

## Moving the Body; Awakenng the Spirit: Mediums' Performance of Healing, Cultivation and Salvation in Taiwan

TSAI Yi-Jia

Department of Religious Studies  
Fu Jen Catholic University

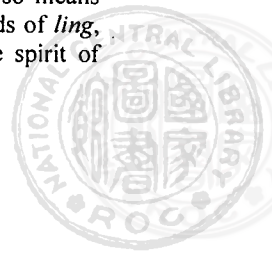
### 1. *Introduction*

In 2000 when I conducted my thesis research into the Mediums' Association in Taiwan, I participated in the educational program designed for the novice mediums.<sup>1</sup> During the daytime introductory lectures on various topics were offered, including health care in Chinese medicine, scriptural studies of Daoist literature, the principle of *wuxing* 五行 (five qualities), astronomical geography and the senior medium's sharing of mediumistic experiences. At night a very special activity called *tiaoling xunti* 調靈訓體 (modulation of spirit and training of body) was held. It is a healing session designed to harmonize the practitioner's *ling* 靈 (spirit)<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The Mediums' Association was officially founded in 1989, one year after the lifting of the 37-year-old martial law in Taiwan. It gathers mediums from various private altars and temples for the fulfillment of particular religious missions granted by the gods. It also proposes a reformative vision for the spiritual progress and cultivation of mediums. The founding of the Mediums' Association can be considered an endeavor to rectify the moral degradation they perceive in contemporary society, both for the mediums themselves and for their adherents. Members of the Mediums' Association generally identify themselves as *lingji* 靈乩, a different kind of medium from the most notable medium—*jitong* 乩童—in Taiwan. *Jitong* is the most common Chinese term for spirit medium. According to *lingji*'s reformative project, the *jitong* are a lower religious figure that needs to be transformed. Since this essay focuses on the spiritual and bodily exercises of *lingji*, I use the term medium to denote *lingji* rather than *jitong*.

<sup>2</sup> The Mediums' Association adopts a general term '*ling*', roughly translated as spirit or soul in Chinese, to describe the invisible beings of the spiritual realm, mostly denoting the departed souls or spirits that are still in the process of cultivation before they transform into deities. Sometimes this term also means deities or ancestors. According to the Association, there are many kinds of *ling*, including ancestral *ling*, dynastic *ling*, karmic *ling*, original *ling* (the spirit of one's first incarnation), and various *ling* of animals or plants.



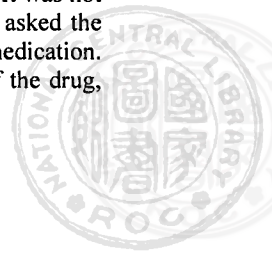
and the spirits with whom they work.<sup>3</sup> *Tiao* literally means regulation, adjustment, modulation or mediation. Therefore *tiaoling* can be translated as the modulation of *ling* or the adjustment of *ling*. *Xunti* literally means the training or exercise of the body. The courses of *tiaoling xunti* I observed were held in a spacious outdoor setting after dinner. At the opening and the end there were simple ceremonies of salutation to the deities. The mediums reported to deities about the beginning of the training section and invited them to descend to the training field to help them with the training section. Then everyone sat quietly and listened to the instruction of the senior medium. The senior medium adopted specific methods, including walking exercises and sitting meditation to inspire them to feel the vital forces from *ling*. Before the students moved to enter the training field, they usually had specific physical manifestations such as trembling, hiccupping or yawning. When the novice mediums felt the spiritual force, they entered the training field to practice various exercises, including Chinese boxing, dancing, singing, or other movements, according to the various vital forces of *ling* that inspired them. Different novice mediums were inspired by different vital forces of *ling*. The deities that were invited at the opening ceremony of the training section were regarded as the invisible mentors of the novice mediums. They instruct the novice mediums through the exercise of the mediums' bodies. If the novice mediums follow the movement of the deity's vital force and achieve a corresponding state, they will become stronger and healthier after the training.

According to their understanding, the modulation of *ling* and training of the body have many goals, including healing, control, and incorporation. A medium's "spiritual disease," caused by the harassment of disturbed *ling*, is healed and his or her body is pacified through the modulation of *ling* and body.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, some of the diseases of *ling* can be healed by the remedy of the medium's body.<sup>5</sup> Through the

<sup>3</sup> Paper, "Mediums and Modernity," 115.

<sup>4</sup> When someone suffers from physical and/or psychological disturbances and is brought to a medium for help, he or she might be diagnosed as being affected by spiritual harassment. According to the mediums, such spiritual disease needs the intervention of the spiritual power of deities.

<sup>5</sup> According to their understanding, there is one kind of sick *ling* that borrows the medium's body to cure its own disease. A sick *ling* possesses the body that corresponds to its magnetic field. And its disease must be cured by medication. They report an example of a *ling* that died because of a certain disease. It was not able to get the proper medication while it was still alive. Therefore it asked the medium it possessed to visit the hospital it indicated to get the proper medication. When the medium took the medicine and the *ling* scented the smell of the drug,



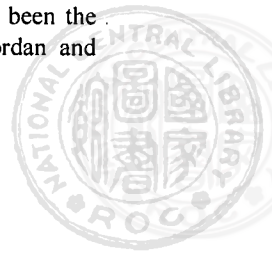
religious intervention of the teacher medium, the disturbed *ling* are also appeased and transformed in the modulation process. Hence the novice mediums are able to free themselves from the disturbance and dominance of possessing *ling* and to achieve a state of autonomy. Here the modulation of *ling* implies the medium's ability to restrain and control the desire of *ling*. The goal of incorporation signifies the productive and creative relationships with deities or benevolent *ling*. By the exercise of the body the novice mediums learn to adjust themselves to tune into the frequency of deities or beneficial *ling*. When the medium and the *ling* achieve a better state of cooperation, they are able to execute assigned religious tasks. For mediums, the training field and other sacred spaces like temples are replete with the vital forces of various *ling*. Hence how to protect oneself from the invasion of malicious *ling* and how to correspond to the frequency of benevolent *ling* constitute the most important lessons for the medium in the training sections.

