehui zhong de jiaose yu xingxiang“ 醫者或病人: 童乩在台灣社會中的角色與形象, pp.511-68. In: *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan* 中央研究院歷史語言研究所集刊 76/3, 2005). There are also some studies analyzing the relationships between spirit mediums and patrilineal ideology and social structure (Jack Potter: „Cantonese Shamanism“, pp.207-31, in: Arthur Wolf ed.: *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*. Stanford: 1974; Pei-Ru Tsai 蔡佩如: *Chuansuo tianren zhi ji de nvren: Nu tongji de xingbie tezhi yu shenti yihan* 穿梭天人之際的女人: 女童乩的性別特質與身體意涵. Taipei, 2001; Margery Wolf: „Woman who Didn't Become a Shaman“, pp.419-30. In: *American Ethnologist* 17/3, 1990), and the

always chosen from amongst their followers, instead of transmitting to their descendents as in the case of Daoist priests? Why do people want to have spirit mediums localized in the place where they live? And what kinds of relationship do deities establish with their devotees by means of their mediums? I will investigate these issues by looking at how spirit mediums are selected, focusing particularly on their ceremony of initiation, and the consultation rituals they provide. In this way, I will show how Chinese popular religion becomes internalized to people's lives and their living space by its cultural mechanisms of personification and localization. It is in the spirit medium that we see the full extent to which Chinese popular religion emphasizes the integration of people and place, and how it is thus different from Daoism, Buddhism, or other transcendental religions such as Christianity.

Wannian Village

Wannian is a village located in the north of Tainan county (fig. 1). It has seventy households composed of three main surnames: Gao, Li, and Wang.⁷ From its early establishment until the present, farming has been the main economic activity, even as villagers have also begun to undertake other kinds of manual labor to increase their income.

Wannian has only one temple with six main deities. How five of the deities arrived there is related to the development of agriculture in the village. It is said that the Lis were the first group to cultivate land there. They brought with them their ancestral image (*zufu* 祖佛) Laoyegong (老爺公). Later, two brothers of the Gao family, carrying their ancestral deity Dadaogong (大道公) and, wandering from the south in search of farmland, passed by Wannian. They put the deity statue down and rested there, but it then became too heavy for them to lift again. The brothers therefore stayed on and married into the Li family, and after a few generations the Gao became Wannian's biggest group. Last to arrive were the Wangs, who moved there from a neighboring village. Other independent households came later.

community (Donald Sutton: „Rituals of Self-Mortification: Taiwanese Spirit-mediums in Comparative Perspective“, pp.99-125. In: *Journal of Ritual Studies* 4/1, 1990).

7 The village name and the surnames have been changed to protect their privacy.

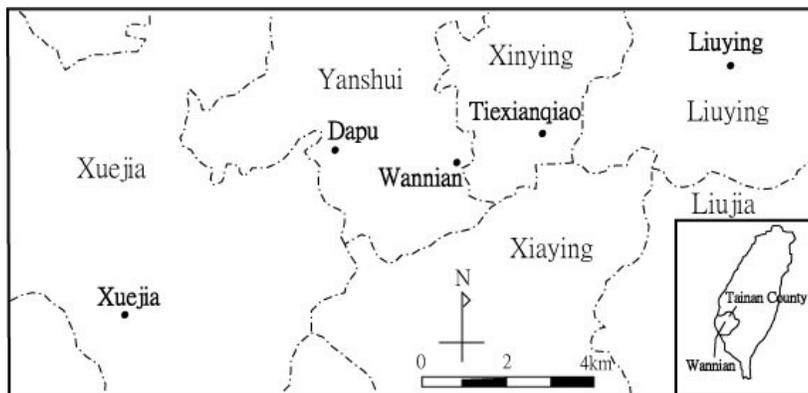


Fig. 1: Wannian village

After the people settled down and the village developed further, the inhabitants decided to make public their respective ancestral images and to worship them as common village deities. The biggest group's deity, Dadaogong, was selected as the main deity. The next in rank was the second Dadaogong, a branch deity of the regional temple in a neighboring town, Xuejia, and according to myth a sworn brother of the first Dadaogong. The third was the Li family's ancestral deity, Laoyegong, and the fourth was the territorial deity Jingzhugong (境主公). The fifth was a tiger god, Huye (虎爺), who people say was cured by Dadaogong and afterward followed him as his mount. These have long been Wannian's five major deities. Around thirty years ago, You Wangye (遊王爺) from Liuying conducted a tour of inspection (*raojing* 繞境) in the proximate area of Wannian. As a result of solicitation by the villagers, a command tablet (*wangling* 王令) from You Wangye was set up in Wannian to protect the village, and he became Wannian's sixth deity.

Dadaogong, as the head deity, receives much respect from the local inhabitants and holds substantial power. However, all the first five deities have their own spirit mediums who mostly work in cooperation with each other.⁸ They command five camps of spirit soldiers (*wuying bingjiang* 五營兵將) who protect the territory of the village. The camps,

8 Since the sixth deity, You Wangye, only came to Wannian 30 years ago, he does not have his own spirit medium yet, but uses the territorial deity Jingzhugong's medium to transmit his messages.

located at the center and four ends of the settlement, protect the residents from interference by ghosts.⁹

Ways of Transmitting Divine Will and the Selection of Spirit Mediums

There are many ways by which villagers communicate with a deity. They can simply drop wooden divinatory blocks to learn the deity's instructions, or they can get the deity's message written out by the handrest of a small divination chair held by two people. On particularly serious or important occasions, they can resort to consulting the deity by using a large divination chair carried by four people. All these methods, however, have their limitations, since they cannot cross the boundary separating deities from people. That is, these ways of communication are considered "dumb" (Huang 1989: 33), since the carriers cannot speak. Ideally, a deity will ultimately wish to have his¹⁰ own spirit medium convey his messages directly.¹¹ That is why the selection process of every spirit medium includes a very important rite, called "opening the mouth" (*kaikou* 開口) (see below). During the selection process, the candidates who are seemingly in trance but start talking before this particular rite is performed, are considered to be possessed by a minor spirit rather than the god. These people are quickly excluded from the list of candidates. In the initiation ceremony I attended, I heard the newly selected spirit medium tell the gathered people, immediately after his 'mouth was opened', that the deity "could not exercise his power without a spirit medium". This shows that a spirit medium is not only the most direct channel for a deity to transmit his message, but also the closest means of communication between a deity and his followers.

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- 9 I have discussed an oil-boiling ritual, in which the spirit medium leads the five camps of spirit soldiers to expel the invading spirits. See Wei-ping Lin: „Boiling Oil to Purify Houses: A Dialogue between Religious Studies and Anthropology“, pp.151-70, in: Florian Reiter ed.: *Exorcism in Daoism: A Berlin Symposium*. Wiesbaden, Germany, 2011.
- 10 In this paper, I use the masculine pronoun to refer to gods and spirit mediums for convenience; while most of the deities and mediums in Chinese religion are male, they can also sometimes be female.
- 11 See also Hui-Cheng Lin 林會承: „Juluo danyuan: jianlun Penghu de difang zizhi“ 聚落單元: 兼論澎湖的地方自治, pp. 123. In: *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan minzuxue yanjiuhuo jikan* 中央研究院民族學研究所集刊81, 1996.

The Initiation Ceremony for Spirit Mediums

Records of spirit medium initiations are rich.¹² Despite minor differences in content or procedure, the ritual framework is nearly identical. In this article, the description will be based on ethnography in Wannian village in which the senior mediums, not the master of rites or the Daoist priest, guides the ceremony.¹³ There are three stages in this ritual: “informing the deity to select a medium” (*guan jitong* 關乩童), “placing the spirit medium in confinement” (*shoujin* 受禁), and then completing the process with fire-crossing (*guohuo* 過火).¹⁴ Generally speaking, in the first stage one appropriate person is chosen and experiences a symbolic death. He is reborn when placed in confinement as the son of the deity. Finally, the rite of fire-crossing confirms the integration of the deity, the spirit medium, and the community. The whole process is in line with the rites of passage noted by Van Gennep.¹⁵

Informing the Deity to Select a Medium (*guan jitong* 關乩童)

According to tradition, it is only after a spirit medium passes away and the adherents very much need the help of a new one that they “inform the deity to select a medium” (*guan jitong*) for them. The time required to find one can vary greatly: it could take a day, a week, or years. However, before the formal ritual of selecting the medium begins, it is believed that the deity would already have started to test suitable candidates from the village for some time. The deity possesses some villagers’ bodies irregularly and unpredictably. This is called “rotation among prospective spirit mediums”

12 See Alan Elliott: *Chinese Spirit-Medium Cults in Singapore*. London: 1955; Donald Sutton, *ibid.*; Wen-Ling Wang 王雯鈴: *Taiwan jitong de chengji guocheng: Yi Sanchong tongji weizhu de chubu kaocha* 台灣乩童的成乩過程: 以三重童乩為主的初步考察. Department of Religious Studies, Fu Jen Catholic University MA thesis, 2004; Xiang-Shui Chen 陳祥水: „Guan ji ji“ 關乩記, pp.35-39. In: *Renlei yu wenhua* 人類與文化 4, 1974; Pei-Ru Tsai 蔡佩如, *ibid.*; Zhi-Wan Liu 劉枝萬: „Taiwan de lingmei: Tongji“ 台灣的靈媒: 童乩, pp.104-15. In: *Taiwan fengwu* 台灣風物 31/1, 1981; Zhi-Wan Liu 劉枝萬: „Taiwan zhi Shamanism“ 台灣之Shamanism, pp.1-32. In: *Taiwan wenxian* 台灣文獻 54/2, 2003.

13 You-Xing Huang 黃有興 offers a detailed description of how a master of rites led and trained a spirit medium (*ibid.*).

14 Wang further divides the initiation into seven stages, namely “obtaining a spirit medium”, “training a spirit medium”, “placing the spirit medium in confinement”, “breaking the confinement”, “receiving sacred edicts”, “leaving ancestors”, and “erecting a god statue” (see Wen-Ling Wang 王雯鈴 *ibid.*, 2004).

15 Arnold van. Gennep, translated by Monika Vizedom and Gabrielle Caffee: *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago, 1960.

(*liuji* 流乩), indicating that the deity takes possession of different people (some of them multiple times) to find the most suitable one. In modern language, it is a “probation period” during which the god prepares a few candidates for later formal selection. Although the possessions often take place in private, the villagers get to know about them through hearsay and gossip, and some favored candidates may appear. The real spirit medium, however, must be selected in a public ritual in order to become the spokesperson of the deity.

In Wannian Village, each household must send a man to participate in the first stage. When the rite begins, the old medium commands a talisman (*chifu* 勅符) on which the name of the deity is written and attaches it to the back of the divination chair (Fig.2). Since it is people of the village who invite the deity to select a medium,¹⁶ they play gongs and drums to welcome the deity to descend. The men have to take turns carrying the divination chair (Fig. 3).¹⁷



Fig. 2: A divination chair is prepared for the deity to descend



Fig. 3: Deity’s followers take turns carrying the divination chair

If any carrier falls into a trance, it is likely that he is possessed by the deity and hence will become a candidate to be the medium. It is also possible,

16 The first stage of initiation is called “*guan jitong*”. “*Guan*” means to “inform.” I thank John Lagerwey for providing the English translation.

17 In Wannian Village, women are generally considered unclean (see also Emily Ahern: „The Power and the Pollution of the Chinese Women“, pp.193-214, in: M. Wolf and R. Witke eds.: *Women in Chinese Society*. California, 1975), and thus cannot be selected to be a medium.

however, that the person is possessed by other deities or just a minor spirit. Therefore, although there are usually many people who fall into a trance, there is only one that is really favored by the deity. What, then, is the difference between the chosen one and the others? Villagers say that the deity would constantly exercise the chosen one's body, such as by making him spin around on the floor, until he is completely exhausted and falls down (Fig. 4). They told me:

The new medium has to be exercised until he is “pulse-less” and his sense organs are exhausted, like a dying person exhaling his last breath.