Although the activity of *tiaoling xunti* constitutes a very important part of the medium's educational program, the Association did not invent this activity themselves. The beginning of this activity can be traced to one very popular sectarian religion, the Compassion Society, in Taiwan. In the *Yaoming Guipan* 瑶命皈盤, an important text of this sectarian religion published in 1967, the method of body exercises was introduced as a magical skill that was granted by the Golden Mother as an exercise to cure diseases and cultivate virtues.<sup>6</sup> It is a special way of entering a trance state. The practitioners who connect with the spiritual power do not lose their self consciousness. They exercise their body by particular movements and dance. And these are able to comfort and refresh their bodies. Although the practitioners experience a physical reward after the exercises, the meaning of body exercise is not limited to the curing from diseases, it is also a method of cultivation granted by the deity with a view to salvation. With the spread of this sectarian religion, the method of body exercise has become a method of cultivation pursued by the practitioners

---

the *ling* was satisfied and stopped harassing the medium. In this case the healing of the *ling* is indeed a psychological compensation rather than a physical recovery. Nevertheless, it shows the blurred boundary between 'earthly' remedy and spiritual intervention.

<sup>6</sup> The Golden Mother is the chief deity of the Compassion Society. She is also known as *Wangmu Niangniang* 王母娘娘, *Laomu* 老母 Venerable Mother, or just Mother *Mu* 母. The "Golden Mother is a contemporary manifestation of the "Queen Mother of the West" (Xi Wangmu 西王母). The Goddess has been the supreme deity in sectarian mythologies since the Ming dynasty. (Jordan and Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix*, 129).



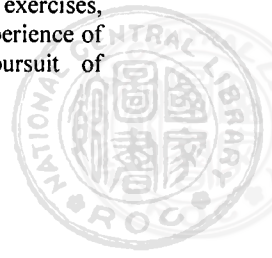
with specific procedures and self awareness in mind.<sup>7</sup> Later this method of healing and cultivation spread to the various private temples that are directly or indirectly connected with the Compassion Society and since the mid-1980s this has led to a collective trance movement, the *huiling shan* 會靈山 (Converging with the Spirit-Mountain). According to Ting, “the purpose of the participants’ religious practices is to spiritually converge with specific *Mother Deities* residing in the so-called *Mother Temple* and through this process be healed, as well as attain ultimate salvation”.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, the method of body exercises of the Compassion Society, the collective trance movement of *huiling shan*, and the *tiaoling xunti* adopted by the Mediums’ Association all share a similar scope of healing, cultivation and salvation.<sup>9</sup> The bodily exercises play an integral part in the interplay of healing, cultivation and salvation. While the outburst of movement and the ecstatic state manifested in these bodily exercises are similar to those of the *jitong* 乩童, the time-honored religious professionals who play the roles of healers, exorcists, fortune-tellers and performers in religious festivals in Taiwanese society, the practitioners of body exercise, *huiling shan* or *tiaoling xunti* put more emphasis on a vision of cultivation and salvation.

In this essay I attempt to explore how the body exercises adopted by the sectarian religion and *lingji* manifest a certain kind of spirituality and how such a new kind of spirituality brings about the transformation of the practitioners. First I analyze the narrative of the *Yaoming Guipan* to explore the religious meaning of body exercises. Then I discuss the experiences of *qiling* 啓靈 (inspiring the spirit) and *zhuanling* 轉靈 (transformation of spirit) to explore the co-constituted visions of healing, cultivation and salvation. Finally I discuss some reflections about the deep connection between dance and religion and attempt to propose that such reflection about dance and religion can shed a light on the understanding of spirituality manifested in bodily exercises and the transformative power they achieve.

<sup>7</sup> Ting, “A Sociological Analysis,” 76.

<sup>8</sup> Ting, “A Sociological Analysis,” 57-111.

<sup>9</sup> Although the *Yaoming Guipan* and some mediums and practitioners I know from my fieldwork do mention the ‘cure’ of disease through the bodily exercises, yet in this essay I adopt the term ‘healing’ to include the subjective experience of a restoration of wholeness, which is intertwined with the pursuit of self-cultivation and aims at salvation.





## 2. THE NARRATIVE OF THE YAOMING GUIPAN

The *Yaoming Guipan* (*Instruction from the Jasper [Paradise] to Give Allegiance to the Spirit Writing Alta*) is an important text of the Compassion Society that recorded the saving work of the Golden Mother. According to the editor, Luo Woyun 羅臥雲, this text was taught by the Golden Mother in 1961 and published by the Fahwa Shan branch hall in 1969. The *Yaoming Guipan* is a combination of several revelations with explanations and exhortations by the editor, including the Creation Myth, the Eschatological Myth, and how the Golden Mother descended to Hualien through a medium and proclaimed her salvation task.<sup>10</sup> This text also recorded the foundation and development of the Compassion Society. The founding of the Compassion Society is based upon a step-by-step revelation of the Golden Mother. Therefore the historical record of the development of the Society is also a recording of the conversion experiences of her disciples.

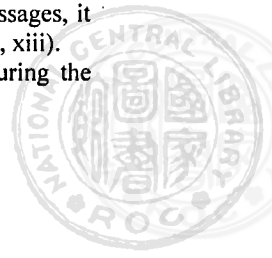
According to the *Yaoming Guipan*, the “exercise of the body” (*lianshen* 練身) is a gift sent by the Golden Mother to her disciple children. Nonetheless, its meaning and significance were not revealed in the very beginning. The *Yaoming Guipan* recorded the origin of the method of bodily exercises with the title of *shen gong* 神功 (magical skill). The narrative goes like this: On 15 February 1955 through *ji* revelation (占示) the Golden Mother asked her disciples to wear blue shirts and pants as the worshipping dress to worship her on the first day of March.<sup>11</sup> She then asked four women to wear the blue dress and to follow the rules of staying clean and eating vegetarian diet in order to train their body and mind through sitting meditation.