Fig. 4: The new medium lies flat on the ground with his “sense organs exhausted”

“Pulse-lessness” (*wumai* 無脈) and “exhaustion of the five sense organs” (*wuxing san* 五形散) are the terms by which villagers describe the unconscious condition reached by the new medium. This shows that he needs to go through a symbolic “death” in order to be used by the deity in the future. In the second stage of initiation, the deity takes the medium to the underworld to see his ancestors and buys his physical body from them with spirit money. If the ancestors agree with the transaction, the medium becomes

the deity's golden son (*jinzi* 金子) from then on and his body would be used by the deity. If the ancestors disagree, however, the deity cannot take him by force. In order for the ancestors not to turn down the deity's offer, villagers say that the spirit medium chosen by a deity is usually someone who originally had a short life expectancy. After becoming a medium, he will be able to live longer under the deity's protection. Only under these conditions will the ancestors not reject the deity's offer.

In reference to the consent of ancestors, a curious incident occurred during an initiation that I observed. After a long day, the deity finally chose a medium. The village celebrated the successful completion of the rite by having a feast in the temple courtyard. To everyone's surprise, the son of the new spirit medium, sitting next to him, suddenly felt dizzy and fell to the ground, causing a general panic. This accident was quickly interpreted by the mediums of other deities as being due to the new medium's ancestors not wanting their descendant to become a medium. Nevertheless, he had been selected through a public ritual and this choice could not be overruled easily by any ancestor after the selection was formally complete. Therefore, the other mediums decided at that very minute to rush to the new medium's house, where the leading medium used the Sword of the Big Dipper to strike the altar near the ancestral tablet and warn the ancestors not to create trouble (Fig. 5). The tablet shook violently and nearly fell down. After this, the unrest in the village was calmed.

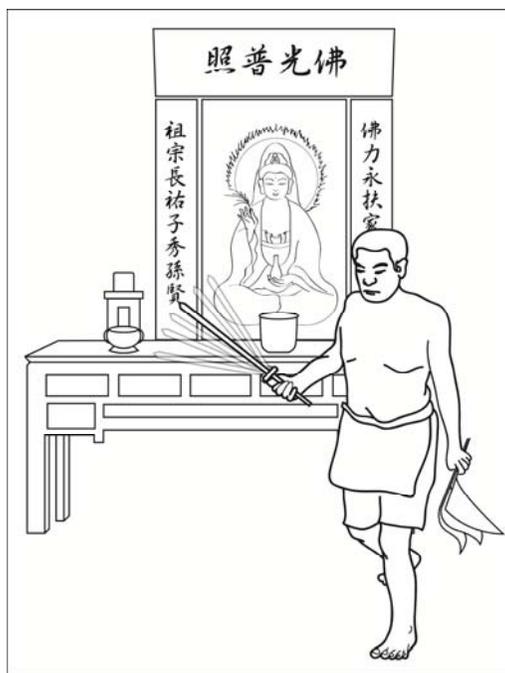


Fig. 5: The leading medium strikes the ancestor tablet

Returning to the selection ritual, once the leading medium recognizes that the candidate is in the desired state of “pulse-lessness”, he lifts him up and helps him to approach the altar (*shangzhuo* 上桌). The new medium’s mouth is then “opened” (*kaikou* 開口) (Fig. 6) by the ceremonial water commanded by the deity so that he can start to talk.

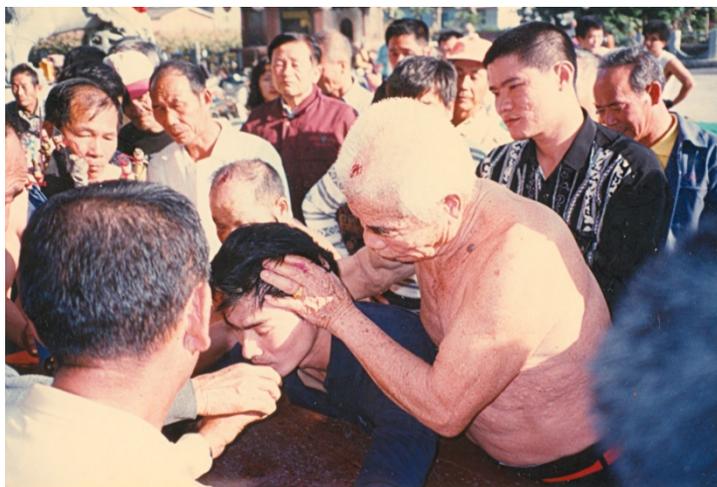


Fig. 6: The rite of “opening the mouth”

The leading medium then asks the new one: “Who are you?” to confirm the identity of the possessing spirit. If the new medium gives the right name, the ceremony enters a key stage: The senior medium will start to teach the new one to “open the five spirit camps” (*kai wuying* 開五營) and “mobilize the spirit soldiers of the five directions” (*cao wufang* 操五方) (Fig. 7).¹⁸

18 This rite usually takes place after the second stage of confinement is completed. (The initiation ritual I witnessed was one in which the senior mediums helped migrant youngsters from the village who had moved to north Taiwan to select a medium. Owing to the brevity of their stay in the village, the seniors shortened the procedure and practised this rite in the first stage itself; the confinement was carried out later in north Taiwan.) Liu, for example, writes: “On the morning when the confinement is over, the deity descends to the medium’s body for the first time, he exercises the sharp instruments to cut his body to bleed on purpose. This is referred to as “breaking the medium” (*potong* 破童) (Zhi-Wan Liu 劉枝萬 1981:107).