On the first day of March these women were asked to bring a new mat and four cattail hassocks to the temple. In order to acquire the training of the deities, they were asked to face the altar and to sit at the four corners of the mat. These women closed their eyes and sat quietly in a gesture of meditation but did not feel anything until midnight. Other disciples decided to return home because of the late hour. Only Mr and Mrs Jian stayed in the hall with these women.<sup>12</sup> They were the

<sup>10</sup> Jordan and Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix*, 305.

<sup>11</sup> *Ji* revelation is a special way of receiving the deity's message through *fujī* 扶乩 (wielding a divination instrument). *Fuji* has a long history in Chinese religion. For those sects that adopt *fujī* as the means of revealing the deities' messages, it has become the central activity (Jordan & Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix*, xiii).

<sup>12</sup> Mr Jian was one of the key figures of the Compassion Society during the



landowners of the temple. They also managed the business of the temple. Around one o'clock Mr Jian also left to sleep.

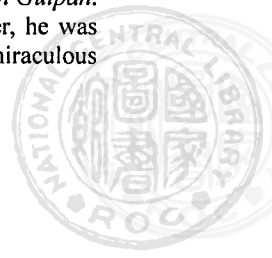
Suddenly the women felt a shock in their bodies and they could hardly breathe. Their faces turned pale and green. Then they clapped their hands and beat their legs with sweat flowing like rain. Mrs Jian was terribly shocked and intended to wake up Mr Jian. Mr Jian had already woken up because of the noise. He ran to the hall and tried to awaken these women but only agitated their queer movements. He and his wife knelt down before the altar and asked the Golden Mother to help them but did not get any reply. The women kept moving and dancing until three o'clock in the morning when they took a short rest. Finally they slowed down their movements and woke up from the trance state in the early morning.

When they opened their eyes they saw Mr and Mrs Jian standing in front of them in tears. They asked the coupled why they cried. The Jians told them how they were frightened by their weird state during the night. When the women realized that it was already morning of the next day, they were also shocked by the passing of the time since they had lost all consciousness of time during the trance. Mr and Mrs Jian asked them what happened. They replied that in the beginning they did not feel anything. Then when they were very tired, they felt their hands and legs go numb, their breathing become difficult, and their consciousness fade while their whole body was controlled (by an external power). While they moved and danced they could not see anything. Gradually they saw a very bright gold and beautiful scene with buildings and deities around. It seemed that they visited the heavenly palace and experienced great happiness. When they woke they felt refreshed and agile. Although they did not sleep for a whole night, they still felt inspired and light. Later when other disciples asked the Jians what happened during the night, they told them what they heard from these women. And many disciples eagerly tried to sit and to meditate in order to acquire similar miraculous experience.

Mr Jian felt uneasy about their enthusiasm and asked for guidance from the Golden Mother through *ji* revelation. In the *ji* revelation the Mother revealed the meaning of the bodily training and explained why she kept silent during the night. She said what happened that night was too insignificant to bother the deity. And she sighed out her grief over the

---

process of its foundation. His conversion story is recorded in the *Yaomin Guipan*. In the beginning when Mrs Jian started to worship the Golden Mother, he was suspicious of her belief. His conversion was based on a series of miraculous healings. He was regarded as the great son by the Golden Mother.



cowardice of her children. She then revealed the true meaning of the bodily training. According to the revelation, dancing and moving were a method of training granted by heaven for the curing of diseases and strengthening of the body.

Since then many disciples have visited the temple at night and asked the Golden Mother to grant them to practice meditation and to exercise the bodily training. Those who practiced the bodily training felt refreshed and inspired after it. Many disciples experienced the miraculous power of healing through the cure of their long-term illness.<sup>13</sup>

The recording of the origin of bodily training is narrated in the form of a story with elements of characters, time, place and episodes. In other words, the meaning of bodily training is revealed in the form of a story rather than by direct elucidation. And the genre of the story is analogous to a suspense tale which opens with an enigma and ends with the solution. The disciples followed the instruction of the Golden Mother to sit and to meditate without knowing the meaning of “the teaching of the deities”. People gathered expecting something to happen but nothing really happened. The long time of quietness and dullness was not broken until the crowd left the scene. And the break of the quietness was manifested by the trance-like state of the meditating women. Before the true meaning was realized, the figures in the primary scene of the bodily training included four women who lost self consciousness and control, a terrified landlady, a suspicious landlord, the silent Golden Mother and an invisible power. The narrator of the primary scene does not hesitate to depict the confusion, worries, suspicion and horrific state of the first witness when they encountered the unknown power manifested by the weird dance and the movements of the women. When they appealed to the Golden Mother and got no reply, Mr Jian, the new convert, began to express his doubt about the nature of the Golden Mother: “Is the Mother a deity or a demon?” The boundary between holy and demonic seemed blurred. Her compassionate pity did not seem to work in this moment of darkness. The darkness experienced by the witness was shared by the four women who lost their self-control and consciousness. They described their entering into trance as an encounter of darkness with the physical experiences of numbness and difficult breathing. Nevertheless, the suspension of normal perception and the blocking of regular breathing opened the channel for an encounter with the other realm. This is quite like Otto’s description of encountering the *mysterium tremendum*:

It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul

---

<sup>13</sup> Luo, Yaoming Guipian, 82-89.



with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering. It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is a *mystery* inexpressible and above all creatures.<sup>14</sup>

Even though the hidden and esoteric *mysterium* is “beyond conception or understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar”,<sup>15</sup> it strives to locate itself in symbolic forms in order to articulate its ineffable positivity. Consequently the other realm was manifested as visions of bright light, splendid building and glorious deities. When they awoke, they shared their visions with the stunned landowners and cleared their doubt and suspicion, although only partially. There were disciples who heard about this event and enthusiastically searched for the miraculous experiences themselves. But the suspicion still lingered on. And it was through the Golden Mother’s revelation that the true meaning of bodily training was revealed. Finally the bodily training became a gift granted by the deity to her pious disciples.

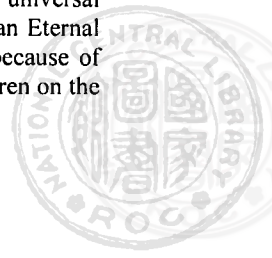
Nevertheless, there was revelation after revelation. While people passionately sought cures for disease and strengthening of body through the exercise of the bodily training, the following episode in the *Yaoming Guipan* showed that there existed a deeper meaning of bodily training that was concealed from the disciples’ understanding. This ultimate meaning was revealed in a secret letter hidden under the altar.<sup>16</sup> The messages revealed that although the Golden Mother manifested her efficacious power through the exercise, yet the aim of the descent of the Golden Mother is not to be limited to the curing of diseases. The ultimate goal, *shouyuan* 收圓, was related to the salvific task of the Golden Mother.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 12-13.

<sup>15</sup> Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Luo, *Yaoming Guipan*, 90.

<sup>17</sup> *Shouyuan* was a popular eschatological doctrine within the secret societies of the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. It can be translated as ‘collecting the origin’, ‘collecting the circle’, or ‘collecting the linking’. *Shouyuan* indicates an eschatological task that is concerned with universal salvation. Basically it is related to popular Chinese myths concerning an Eternal Mother who creates human beings. Human beings get lost on earth because of their wrongdoings. The Eternal Mother will one day bring her lost children on the



The bodily training and its miraculous healing was a precedent manifestation of the *Dao*.<sup>18</sup> Therefore the healing brought about by bodily training can be considered a sign of the salvation accorded by the Golden Mother. It is also a convenient way of exercise which is accessible to the general population, as long as they seek salvation from the Golden Mother in a pious state of mind. The *Yaoming Guipan* also explains that *xunshen* is a way to liberate oneself from the barrier caused by *karma*. It also cleanses away the sins that one accumulates in the process of transmigration. Here we see how the meaning of healing, cultivation and salvation constitute each other.

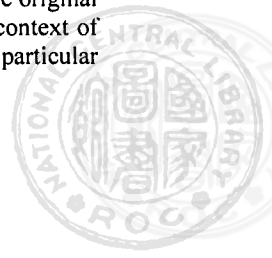
### 3. *QILING* 啓靈—THE EXPERIENCE OF “INSPIRING THE SPIRIT”

After examining the recording of the origin of the body exercises in the early text of the sectarian religion, I explore further the co-constitution of healing, cultivation and salvation through several ethnographic recordings of the disciples' experiences. First I review Jordan and Overmyer's investigation of the Compassion Society in the early 1980s. This work represents the early observation of the method of

---

earth back to the paradise from where they came. The salvific task is initiated by the Eternal Mother's promulgation of the *Dao*. Those who turn to the *Dao* will enjoy eternal happiness and liberate themselves from the suffering of *samsara* (the cycle of birth and death). According to the teaching of sectarian religion, the Eternal Mother will promulgate the *Dao* three times in order to call back her lost children to her realm. The contemporary period offers the final opportunity for the Eternal Mother to redeem her children. *Shouyuan* thus means the action of the Eternal Mother and the cooperation of human beings to reencompass her children within their original purity. Later, *shouyuan* was adopted by not a few popular sects, all of which claimed it as their own eschatological mission.

<sup>18</sup> *Dao* literally means a 'pathway' or 'road'. While examining the meaning of *Dao* in antiquity, Nivison points out that its literary meaning was extended to mean "the correct or natural way something is done" by the time of the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770-256 BCE). Since then the meaning of *Dao* has shifted from 'a way' to 'a way to do something', to 'the way to do things of highest importance', such as conducting oneself morally or governing the world. Ultimately *Dao* comes to mean 'the way the whole universe operates'. It thus acquires the religious connotation which denotes the "ultimate reality behind or 'in' ourselves and everything we experience" (Nivison, "Tao and Te," 284-285). The 'pursuit of the *Dao*' is a general term often adopted by Chinese religious practitioners to indicate the process of grasping ultimate reality and the cultivation of the original self which is undifferentiated from this first principle of reality. In the context of sectarian religion, 'the promulgation of *Dao*' denotes the spread of a particular doctrine which is related to its project of salvation.



body exercises in the sectarian religion. Then I review the recent ethnographic studies of the same sectarian religion to explore the meaning of the body exercises as they developed.

Jordan and Overmyer's *Flying Phoenix* was published in 1986. In this work they mention a distinctive ritual called *xunshen* 訓身. During the ritual the practitioner 'dances' (*tiao*, 跳, literally, 'leaping') under the influence of a deity. It is also called 'training' (*xun* 訓 or *xunlian* 訓練). According to them, it "is a state of ecstatic excitement usually associated with makeshift shadow-boxing or with slapping one's body in a pattern of quick, repetitive motions with the flat of each hand alternately".<sup>19</sup> During the time they conducted their research on the Compassion Society, the bodily training was considered an important gift granted only to the true members of the Society:

Whether or not one was a true member depended on experiencing the presence of the spirit, a presence sensed primarily in the process of dancing or 'training'. This dancing was both a quest for the descent of a deity into one's body and a response to that descent. It was believed to strengthen one against illness. An experience of the spirit could come right away or after two or three months of worship and dancing. Its reality was decided by the individual: as one man said, 'It's like an electric light; suddenly one believes and understands, just as if a light bulb were turned on in his head.' There was no formal initiation ritual—at most, a vow before the image of the Golden Mother to observe traditional virtues and not do 'bad things'.<sup>20</sup>

Accordingly, the dancing and moving manifested in the training was understood as the presence of the spirit. The encounter between the practitioner and the spirit was characterized by an ecstatic state with peculiar physical experiences and inner transformation (e.g., believing and understanding). The inner transformation led the practitioner to live in a world with an intimate bond with the Golden Mother. The personal relationship with the deity was maintained by inspiration and many visions and in daily life. In their depiction of the Compassion Society's believers, Jordan and Overmyer point out:

The ecstatic physical outbursts, vivid visionary experiences, and probably a deep sense of...virtue and of supernatural recognition of it—all of these could be combined to make a meaningful whole

<sup>19</sup> Jordan & Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix*, 139.