Fig. 7: The senior medium teaches the neophyte to “open the five spirit camps” by striking his forehead

“Opening the five spirit camps” refers to the process in which the medium uses the Sword of the Big Dipper (*qixing jian* 七星劍), one of the five treasures, to cut his forehead five times. Accompanied by chanting, he points the blood-stained sword toward the respective locations of the spirit camps in turn to “mobilize their spirit soldiers” (*cao ying* 操營). To accomplish this, it is necessary to “see blood” (*jianxie* 見血), meaning that the medium has to cut his own forehead with the Sword of the Big Dipper until he bleeds. Villagers explain:

The medium will be unable to command the spirit soldiers if no blood is seen. Have you noticed that the scarf on the head of the master of rites is red? This is because for him it is not necessary to “exercise the body” (*ts’au*, using the five treasures to cut the body). Instead he ties a red scarf on his forehead as a sign. The implication is similar to the blood a spirit medium has to shed.¹⁹

19 Here is another interesting story told by the villagers, which further explains why the master of rites wears a scarf over his head: “In early times the master of rites never wore a head scarf when performing a ritual. However, when he was practicing the lines for mobilizing camps, he would often recite them even when he went to the toilet.

Blood is “yang”, an important symbol of vitality. When the medium is possessed by a god, his blood furthermore represents the god’s magical power and strength. It is from this perspective that we can understand why in the initiation rite a senior medium teaches the novice how to cut his forehead to get blood, and how to use his blood to command the god’s spirit soldiers.

Using the Sword of the Big Dipper in this manner to command spirit soldiers is the current practice among mediums in Wannian. Villagers also recounted that mediums in other places could proceed in different ways.²⁰ In addition to cutting the forehead, they could use the other four “treasures” (weapons) to cut their back or four other parts of their body. A senior medium in Wannian explained by saying: “customs vary in different places”, but the underlying meaning is the same. The spirit medium in Wannian primarily cuts his forehead because that is where the commander of the five camps is located. As long as the center is well directed, the other four camps follow.

“Placing the Spirit Medium in Confinement” (*shoujin* 受禁)

Medium selection is done not only to find a proper spokesman for the deity but also to establish (or renew) a relationship between the deity and the community. This is evident in the second stage of the initiation ritual, “placing the medium in confinement”. As discussed in the foregoing section, the neophyte, after going through a symbolic death, is reborn in “confinement”.²¹ This image of rebirth is first manifested in the preparations made for the medium prior to confinement. Just as they would do to welcome a newborn, villagers must find a tranquil place where the neophyte can stay without being disturbed for seven days. They also prepare a set of new clothes, blankets, and a mattress for the medium. The new medium eats very little for a week before the confinement in order to gradually rid his body of food. For seven days, he is confined to a sealed and darkened room, knowing neither day nor night, and consuming nothing except a little water. Therefore, it is said that during these seven days, the medium must “excrete nothing”

When spirit soldiers showed up, they would see a priest squatting in the lavatory and mumbling words! This disturbed them greatly. As a result, camp soldiers made a deal with the priest: only when a priest had a red scarf on his head would the soldiers obey his mobilization orders.”

20 E.g. Wen-Pou Huang 黃文博: *Taiwan Xinyang Chuanqi* 台灣信仰傳奇. Taipei, 1989: 23.

21 See also Zhi-Wan Liu 劉枝萬 2003: 14; Donald Sutton, *ibid.*: 108.

(*wushi wuniao* 無屎無尿).²² These conditions also apply to a fetus in its mother's womb. This shows how the neophyte in confinement is imagined as a baby about to be born. In Liu's words, a post-confinement medium is

Like a worm shedding its skin or a silkworm breaking through a cocoon; the secular body (凡胎) dies and the sacred body (聖體) rises.²³

During confinement, the medium is half asleep and half awake. By "giving him visions" (*huaqing* 化景), the deity teaches him how to deploy magic, command talismans, and prescribe medicine. On the third day of confinement, the deity takes the medium to the underworld, to teach the neophyte how to negotiate with underworld bureaucrats, and also to purchase his body from his ancestors and make him his "golden son." According to Sutton's study in Tainan, the deity needs to obtain the consent of three consecutive generations, including the medium's father and grandfather, as well as his wife and son.²⁴ In Wannian, the villagers are not specific about which ancestors the deity must negotiate with for the medium's body, but if the ancestors are dissatisfied with the deity's proposals, they are liable to cause trouble. It is said that there once was a newly selected medium of the territorial deity who could not endure the harsh conditions of confinement and broke out on the third day. The senior mediums had to renegotiate with the ancestors, after which the new medium was put again into confinement and successfully completed the procedure.

Although the newly selected medium becomes the deity's golden son, he does not lose his role as a son of man; he maintains dual identities from then on. During ordinary times, he looks no different from normal people; only when he is possessed by the deity does he become his spokesman.²⁵

As the deity's son, the medium obtains a public position in the community. This public role is worth exploring further. In an earlier section, I mentioned that in the selection period, each man in the village is obligated to come to the temple to carry the divination chair. In addition, any supplies, work, and labor required while the medium is in confinement are shared by all the people. Thus, it is clear that the medium represents the whole

22 Kokubu Naoichi and Ying-tao Wu also record similar phenomena. See Kokubu Naoichi 國分直一, translated by Quan-De Zhou 周全德: „Tongji yanjiu“ 童乩研究, pp.46-53. In: *Nanying wenxian* 南瀛文獻 8, 1962[1942]: 51. Ying-Tao Wu 吳瀛濤: *Taiwan minsu* 台灣民俗, pp.170-71. Taipei, 1969.

23 Zhi-Wan Liu 劉枝萬 2003: 14.

24 Donald Sutton, *ibid.*: 107.

25 Donald Sutton, *ibid.*: 105-110.

community in (re)establishing a relationship with the deity. We can say that when a medium rises to become the golden son of the deity, he embodies the whole community in building up a kinship-like relation with the deity. This can be more clearly seen from the sharing of “confinement rice.”