<sup>20</sup> Jordan and Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix*, xvii-xviii.



by means of the doctrine of the Compassion Society, which emphasizes commitment to a goddess regarded as ultimately maternal, and by means of the spiritual exercises of the society, which provide the possibility of ecstatic outbursts for all participants.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, since “all can become possessed,” “*dance* while in a state of trance is seen by Compassion Society leaders to be one of the most important distinguishing characteristics of their religion. The body exercise can be regarded as a popularization of spirit mediumship”.<sup>22</sup> In their discussion of a female practitioner, they recognize how the activity of meditation and bodily exercise constituted the most important part of her religious life. Compared to *jitong* who enter the state of trance in order to transmit a deity’s messages, the practitioner of bodily exercise is more like a seeker of religious awareness and enlightenment. Although Jordan and Overmyer propose that “for them such articulate possession expresses temporary heightening of awareness rather than a long-term vocation”,<sup>23</sup> recent studies of the Compassion Society show that for pious practitioners, the experience of trance during the body exercises has become an initiation into a long-term relationship with the deities. In the later development of the *huilin shan* movement and the flourishing of *lingji* we also see how the vision of vocation is incorporated into the self-understanding of the practitioners.

In recent studies of the Compassion Society and other related groups, the spontaneous dancing and movement is regarded as the experience of ‘moving the spirit’ *lingdong* 靈動. The emphasis on the spiritual dimension can also be seen from the change of the term to describe the activity of bodily exercise. A new term *qiling* 啓靈 (inspiration of spirit) emerges and is sometimes added before *xunshen*. *Qiling xunshen* 啓靈訓身 therefore points to both the spiritual side and the bodily side that are involved in the practice. And ‘inspiration of spirit’ is the term to indicate the experience of initiation that crosses the threshold. With the further development of discourse, the crossing of the threshold is understood in several ways. It can be conceived of as letting go of self-consciousness and control and allowing the guidance of the spiritual power.<sup>24</sup> This forgetfulness of self is manifested by free body movements, including playing shadowboxing, speaking in tongues to the Mother Deity

<sup>21</sup> Jordan and Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix*, 197.

<sup>22</sup> Jordan and Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix*, 139.

<sup>23</sup> Jordan and Overmyer, *The Flying Phoenix*, 139.

<sup>24</sup> Xu, “The Venerable Mother,” 14.





with tears, and writing down heavenly texts following inspiration from the Mother Deity.<sup>25</sup> One practitioner described it as extending the body to its limit in order to forget oneself. It was “to lock the four doors of eyes, ears, nose and consciousness and to empty yourself. You would be clear about (the power) that approaches you”.<sup>26</sup> Another practitioner stated that when she mediates she feels an external power moving her body.<sup>27</sup> This power led her to exercise her body with certain movements that were able to adjust it to a healthier state, e.g., to beat or massage the ailing parts or to disgorge the vicious breath.<sup>28</sup> One lady also experienced the healing power of spontaneous movement. When she knelt down before the altar and worshiped the Mother Deity, she was ‘caught’ by the Deity so as to exercise her body. She beat her breast and abdomen vigorously until they were ecchymosed. Nine days later her swollen abdomen and heart disease were cured.<sup>29</sup>

Experiences of miraculous healing lead the practitioner to cross the threshold of belief. Therefore the crossing of the threshold is also explained as an initiation into a process of spiritual cultivation. It begins with the retrieval of memories of past lives, especially the memories of cultivation in previous transmigrations.<sup>30</sup> The retrieval of memories of cultivation also denotes the acknowledgement of one’s spiritual origin and lineage. Such understanding is related to the idea of *yuanling* 元靈 (the original soul) and the cosmological concept of *wuji* 無極 (non-ultimate).<sup>31</sup> The original soul is the first transmigration that originated from the realm of *wuji*. The original soul denotes the purest and

<sup>25</sup> Xu, “The Venerable Mother,” 16.

<sup>26</sup> Lin, “Views and Practice of Lingji,” 68.

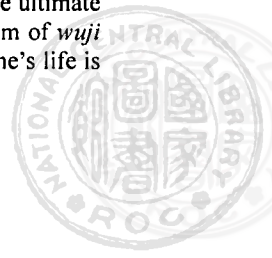
<sup>27</sup> Wang, “The Process of becoming a Medium,” 19.

<sup>28</sup> Wang, “The Process of becoming a Medium,” 73.

<sup>29</sup> Xu, “The Venerable Mother,” 17.

<sup>30</sup> Zhu, “A Study of Efficacious Experience,” 76.

<sup>31</sup> *Wuji* is a cosmological concept of *Yiguan Dao* 一貫道—a popular religious sect once prohibited but now with widespread influence on popular religions in Taiwan. The sect divides the cosmos into three realms: the realm of *huangji* 皇極 (imperial ultimate), the realm of *taiji* 太極 (great ultimate) and the realm of *wuji* (non-ultimate). This doctrine of three realms was proposed by Wang Jueyi (1821-1884), the main theorizer of *Yiguan Dao*. According to Wang Jueyi, the realm of *wuji* is the *noumenon* and origin of the cosmos. It rules the existence and extinction of all things on earth. It should be the practitioners’ ultimate concern and the place or state to which they strive to return. Furthermore, it is the ultimate principle and the origin of all things in the world. Returning to the realm of *wuji* means the unification of limited life with its eternal origin. Therefore one’s life is transformed into an absolute existence.



clearest state to be sought or recovered in the process of self-cultivation. Nevertheless, rather than something outside oneself, it points to the innermost state of one's true self. Multiple transmigrations lead the original soul to a state of degradation and corruption. Therefore the original soul falls into a cycle of transmigration. It is held that since the original soul carries the least karmic barrier, if one encounters it during cultivation, one's spiritual quality will be further raised by the help of one's original soul. However, it is not easy to encounter one's original soul, unless one has achieved a certain level of cultivation. One needs to exercise oneself into a better physical and spiritual condition for the descent of the original soul.<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, the goal of *qiling* is to understand one's spiritual origin and lineage, so that one is able to follow the guidance of one's patron deity.<sup>33</sup> What is moved in the experience of 'moving the spirit' is the original soul. The original soul is what connects the practitioner to the spiritual world, and allows the dances and songs to take place.<sup>34</sup>

#### 4. *ZHUANLING* 轉靈 CULTIVATION AND TRANSFORMATION

While *qiling* (the inspiring of the spirit) denotes the experience of crossing the threshold and an initiation into the process of spiritual cultivation, *zhuanling* (transformation of the spirit) focuses on the transformative dimension of the process of cultivation. Many mediums and practitioners I met shared a similar experience of ordeal during the initial stage of cultivation. The awareness of the spiritual power of the deities is a mixed blessing. In other words, one has to pass the deity's 'test' in order to show one's sincere desire for the cultivation. When I attended the classes offered by the Mediums' Association for practitioners, I met a woman, K, in her late forties who had economic problems. She told me that the deities "came near" her during this difficult time of her life. She was an earnest practitioner. Through the whole educational program she only ate fruit and drank water because she was trained by the spirit of a bird during that period. When I asked her the reason for her abstention from other foods, she said that she just felt that she wanted to do so, and it seemed like a very natural thing for her. During the course of the spiritual exercises she always danced like a bird. According to K, the process of cultivation is a process of testing:

---

<sup>32</sup> Tsai, "The Reformative Visions of Mediumship," 132.

<sup>33</sup> Huang, "Going toward the Sacred Land," 67.

<sup>34</sup> Marshall, "Moving the Spirit on Taiwan," 94.

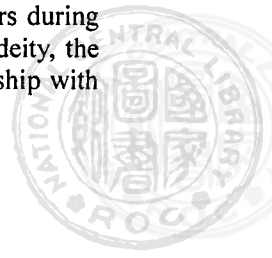


Someone told me that as long as we started to learn, calamity followed. I did not understand the logic until I started the process of cultivation. Why did He (the deity) put us through such an ordeal? It is because He wanted to test us. This is not an easy road. And He would test you according to your level. For example, after you pass the test for the level of kindergarten He would give you another test for a higher level. I know that my economic difficulties are the result of karmic entanglement. Therefore I have to be patient with the situation and to cultivate myself in order to bear it instead of accumulating bad *karma*.

The process of cultivation is related to the experience of the “moving of the spirit”. The spontaneous bodily movement during the class of bodily training implied for her an encounter with the spiritual power of deities. In order to be ‘connected’ to the spiritual power, one has to empty oneself. According to K,

You have to let go of your self-consciousness in order to receive the ‘spiritual induction’ in the form of electronic waves. When I empty myself I can feel the propelling force that pushes me to dance and to move. The more I move and dance with my body, the more content and cheerful my body feels. It is just like curing me of my illness, or you can say it is like adjusting the *qi* of my body.

Although bodily exercise plays an integral role in the process of healing, salvation and cultivation, the weird state and movements manifested during the exercise might be considered abnormal or psychotic by the general public. Such suspicion is not only held by the outside public, it is also shared by some participants of the same sectarian religion. Nevertheless, the expression of the spiritual power, however eccentric, constitutes the essential turning point for the healing and transformation of the medium. The practitioners have adopted the word *zhuan* 轉 to describe the process. *Zhuan* literally means turning, transportation or migration. Therefore it signifies both the gesture of the practitioner’s movement and its implied meaning of transformation. One senior medium says that that it is like the broadcasting of a recording tape. One needs to go through it first. Then one can remove it and insert a new one. The process is also like passing through various critical tests or going through ordeals. The meaning of *zhuan* is related to the idea of clearing the barrier of *karma* and sin proposed in the *Yaoming Guipan*. And the process of clearing is actualized in the encounter of various spiritual powers during the bodily exercises. These spiritual powers include the patron deity, the original soul, or other spirits with an unfinished karmic relationship with



the practitioner. When the patron deity or the original soul is involved, the goal of *zhuanling* is to develop a relationship of cultivation with them. If one has promised to participate in the Deity's work of redemption in previous lives, one needs to commit oneself to the redemptive project and to convert other people to lead a life of cultivation. When the spirit of karmic entanglement is at issue, the meaning of *zhuanling* is to help the karmic spirits to realize their unfulfilled wishes or religious mission so that they can be liberated from their state of resentment.

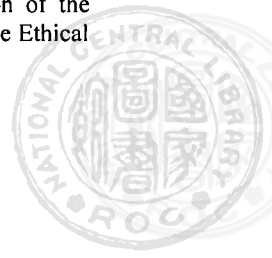
Incorporation of the practitioner's body and spiritual power constitutes one of the most important tasks of training for the transformative process of cultivation.<sup>35</sup> In the process of modulating the spiritual power, usually the practitioner manifests physical symptoms of hiccupping or trembling. Hiccupping indicates that the spiritual power is starting to move the practitioner by stirring the vital force.<sup>36</sup> If the mediums' bodies are not strong enough, or they are not skilled at the modulation of spiritual power, they will probably experience difficulty in breathing, trembling, or even shock or fainting while they are 'bumped' by the spiritual power of the deities. Therefore skill in breath modulation and stable steps of movement are very important in the process of bodily exercise. And it is very important to have someone beside the novice practitioner when he or she is still in the early stages of practice. In the early stage of the modulation of spiritual power, the spiritual power and the practitioner's body have not yet achieved the state of unification. Therefore the practitioner's body cannot smoothly and confidently express the ideas and movements of *ling*. Unstable spirits are just like babbling children learning to talk. The messages they send cannot be clearly expressed by the medium. Hence the conduction of spiritual power is designed to limber up the spirit by singing, talking, performing Chinese martial arts, or other movements.

According to the above discussion, the relationship between practitioners and various spiritual powers constitutes the core axis of a practitioner's religious cultivation. The practitioner and spiritual power cooperate with each other to actualize each other's specific religious mission. In the process of cultivation, the practitioner's body constitutes the intersection of the visible and invisible realms. The practitioner's body is the indispensable passage and instrument for the progress of karmic spirit and the religious tasks of deities. The practitioner's body retrieves

---

<sup>35</sup> For a more detailed and systematic discussion of the incorporation of the practitioner's body and the spiritual power, see: Tsai, "Construction of the Ethical Self" in Lardinois & Vermader, *Shamanism and Christianity*.