Before the ritual starts, the villagers prepare a special pack of “confinement rice” (*shoujin mi* 受禁米) and put it into the place of confinement. After the ritual is completed, the pack of rice is distributed to each household in the village and added to their rice vats. This resembles the “godparenting” rite (*qi fumu* 契父母) for children. In Wannian, if a child falls ill frequently, its parents hold a godparenting rite in order to have it become someone else’s child. On the day of the rite, the parents prepare offerings, clothes, shoes, hats, and ritual money. They then accompany the child to the house of the prospective godparents, where they first worship the latter’s ancestors with the offerings to inform them that the child is to become their descendant. Then the parents give the clothes and ritual money to the godparents who give gifts to the child in return. The two families then have lunch together. Before the biological parents and the child leave, the godparents give them a pack of rice and a bottle of water prepared in advance. After they reach home, the mother pours the rice into the family’s rice vat, cooks it with the water they have brought back, and feeds the child. Thenceforth, the child must refer to the godparents as “father” and “mother”. Both families become closer to each other and are obligated to attend each other’s life cycle rituals.

If the godparent is not a human being but a deity, the parents of the child only need to bring the offerings and clothes to the temple to worship the deity. After the worship, the clothes are sealed with the divine stamp to symbolize that they are given by the deity. The child’s mother also has to feed the child the rice which they worshipped within the temple.

There are obviously many similarities between the medium in confinement and the custom of finding godparents for a child. The new clothes the villagers prepare for the medium before confinement are similar to those which the biological parents prepare for their child in the godparent rite. The confinement rice distributed to each household and added to each home’s rice vat resembles the godparents’ gift of rice. The confinement process, therefore, implies the “birth” of a boy belonging to both the villagers and the deity. The relationship established is not only between the medium and the deity, but also between the villagers and the deity. Villagers say that “a spirit medium belongs to the public” (*jitong shi gong de* 乩童是公的), meaning that a spirit medium is obligated to serve all followers. The services provided by the spirit medium for the residents in Wannian are free of

charge. If someone from outside the community asks for assistance, however, the medium usually accepts a fee.

Fire-Crossing (*guo hou* 過火)

The neophyte selected in the first stage of the initiation ceremony is still a “raw” medium (*shengji* 生乩). He becomes a “cooked” medium (*shouji* 熟乩), able to tell the significances of the deity’s visions and ready to serve the villagers, only after completing the test of confinement and passing the ordeal of “fire-crossing”.

Fire-crossing is indeed a demonstration of the final integration of the medium with the deity and the whole community. The villagers make a circular pile of dried branches in front of the temple courtyard. The senior mediums “set up the spirit camps” (*fangying* 放營), commanding the five camps of spirit soldiers to come to the center and four points of the circle (fig. 8).



Fig. 8: The circular pile of dried branches prepared for burning and fire-crossing

The firewood is then lit, the purity of the flame being representative of the deity’s power. After the firewood is consumed and the flame has almost died down, the senior mediums summon the “east wind” to reduce the heat of the

ashes. At this moment, the new medium has to be the first one to walk barefoot through the circle from east to west, and then from south to north (Fig. 9).

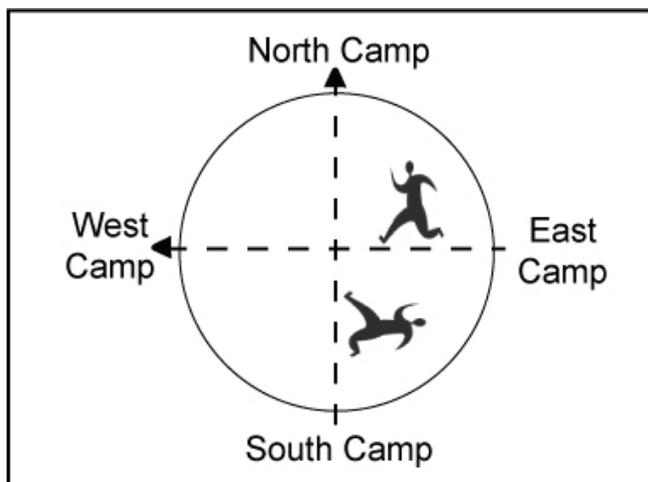


Fig. 9: Fire-crossing

Having successfully passed through the burning fire, the medium then leads the sedan chair on which the statues of the village deities are placed across the fire. Subsequently, the circle is opened to ordinary people. Successful fire-crossing represents the full possession of the medium's body by the deity; the deity's spirit is infused into the medium. It is said: "After fire-crossing, the power of the deity is firmly stabilized in the medium" (*guohuo ho, shen cai hui wen* 過火後，神才會穩).

Successful fire-crossing additionally signifies that the medium is able to exert his power over the people and the territory of the village, which is epitomized by the circle in which the five spirit camps are placed. Only by establishing proper control of the five camps is the medium able to walk through fire without injury. In sum, fire-walking binds the deity, medium, the space of the village, and its inhabitants together as a whole.

Consulting the deity

After the chosen medium goes through confinement and fire-crossing, he can start to serve his people as their bridge to the deity. Anyone who wants to

consult the deity regarding any problem must first invite the statue of the deity from the temple to his house and then inform the medium. After that, he has to worship him with rice wine every morning and night, and also renew the grass and water for the spirit soldiers. The deity and his spirit soldiers then start to seek out the cause of the misfortunes the members of the household have suffered.

Once the cause is identified, the deity comes to the spirit medium in a vision (*dianji* 點占). How is this done? A senior spirit medium interpreter in the village explains the process:

The deity has neither form nor image and thus cannot speak, so he must “borrow a human’s mind” (*jie ren de qiao* 借人的竅) to “communicate by telepathy” (*ganying* 感應).

How to “communicate by telepathy”? I asked.