<sup>36</sup> Marshall, "Moving the Spirit on Taiwan," 82.



wandering, departed souls from homelessness and enables their integration into the redemptive structure of the spiritual realm. The practitioner's body also constitutes the hub of the human connection for the execution of the spiritual power of karmic spirits in the process of accumulating merit. Finally, the practitioner's body represents the incarnation of the mercy, justice or power of deities from the higher spiritual realm. When the practitioner opens herself to allow the various spiritual powers to be present, it is analogous to Poulet's understanding of reading: "I am on loan to another, and this other thinks, feels, suffers, and acts within me".<sup>37</sup> It is a reciprocation of materiality and spirituality, or alteration of form and formlessness.

## 5. DANCING, HEALING AND TRANSFORMATION

In the above, the meaning of bodily exercise was discussed through the records of the *Yaoming Guipan* and the experience of spirit inspiration and spirit transformation. In these contexts we see the intertwining of healing, cultivation and salvation. How do healing, cultivation and salvation co-constitute each other through the practice of bodily exercise? In order to answer this question, in the final section of this essay I examine some reflections on dance and spirituality. And I show that these reflections can shed light on the further understanding of spirituality manifested in bodily exercise and the transformative power it achieves.

Although dance is usually regarded as a performative art, that is consciously made with creative movements and intended for observation, its origin is deeply related to religious ritual and worship. It is not only an elemental form of human expression, it also constitutes the most elementary form of religious expression.<sup>38</sup> As LaMothe says:

Cultures around the world use rhythmic bodily movement as an integral part of spiritual practice. People dance to demonstrate their devotion and commitment: to invoke the presence of goddesses and gods; to communicate their grievances and receive divine counsel; to attain mystical experience; or to share the wisdom within a community. People dance spontaneously to express their emotion; they dance as part of a ritual or discipline aimed at transforming the one who dances.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Poulet, "Phenomenology of Reading," 59-60.

<sup>38</sup> Stewart, *Sacred Women, Sacred Dance*, 3-5.

<sup>39</sup> LaMothe, "Sacred Dance," 64.



Accordingly, dance may be a channel for the manifestation of the sacred and the dancer may be regarded as an instrument of spiritual power. Ruth St. Denis said that while dancing, her aim was to become a “rhythmic and impersonal instrument of spiritual revelation” rather than a personal actress of comedy or tragedy. Isadora Duncan conceived that movement sprang from the ‘soul’ and she considered her dance a “prayer” and a “revelation.” Martha Graham said that “where a dancer stands is holy ground.” Through “the principle of connecting the human body to the Cosmic Body,” a specific kind of spirituality is manifested.<sup>40</sup> These modern dancers’ understandings of dance are analogous to the religious practitioners’ experiences of bodily exercise, through which they offer themselves as active agents for giving themselves “temporarily to a supernatural being or force”.<sup>41</sup> In the discussion of the unity of dance and religion, van der Leeuw also pointed out that “when dance is genuine, one can no longer speak of an action which one performs, but of a dance which sweeps one away....The dancer who gives the impression that he is executing a well-thought-out plan, instead of surrendering to a power which uses his limbs as willing instruments, is not a true dancer”.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, Marshall’s accounts of *lingji* can be considered echoes of dancer’s experience:

For *lingji*, ecstasy is experienced when one’s original spirit is moved by a spirit, as one *lingji* explains, “[when you are moved by a spirit] you have the mind of the spirit [that becomes united with your original spirit] and the mind of your body.”... “I am a medium standing between the world of people and the spirits. During a performance, a spirit tells me how to move and what to sing, but while I am singing and dancing I am not aware of what I am doing.” A *lingji* did not become fully possessed by a spirit; rather it was through getting in touch with his or her original spirit that a *lingji* enabled a spirit to move him or her...[*Lingji*] were modernizing traditional mediumship in which mediums were regarded as servants or puppets to the gods they served. As servants to the gods, many traditional mediums accepted (and continue to accept) that their life force would be used up in service to the gods. In contrast, *lingji* were not restricted to performing for any particular gods, and their performances refreshed their spirits or life forces, as opposed to exhausting them,

---

<sup>40</sup> Stewart, *Sacred Women, Sacred Dance*, 123-130.

<sup>41</sup> Hanna, “Dance and Religion,” 209.

<sup>42</sup> van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty*, 29.



leaving them feeling energized and peaceful.<sup>43</sup>

Marshall's accounts points to several aspects of convergence between dancers and religious practitioners. The first aspect is the integration of the spiritual self and the physical body. As discussed above, the process of *zhuanling* involves the incorporation of body and spirit. This is analogous to the dancer's experience of unfolding the intuitive part of her mind and communicating with the spiritual power through her body. Moreover, the active surrender of oneself to a greater force is manifested in both activities. The dancer surrenders conscious intention to the larger rhythms which we are all part of.<sup>44</sup> The religious practitioner allows herself to be receptive to the transformative power of spirit. Finally, both religious practitioner and the dancer experience ecstasy in the height of self-abandonment. The term 'ecstasy' comes from the Greek word *ekstasis*, which literally means "to be placed outside" as well as "to be displaced".<sup>45</sup> It is in the transcendence of everyday consciousness that the creative flow of life force is touched. When one connects to that life force one becomes awakened and revitalized.