The deity will “create visions” (*huajing* 化景) for the spirit medium while he is asleep. The medium must use “cleverness” (*qiaozhi* 巧智) to understand what the deity tries to convey in the visions. At this time, the medium must keep his body “pure” (*jingshen* 淨身), – i.e., abstain from sex – so that the spirit of the deity can “enter his body” (*ruti* 入體) and show him the visions. They are sometimes difficult to understand and hence the spirit medium must rely on his “power of comprehension” (*wuli* 悟力). If he initially has difficulty in divining the message, the visions posed by the deity will gradually become easier for him to comprehend. Therefore, it usually takes days for the spirit medium to interpret them. ... These visions are secret and cannot be disclosed. Revealing divine messages makes the whole thing human-contrived.

It is for this reason that I could only collect a few visions given by the deity during the fieldwork. A medium interpreter told me that he once heard a medium saying that he had dreamed of eight pairs of chopsticks and bowls on a table, even though the household requesting divine instructions only comprised six living brothers. This meant that the problems of the household had to be related to the two deceased brothers. A medium’s son related that his father once dreamed of a house with dripping eaves; the spirit medium thus inferred that the patient suffered from night sweats.

After the spirit medium understands the vision, he goes to the afflicted household to transmit the deity’s message. He does so by performing a rite in front of the patient’s house altar. This procedure indicates that the vision given by the deity is an important hint for the medium to identify possible

causes of the troubles afflicting a household. However, it is only when he is possessed by the deity in front of the patient's house altar that the deity's true message is revealed.

The medium in Wannian village usually does this in the evening. Taking care not to eat anything beforehand, he goes to the patient's house carrying his Sword of the Big Dipper and the flags of the five spirit camps. He sits on a bench before the house altar and waits for the deity to descend into his body. Shortly after, he starts to burp and his body cramps, as if the god is entering his body; he beats his chest and spins his head constantly until he loses consciousness and falls into a trance.²⁶ At this point the deity mounts him (*qijia* 起駕), whereupon he stands, approaches the altar (*shangzhuo* 上桌), and begins to transmit the deity's message to the master of the house.

The language spoken by a possessed medium is of various kinds; it can be straightforward, but can also be poetic or employing unusual words from unfamiliar dialects. It usually cannot be fully understood by ordinary people. Thus, the house master needs the help of a medium interpreter who can understand the medium and communicate with the consulting family. The conversation among them is mostly about identifying the cause of the disease and ways of resolving it. For example, if the cause has to do with an ancestral soul, then what generation is it from, and is it male or female? If the problem relates to fengshui, is it with the house or ancestral tomb? And how is the geomantic fault to be adjusted? If it stems from an evil spirit, from which direction or region does it come? And how to negotiate to make it leave?

The following is an example of a household in Wannian consulting the Tiger deity for instructions. The son of the house had been ill for a long time and the father asked the Tiger deity for assistance. The following were the steps instructed by the deity through the medium:

1. After being possessed by his master deity, the medium held the Sword of the Big Dipper in his right hand to cut his forehead until it bled, and waved the flags of the five camps with his left hand to summon the spirit soldiers to come immediately.
2. The spirit medium indicated that the problem was caused by the spirit of a miscarried baby boy of the house master's wife. After the medium interpreter confirmed the truth of the miscarriage with the wife, the medium commanded a talisman to inform the Earth god that the spirit must withdraw. If the son recovers from his illness, the Tiger deity would in return come to some arrangement with the spirit.

26 If he had eaten before the ritual, he would vomit it all up, according to the villagers.

3. The medium instructed the soldiers of the five camps to approach the spirit at the same time. The interpreter repeatedly beseeched the deity that the household would continue to need its help even after the patient recovers.
4. The medium commanded another talisman to ask the ancestors of the household to accept the spirit of the miscarried soul.
5. The interpreter relayed the request of the master of the house that the patient's blood counts and body temperature be normalized. The spirit medium commanded a talisman to make this happen, which the interpreter then burned and mixed the ashes in water for the patient to drink.
6. The medium wrote out a talisman for the patient to carry with him at all times and another one to be burned and mixed with water for all members of the household to drink.
7. The spirit medium instructed the patient to call every day for spirit soldiers to protect him.

When the consultation approached its end, the spirit medium abruptly turned around – the sign of the deity withdrawing (*tuijia* 退駕). The medium regained consciousness and was back to his normal self. After the long ritual, the medium was exhausted. The wife of the household prepared a rich dinner for the medium and the interpreter in gratitude for their efforts.

Deity Personified

From the initiation ceremony and consultation ritual, we know that the separability of body and soul and the exchangeability between a human soul and a divine spirit are important concepts by means of which the villagers imagine the relationship between a deity and his medium. As indicated by the medium interpreter above, the deity has divine power but no form or image and thus cannot speak. Hence he relies on a human body to convey his messages. Therefore, the new medium has to experience a symbolic death in the first stage of medium selection. His body is then reborn in the second stage of confinement, so the medium can represent the deity thereafter. “Fire-crossing” is the demonstration of complete infusion of the divine spirit into the medium's body.

After the complete infusion of the divine spirit into the medium's body in the fire-crossing, whenever the villagers have problems and want to consult the deity for instructions, the deity's spirit enters the medium's body in his sleep and imparts visions to him. When the medium comprehends what the deity is trying to convey, he goes to the afflicted family's house where he is

once again possessed by the deity and tells the master of the house the cause of their misfortune. The whole process shows that the concept underlying the spirit medium is that his body and soul can be separated, and that the latter can be exchanged for the deity's spirit.

In this way, we see how the spirit medium can objectify the deity. If a temple does not have a medium, it will be more difficult for people to communicate with its god. In a study of medium selection in Xizhou, Zhanghua (彰化溪洲), the followers even said: "A temple without a spirit medium is like a temple without a god."²⁷ Similarly, if a deity does not come to possess any man after the selection ritual has gone on for some time, the followers begin to wonder: "Why does it take so long for the deity to descend? Maybe the deity has already gone away."²⁸ These devotees' statements show that the spirit medium is tangible evidence that the god has come to the local society to be with them. A deity who hesitates or declines to respond to the selection ritual will make the adherents doubt whether they are still connected with him.

From another perspective, when a deity has a medium, not only can people directly witness and sense the existence of an invisible god, but they also get to know his characteristics. For example, Wannian villagers often said:

Dadaogong is righteous and has a hot temper.

"How do you know?" I asked.

[When he possesses his medium] he speaks with a stern voice. He never allows other deities to come to Wannian, no matter how much they plead with him. ... Whenever there were important issues waiting to be resolved and other village deities were late to come [meaning the deities' mediums were not possessed], he would scold them severely and command talismans to demand their immediate arrival.

Almost every villager can vividly describe how the late legendary medium of the head deity, Dadaogong, used to speak with his head shaking and eyes closed. "It's as if he was contemplating while speaking", people explained with admiration. They are fond of imitating the ways in which he

27 Ya-Xin Zheng 鄭雅心: *Yishi xiangzheng yu difanggan chengxian: Yi Xizhou xiang Chenggong cun Guoxing gong guan jitong yishi weili* 儀式象徵與地方感呈現: 以溪州鄉成功村國姓宮關乩童儀式為例. Department of Cultural Heritage Conservation, National Yunlin University of Science and Technology. MA thesis, 2004: 64.

28 Ya-Xin Zheng 鄭雅心, *ibid.*: 70.

shouted to the evil spirits: “How dare you!” (*dadān* 大膽) or “Animal!” (*chūshēng* 畜生) or forcefully telling them to “Withdraw immediately!” (*tūi* 退). “He was a living Buddha!” they exclaim. We can see that villagers get to know a deity’s temper and character by the manner in which the medium talks, the tone he uses, and the various postures he assumes. A spirit medium is not only proof of the deity’s existence, but also an important way for the adherents to imagine him.

The case of Wannian furthermore shows that a deity can more fully exercise its power through a spirit medium. A local saying explains this clearly: “Half of the deity’s power comes from the medium” (*jítóng xìng yìbān* 乩童興一半). A good spirit medium is able to use his talent to speculate on the visions given him in dreams, and analyze them by deploying his practical wisdom and experience to discover the cause of problems. A capable medium thus can increase and expand the deity’s power and authority: word of its miracles spreads, devotees increase, and the temple prospers. In contrast, a spirit medium who over-manipulates the deity’s power damages the master deity, driving followers away and bringing the temple to disrepute and decline.²⁹

The deity, after gaining a human form, also becomes more embedded in the adherents’ social world. We have seen that a deity builds up a kinship-like relation with his followers through its medium. This kinship intimacy also exists among spirit mediums themselves: they refer to each other as brothers and sisters. For example, the spirit medium possessed by Dadaogong would address the one possessed by the Second Dadaogong as his “younger brother” (*xiongdì* 兄弟), while the latter called the former “elder brother” (*geqīn* 哥親). Together, they are the great grandparents of all the villagers.

Deity Localized

Medium selection is also a way by which the deity establishes or renews its relationship with the people of a particular place, as each household in the village comes to participate in the process. In contrast to a Daoist priest or a Master of rites who comes when necessary and leaves after he completes his assignment, a spirit medium dwells in the village. An omnipresent god is thus localized to live with the residents, and helps them to resolve all sorts of problems. Through the medium, the interactions between the deity and his

29 Wei-Ping Lin: „Local History through Popular Religion: Place, People, and Their Narratives in Taiwan“, pp.1-30. In: *Asian Anthropology* 8, 2009.

followers become more frequent and intimate; their relations are stabilized and made permanent.

The localization of a deity is also demonstrated by the continually appearing motif of the five spirit camps in the initiation ceremony and consultation rituals. The five spirit-soldier camps constitute the deities' army and are located at the center and the north, south, east, and west borders of the village to guard against invasions of evil spirits (fig. 10).³⁰



Fig. 10: Spirit camp with bamboo sticks commanded by the medium

Every camp has a representative color, a general, an ethnic army, and a certain number of soldiers' horses. Among the five, the central camp is hierarchically the highest. The five spirit-soldier camps and their related contents in southern Taiwan can be summarized as in Table 1.

³⁰ See also David Jordan: *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village*. Berkeley 1972: 50-51, and Kristofer Schipper: „Vernacular and Classical Ritual in Taoism“, pp.21-57. In: *The Journal of Asian Studies* 45/1, 1985.

Table 1: The five spirit-soldier camps and their characteristics³¹

Camp	East	South	West	North	Center
Flag Color	Blue	Red	White	Black	Yellow
Surname of general	Chang	Xiao	Liu	Lian	Li
Army	Nine Yi army	Eight Man army	Six Rong army	Five Di army	Three Qin army
Horses	Nine thousand	Eight thousand	Six thousand	Five thousand	Three thousand
Soldiers	Ninety thousand	Eighty thousand	Sixty thousand	Fifty thousand	Thirty thousand
Five phases	Wood	Fire	Metal	Water	Earth
Spirit medium's sacred instrument	Sword of the Big Dipper	Axe or Spiked club	Spiked club or Sawfish sword	Sawfish sword or axe	Ball of nails

The concepts of the five spirit-soldier camps are based on the traditional Chinese center-and-four-directions, the five phases (*wuxing* 五行), and numerological cosmology.³² Later, these models came to include the five ethnic military troops (*yi, man, rong, di, qin*), which first appeared in Daoist scripture around the third to the fifth century in southern China.³³

In Fujian province, local people were further incorporated as camp generals of different surnames.³⁴ Ethnographies also show that the five spirit-soldier camps not only appeared in pre-modern China,³⁵ but also in parts of

31 Wen-Pou Huang 黃文博 1989: 42.

32 Joseph Needham: *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 2. Cambridge, 1954.

33 Fong-Mao Lee 李豐楙: „Wuying Xinyang yu Zhongtan Yuanshuai: Qi Yuanshi ji Yanbian“ 五營信仰與中壇元帥: 其原始及衍變, pp.549-594, in: *Guoli Zhongshan Daxue Qingdai Xueshu Yanjiu Zhongxin* 國立中山大學清代學術研究中心, and Xinying Taizigong Guanliyuanhui 新營太子宮管理員會 ed.: *Diyijie Nezha Xueshu Yantaohui Lunwenji* 第一屆哪吒學術研討會論文集. Kaohsiung, 2003. However, John Lagerwey traces wuying concepts even earlier to Sima Qian's *The Records of the Historian* (Shiji 史記, ca 110 B. C.) and relates them to the Five Emperors (1987: 34). For further discussion of the Five Emperors, see Michael Szonyi: „The Illusion of Standardizing the Gods: the Cult of the Five Emperors in Late Imperial China“, pp.113-35. In: *The Journal of Asian Studies* 56/1, 1997.