The transformative power of dance and spontaneous movement, nevertheless, is not well understood by the field of religious studies which emphasizes more the textual traditions rather than bodily experiences. In order to search for an alternative to such a text-based approach, LaMothe appeals to the recent accounts of ritual as practice and as performance and reexamines the relationship between dance and religion. She proposes that dance is not only a medium of religious experience and expression. Dance itself is "a religion, an expression of life".<sup>46</sup> LaMothe's account is very insightful in its unique emphasis on the role of bodily being in the life of religion. She proposes that "religion involves practicing patterns of physical consciousness, educating sensory awareness, and cultivating vulnerability to currents of will, desire, and idea. It involves generating, performing, and thus enacting kinetic images of self in relation to others and world".<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, religion *is* practice and performance. Or using Duncan's words, religion can be considered a practice of "awakening soul". The physical awareness and kinetic images involved in such practice follow a specific "logic of bodily becoming". The logic of bodily becoming conveys the idea that "the way in which a body becomes what it is never completely determined by society or nature". While a dancer

<sup>43</sup> Marshall, "Moving the Spirit on Taiwan," 92.

<sup>44</sup> Stewart, *Sacred Women, Sacred Dance*, 11.

<sup>45</sup> Sharma, "Ecstasy," 11.

<sup>46</sup> LaMothe, "Why Dance," 104.

<sup>47</sup> LaMothe, "Why Dance," 121.





abandons herself to the greater movement that runs through the universe, she “becomes the rhythmic forms she performs”.<sup>48</sup> According to van der Leeuw, it is a rhythm of ecstasy and affirmation, or of discarding and seizing. “To understand the psychology of the dance and to see at the same time its connection with religion, we must look upon its rhythm as motion and response, the seizing of life and the discarding of life. The rhythm unfolds in a double manner”.<sup>49</sup> The healing and transformative power experienced by the religious practitioners can be understood by a similar unfolding process.

To end this essay I quote LaMothe’s words: “We heal ourselves, not by returning to a place we once were. We are never the same. We heal ourselves by participating in the creative coming of our bodily selves and transforming whatever happens to us into an occasion for knowledge, love, in a word, bodily movement”.<sup>50</sup>

### Bibliography

- Hanna, Judith Lynne, “Dance and Religion,” in Eliade, Mircea (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York: Macmillan, 1987, Vol. 4, 203-12.
- Huang Qixiang 黃琦翔, “Going Toward the Sacred Land: Belief and practice of a Taipei temple 邁向「飛馬」聖地：台北市日月無極此乃宮信仰組織及活動分析,” MA Thesis, Department of Religious Studies, Fu Jen Catholic University, 2005.
- Jordan, David K. & Overmyer, Daniel L., *The Flying Phoenix*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.
- LaMothe, K., “Sacred Dance: A glimpse of around the world,” *Dance Magazine*, (December 2001), 64-65.
- LaMothe, K., “Why Dance: Toward a theory of religion as practice and performance,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 17 (2005), 101-33.
- LaMothe, K., *Nietzsche’s Dancers: Isador Duncan, Martha Graham, and the revaluation of Christian values*, New York: Macmillan, 2006.
- Langer, Susanne K., *Problems of Art*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1975.
- Lin Bizhu 林碧珠, “Views and Practice of Lingji 靈乩觀點與信仰實踐,” MA Thesis, Department of Anthropology. National Taiwan University, 2003.
- Luo Woyun 羅臥雲, *Yaoming Guipan 瑤命飯盤*, Hualien: Fahuashan Tsuheu Temple, 1967.
- Marshall, A., “From the Chinese Religious Ecstatic to the Taiwanese Theatre of

<sup>48</sup> LaMothe, “Why Dance,” 121.

<sup>49</sup> van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty*, 27.

<sup>50</sup> LaMothe, “Nietzsche’s Dancers,” 227.



- Ecstasy: A Study of the Wu," Ph.D. Thesis, Graduate Department of East Asian Studies, University of Toronto, 2000.
- Marshall, A., "Moving the Spirit on Taiwan: New age *Lingji* performance," *Journal of Chinese Religions*, 31 (2003), 81-99.
- Nivison, David S, "Tao and Te," in Eliade, Mircea (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York: Macmillan, 1987, Vol. 14, 283-867.
- Otto, Rudolf (Harvey, John W. tr.), *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958.
- Paper, Jordan, "Mediums and Modernity: The institutionalization of ecstatic religious functionaries in Taiwan," *Journal of Chinese Religions*, 24 (1996), 105-129.
- Poulet, Georges, "Phenomenology of Reading," *New Literary History: A journal of theory and interpretation*, 1.1 (October 1969), 53-68.
- Sharma, Arvind, "Ecstasy," in Eliade, Mircea (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York: Macmillan, 1987, Vol. 5, 11-17.
- Stewart, I. J., *Sacred Woman, Sacred Dance: Awakening spirituality through movement and ritual*, Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2000.
- Ting Jen-chieh 丁仁傑, "A Sociological Analysis of the Collective Trance Movement 'Converging with the Spirit-Mountain': The transformation and re-embedding of folk religion in a situation of de-territorialization 靈山現象的社會學考察：去地域化情境中民間信仰的轉化與再連結," *Taiwan Journal of Religious Studies*, 4.2 (2005), 57-111.
- Tsai Yi-Jia, "Construction of the Ethical Self: The mediums' modulation of spirit and exercise of body among the popular religion in Taiwan," in Lardinois, Olivier & Vermader, Benoît (eds.), *Shamanism and Christianity: Religious encounter among indigenous peoples of East Asia*, Taipei: Taipei Ricci Institute, 2008, 85-125.
- Tsai Yi-Jia, "The Reformatory Visions of Mediumship in Contemporary Taiwan," Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Rice University, 2003
- van der Leeuw, Gerardus (Green, David E. tr.), *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The holy in art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Wang Wunling 王雯鈴, "The Process of Becoming a Medium in Taiwan 台灣童乩的成乩歷程," MA Thesis, Department of Religious Studies, Fu Jen Catholic University, 2004.
- Xu Ya-Ting 許雅婷, *The Venerable Mother and Her Children 母娘與她的兒女：慈惠石壁部堂宗教人的經驗世界*," MA Thesis, Graduate Institute of Ethnic Relations and Culture, National Donghua University, 2002.
- Zhu Huiya 朱慧雅, "A Study of Efficacious Experience in Songshan Cihui Temple 松山慈惠堂的靈驗經驗之研究," MA Thesis, Department of Religious Studies, Fu Jen Catholic University, 2005.