34 Fong-Mao Lee, *ibid.*: 586.

35 Mingming Wang: „Place, Administration, and Territorial Cults in Late Imperial China: A Case Study from South Fujian“, pp.33-78. In: *Late Imperial China* 16/1, 1995.

contemporary southern China, where they still exist.³⁶ As most early Taiwan immigrants were from Fujian, the five spirit-soldier camps are still widespread in Taiwan, particularly in the south. They form the most visible symbolic boundary of many settlements.

We see in the initiation ceremony that a spirit medium must learn how to mobilize spirit soldiers. He does so by deploying his blood and body to direct the spirit army in the village. It confused me at first why the medium's cutting of his own body was called "summoning the army" (*diao wuying* 調五營), or "mobilizing the five directions" (*cao wufang* 操五方). I realized later that the spirit medium's body, at this moment in the ritual, is the symbol of the village space itself.³⁷ Indeed, the five camps of Wannian all have three bamboo sticks commanded by the spirit medium's blood. Whenever the spirit soldiers disperse, the medium can enforce discipline and resettle the camps by erecting new bamboo sticks marked with his blood to call back the scattered soldiers. We conclude that it is through the medium's body that the power of a deity is spatialized and localized in the village. The deity, medium, and village territory are bound with each other inextricably.

Conclusion

Let us return to the questions raised at the beginning of this article: Why are spirit mediums always chosen from the followers of a deity, instead of passing to their descendants as in the case of Daoist priests? Why do people need spirit mediums? And how can the study of mediums improve our understanding of Chinese religion?

Although the case of Wannian may have its own historical and geographical particularities, its profound ethnography of spirit mediums provides us a new perspective to rethink "Chinese religion", especially popular religion. This can be seen from the two premises of my analysis. First of all, I show that the spirit medium is the deity personified. The process of

36 In Fujian, see Kenneth Dean: *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of South-east China*. Princeton 1993: 65. In Jianxi, see Jinfeng Liu 劉勁峰: „Anyuan Xinlongxiang Changli, Litian, Jiulong Sancun Jiaotan Keyi Chutan“ 安遠新龍鄉長壩, 里田, 九龍三村醮壇科儀初探, in: Yong Luo 羅勇 and John Lagerwey 勞格文 ed.: *Gannan Diqu de Miaohui yu Zongzu* 贛南地區的廟會與宗族. 1997: 218.

37 See also Hok-Lam Chan's discussion of how the city of old Peking was designed according to the body of Nazha, a child deity who could transform himself at will into a being with three heads and six arms to safeguard against evil spirits. Hok-Lam Chan: *Legends of the building of Old Peking*. Hong Kong, 2008. Note that Nazha in Chinese religion is considered as "the commander of the central altar" (Zhongtan Yuanshuai 中壇元帥).

personification is based on the separability of body and soul and the exchangeability between the human soul and a divine spirit. In this way, a deity can have a human form and is able to come into the social context of the devotees who can concretely sense the existence of an invisible god. These tangible contacts are significant to Chinese popular religion which is not transmitted via written scriptures or dogmas. The spirit medium, thus, is an important means by which the adherents learn the characters of the deity and the content of their belief.

Second, a spirit medium is an omnipresent god localized. By the process of medium selection, the deity consolidates his relations with the local society. Different from Daoist priests who leave the local place once their tasks are accomplished, the medium lives in the village, commanding the spirit soldiers who protect the territory. It is in the spirit medium that we see the extent to which Chinese popular religion emphasizes the integration of people and place, and how it is thus different from Daoism, or other transcendental religions such as Buddhism or Christianity. C. K. Yang claimed that Chinese popular religion is “diffuse” and lacking content.³⁸ But this description cannot explain the nature of popular religion. This article, by analyzing spirit mediums, shows how Chinese popular religion becomes internalized in people’s lives and their living space by its cultural mechanisms of personification and localization. These in turn are premised on the Chinese concepts of the person and cosmological ideas, which give Chinese popular religion its own particular characteristics.

Finally, the study of spirit mediums also provides another perspective from which to understand the power of a deity. In previous research, when scholars or anthropologists discussed the magical power of the supernatural, they analyzed it mostly in terms of cultural concepts or social relations. The most famous examples are Sangren who considers yin/yang logic as the crucial concept to understand Chinese magic power or *ling*,³⁹ and A. Wolf who sees the supernatural entities of god/ghost/ancestor as the reflection of the social categories of bureaucrat/stranger/ kin.⁴⁰ This article shows that the local people in Wannian believe that half of the deity’s power comes from its spirit medium. To exert and expand his power, a god particularly needs the spirit medium’s talent of speculation, communication, and performance. In

38 C. K. Yang: *Religion in Chinese Society: a Study of Contemporary Social functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors*. Berkeley 1961.

39 Steven Sangren: *History and Magic Power in a Chinese Community*. Stanford: 1987.

40 Arthur Wolf: „Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors“, pp.131-82, in: Arthur Wolf ed.: *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*. California: 1974.

contrast, a medium could damage the reputation of his master deity by misusing or abusing his ability. The power of the deity can be intensified, but also seriously tarnished, by his objectification into human form.

